

IN MY BACKYARD: STORIES OF IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND CURRICULUM  
THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

By

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis, *In my Backyard: Stories of Identity, Community, and Curriculum through Creative Writing*, is a collection of three narratives of finding voice and community through creative writing and using these discoveries to shape a vision for writing in the classroom. Themes that emerged through this personal and pedagogical research included: the dichotomy between in and out of school writing, writing as an exploration of identity, and the ability of a classroom writing community to promote reflection and risk-taking.

The thesis is written in three parts. The three parts in summary are an archive of my learning, a record of student voices on creativity and writing, and a practical teaching and learning tool for teachers of creative writing. Each part of the thesis vividly paints the landscape it represents and captures the characters who play with words in each context.

Part One is an exploration and an archive of my matrilineal roots and what I learn from the writing on the dog-eared index cards in my grandmother's recipe box. I am transported back to a time when wives and mothers cooked dinner and desserts, like my grandmother's lemon squares, and kitchens were places of female wisdom.

Parts Two and Three tell the story of students learning about their identities through creative writing. This research included personal observation, the experience of co-teaching, student interviews and student surveys. I learned that our classrooms are important places for creative writing as self expression can build self esteem. This can ultimately lead to a sense of community and personal freedom for young writers.

Part Four is a curriculum for a new course, Creative Writing 10, inspired by Atwell's writing workshop approach (1998; 2002). Students look at English through the lens of writer and learn to play with words in the context of a cooperative teacher and student writing community. Together, as students and teachers, we hone the craft of creative writing; the stories in our bones becoming the curriculum from which we learn about who we are and the world we live in.

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## PREFACE

### To the Reader

The manuscript, *In my Backyard: Stories of Identity, Community, and Curriculum through Writing*, is a collection of three narratives of finding voice and community through creative writing and using these discoveries to shape a vision for writing in the classroom.

My backyard is expansive; it includes the landscapes of my matrilineal history, the classroom I dwelled in during my research project, and the curriculum I created for my own creative writing community in the secondary school system. These territories are charted by words; some of them mine and many of them belonging to other scholars and students.

The map to my backyard is a maze of paths and landmarks at which you may choose to stop and ponder. These are written as poems, journal entries and quotes that mark my landscape. In writing these stories, I have garnered the hope that writing and the creative writing classroom can be a place where students and teachers find their unique voices, work together in a writers' community, and connect both private and public genres, audiences, and topics for writing. By experiencing my own life as my curriculum for this paper, I have learned the importance of allowing students' stories to become the curriculum of the writing classroom. By sharing our lives with each other, we

are able to create a community of writers unlike anything else that exists in the public school system. As Connelly and Clandinin (1998) explain,

There is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves. When we have a grasp of the difficulties, for example, of figuring out something simple such as how we think and feel as a component of the personal, we will understand the really serious difficulties of trying to figure out how someone else, our students, think and feel (p. 31).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DEDICATION

Becoming a writer has been a long but welcomed journey for me. Learning the importance of finding your spirit through artistic expression – be it writing, cooking, painting or any other creative endeavour – connects us with who we really are and helps us interact with the world with a sense of wonder. The best thing I’ve learned from this adventure is to ask the question “what if”. *What if I took a year off and lived the life of a writer? What if we allowed students to write their own stories and valued this as curriculum in our classrooms? What if I took the time to live in moments – not days – and noticed all that delights my senses?*

Thank you to Carl Leggo who started me on this journey by giving me permission to research my own stories and make them the curriculum for this thesis. His sense of wonder with the world made me want to live poetically.

Thank you to Renee Norman and Theresa Rogers, two accomplished women, for reading my poetry and prose and giving me the confidence that my stories in and outside the classroom mattered.

Thank you to my husband and partner, Vu who named me “writer” before I ever could and who delights in every word I share with him. His support of this thesis, by caring for our daughter on many late nights and weekends, and by encouraging me when I thought I’d never finish, is the only reason that the final project came to fruition.

Thank you to J, my mother, for recounting the stories of my grandmother, even the difficult ones, so that I could tell her story honestly; for letting me write at your kitchen table for inspiration; and for never doubting the worth of this crazy idea of writing a chapter that revolved around a recipe for lemon squares.

This document is dedicated to my daughter, Ciara. May she know her great grandmother and the line of strong women she comes from through *Voices from the Kitchen* and may she find her own sense of freedom, like so many students I interviewed did, in the English classroom.

## **PART ONE**

### **Voices from the Kitchen**

Cookbooks are cultural histories written primarily by women for women that can transport us to a different era (Haber in Alfroyd, 2002).

The recipe box is nothing special, nothing ornate; its simple metal casing tells you nothing about its owner, my grandmother. But it holds secrets and it holds stories that began more than 65 years ago when she got married and end when we received the box upon her death in 2000. The only recipe that I know well is her version of lemon squares. I made them with her so many times in that yellow Formica kitchen on Transit Road. I can still imagine myself there, sifting the icing sugar onto the tops of the golden brown dessert, my hands sticky from the sweet lemon filling. Sometimes I still rifle through that box hoping I'll find the secrets that will tell me more about her, but all I ever find are recipes, most I've never tasted, and crumbs; remnants of the life of a wife and mother so long ago.

At twenty-nine years old, a year after my grandmother's death, I am a wife, a newly proclaimed writer, an English teacher, and a graduate student taking her last course towards a Master's degree in Language and Literacy Education. The course, taught by Rishma Dunlop, is "Women, Writing and Imagination", and our time together has led to the formation of a community of nineteen female poets who call themselves the "2 a.m. Collective". Through the readings by feminist scholars and writers and through our writing assignments, we have shared many personal stories of mothering and researched what it means to be a woman, a writer and a poet. The stories of my grandmother, Mary

Elizabeth Botterell, surface and resurface as I listen to Rishma Dunlop's (2002a) poetry about childhood and mothering:

...I sit by the window  
watching the night sky  
the mother writing poems of girls  
the art on white sheets like love  
this one will be strong and fierce  
this one will be tender and she will sing  
shaping angels, prophets for the world  
such terrifying beauty...  
(Excerpt from "Stories from Boundary Bay", p. 84)

My grandmother's stories are obsessions that I have been trying to put into words since I started graduate work.

While on educational leave for a year from my job teaching Secondary English in an inner city high school, I have lived the life of a writer. In a room of my own – when there aren't guests to accommodate, bikes to store, or a husband that needs to study for his medical exams – I sit daily to write. I stare at my mantra: *Have faith, the thesis will come*, and write my morning pages. Taking long walks through the woods off 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, I fill my senses with the reds and coppers of fall leaves, the smell of wet grass and ferns, and the sight of endless rain drenched paths for poetic inspiration. When I return home, I email my WB, writing buddy Paige Hansen Davis; we share our writings online and talk about sending our work out for publication.

### 1.1. The Poet's Landscape

I am sitting in my apartment, on a sunny July day, inside my blue office, with laundry drying on the rack beside me and two bookshelves overflowing with research books on writing: anthologies by women poets including Rishma Dunlop and Adrienne Rich, and a collection of emerging women poets in *Breaking the Surface*. Passages in my copy of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* are marked. Feminist texts on being a writer by bell hooks and Nancy Mairs, and my writing notebooks are all stacked horizontally and vertically on my writer's chair, on the carpet, and in the bookshelves. I am the eye, the "I" in a storm of alphabets.

I have gathered so many words over the past year that my collections are spilling out of my husband's bookshelf too. Amidst *Campbell's Urology*, *The Synopsis of Psychiatry*, his patient files, and his class notes from medical school, are two books that my grandmother left me in her will: *Some Poems (1940)* by W.H. Auden and *a Short Biographical Dictionary of English Literature (1910)* by John W. Cousin. It is what is stuffed between the published pages that I covet most: my letters to her when I went away to McGill University, an old drawing of her house in Victoria, and a Christmas card from 1955 when she was happily married to my grandfather.

This space where I sit surrounded by archives of women's lives – my own, my grandmother's and others, including Virginia Woolf – is the closest I have been able to come to "a room of one's own". I am immersed in women's words and family keepsakes, laundry and bills to pay; my writing life and my married life inseparable even in the midst of writing my graduate thesis.

## 1.2. Composting Identities

As I read bell hooks' (1999) chapter, *dancing with words*, Rumi's words, "Do you want the words or will you live what you know?" (p. 45), resonate. I want to write myself into existence, I want to dance the words of who I am and who I am learning to be through the act of writing. I want to research, in the sense of the French word *recherche*: I want to look again, in order to reexamine the multiple identities of woman. This process begins for me through the viewing of artwork by artist Nicole Porter (1999/2000); a series of paintings that had a profound impact on my view of who I want to be as a woman.

Compost

*There she is  
goddess and mother fossilized*

*in the rough canvas and plaster –  
thyme and lavender embedded in  
the skin of her wrists and fingers  
rosemary for remembrance  
she looks up, eyes closed towards the  
crimson and ochre flames  
she, at the centre of a burning sunset*

*seed packages for sweet peas and winter pansies  
sweet basil and white sage scar her shoulders and neck,  
burned in the twilight, embodying her garden  
she composts kindred souls*

*her face is a milky yellow –  
skin crackled with shards of shells  
a crumbling complexion  
in both hands she cups a perfect  
smooth egg,  
her amulet.*



Figure 1. Woman with Egg #1

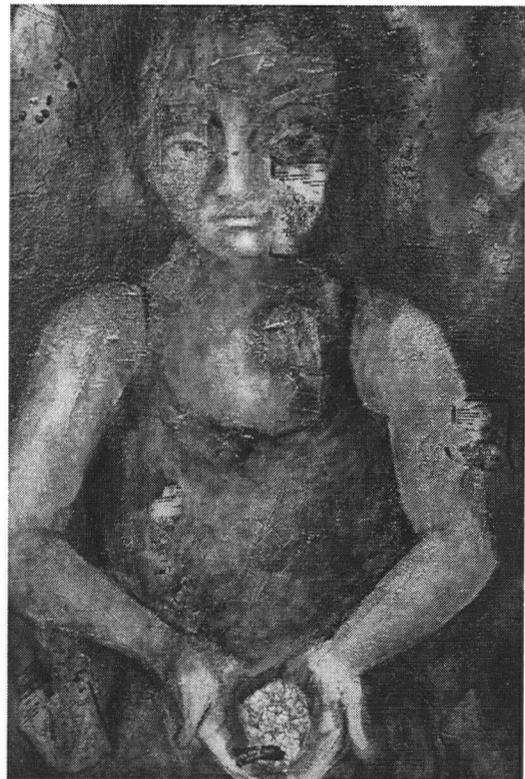


Figure 2. Woman with Egg #2



Figure 3. Woman with Egg #3

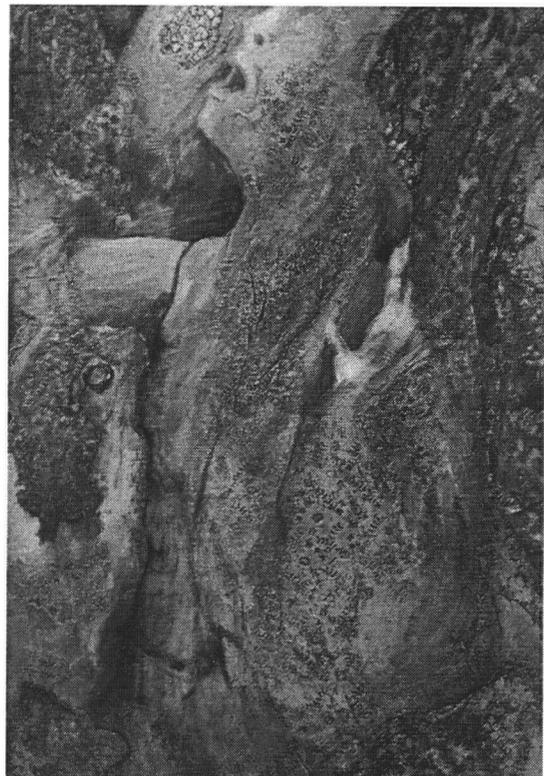


Figure 4. Woman with Egg #4

I grew up in a home surrounded by coastal artists; my parents hung Bill Reid masks in our living room and Rachel Gurlay's serigraphs of Sooke Inlet and Hernando Island throughout the main floor. Carl Larson's drawings of children in Swedish gardens graced my bedroom walls. But none of these ever moved me; I found them beautiful but I did not yearn for these works like I did for Nicole's. In many ways, her painting was a reflection of a part of who I am. In this artwork, I see myself dancing in the sunset of the twilight of experiences, a daughter becoming her mother and a granddaughter with her hands in the soil, fumbling below the surface for her roots, her histories.

I ached for this piece because of what it revealed in me; how it made me understand the woman dancing and becoming - breaking free from the earth, strengthened by the egg, a sign of motherhood:

*remembered rapture* reminds me of Nicole's "Woman with Egg" and how I longed to be in that painting, to be that woman, fiery with passion lost in the flames, hands above her head like she is receiving a quenching spring rain. The earth, her history is embedded in her body, rosemary, lavender, seed packages and egg shells, the composting of her past. I feel this woman's strength, passion, femaleness and remember this part of me- the strong sensuous woman rejoicing, capturing, in awe of the moment.

(Course Notebook, July 11, 2002)

Although her art was reasonably priced, my rational side did not allow me to purchase right there; I needed time to think about how I would pay for it and if I could afford it. Much to my disappointment, while I debated money versus soulful art, the painting was purchased; my reflection of self, bought by another woman. I had missed my chance.

### 1.3. Archiving Recipes of Mothering and Widowing

I am still working on a poem about my grandmother's lemon squares for the collaborative piece that we are doing in "Women, Writing and Imagination". I have the drafts, five so far, paper clipped together and scribbled over in blue ink next to me. I want my words to make a life emerge from the piece, allowing the reader to live what I know of my grandmother:

First Draft

*Somewhere a woman is writing a poem  
ancient recipes for mothering*

*hidden  
tart and sweet  
in the lemon squares*

*a gift  
that she makes from memory  
and packages for her granddaughters.*

Through the reading of Eavan Boland's *Object Lessons* (1995), I have been returning to objects that personify elements of my being and who my grandmother was to me. In the context of my matrilineal history and identity, objects are the evidence I possess of my foremothers' personal lives. These objects- archives of my roots and her life- were given to me after my grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Botterell, passed away in 2000.

### ***Object 1: Letters from Granddaughter***

The letters that I wrote to her while I was away at university are stuffed behind the faded orange cover of Auden's book of poems. They are distant thank yous for her care packages full of homemade baking. They tell filtered versions of my student life in Montreal.

Dear Granny,

Thanks for the lemon squares; they arrived just in time to be shared with friends at graduation. The ceremony was at Place des Arts and then there was a really nice cocktail reception outside on the main campus, they had a jazz trio and all! After the event, we did a lot of sightseeing and a lot of eating; Mom took us to Swartz's Deli on Saint Laurent for smoked meat... a real Montreal experience. I also took Mom on a walk through Westmount and we walked to Linda Redpath's place on Elm Street. It reminded me of you...

(House, excerpt from personal correspondence, 1995)

As I reread my letters and cards to her, I am reminded of the gaps her voice needs to fill to colour and contour the landscapes of these memories.

### ***Object 2: The Industrial Recipe Box***

Her dark green, stainless steel recipe box and her yellowed hand written recipe for Lemon Squares are next to my chair. These are the only words I have from my grandmother's life of 82 years. Last night, I looked through all the cards, hoping but not finding even one that had notes in the margin or indications of whether the recipe was tasty or terrible. I thumbed through each recipe card, opened folded notes and magazine clippings as I ached for clues to my grandmother's life behind these recipes and beyond her yellow kitchen. In a last attempt to find out more, I emptied the box of all its cards hoping there would be a secret hidden somewhere under the recipes. All that remained

was flour and a lone paper clip; dusty remnants of all the times that this box was thumbed through with her baking hands, flour, egg and sugar underneath her nails.

But there are no other words, no emotions for me to read and savor. The words are mine to write; she has left me with her life stories in these objects and it is my responsibility to write her story from an alphabet of memory.

#### **1.4. The Archivist and the Archived: Intertwining Objects and Subject**

In remembering, she became an artist, creating each landscape from the archives of memory, until her personal world expanded, swelling and resonating beyond itself, beyond herself, into the endless recollection and intersecting narratives that are history. (Dunlop, 2002b, p. 13)

*Archive* derives from the Greek word *arkheia* meaning public records. However, these records that I possess are not public. The term is defined as: “a collection of documents or records such as letters, official papers, photographs or recorded material kept for their historical interest; place where these are kept” (*MSN Dictionary Online*, 2002). However, recipes are not included in this definition.

The *archivist* is “somebody employed to collect, catalogue, and take care of the items in an archive” (*Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 1989). This is my role but most of the time I am not sure who is the real archivist and who is the archived; I am learning my life by living moments of her life. As I read her recipes for lemon squares and venison stew, I write her recipes of mothering and widowing, her life objects also archives of my life history.

Woolf states (2001/1929) "... that a woman writing thinks back through her mother" (p. 114) and Leguin (1995) adds, "that we have many mothers, those of the body and those of the soul" (p. 192). My grandmother is a mother of my soul and my writing obsession. In her recipe box, I seek to collect, catalogue and take care of her untold stories trapped in these archives. I am learning who I am and who she was by exploring landscapes of memory and writing about this. I write and write and she continues to surface in my consciousness as a mother, a wife, a widow on the page.

I seek to know why she never remarried after her husband died in 1958 and she was left alone with three children, aged two, thirteen and fifteen to care for and provide for.

*There was no time to look for a husband between working full time as a social worker and caring for the children. Mrs. Walker, my friend and housekeeper, was the only reason that I survived this turmoil.*

I want to know what it was to fall into such a deep depression that she lost her hair permanently and wore a wig ever since.

*I was in shock; Hugh had been given a clean bill of health at Dr. Buffam's office the week before. I was making eggs around the corner in the kitchen when he died suddenly of a heart attack at the breakfast table... right in front of the children. As Anne Cameron (2002) wrote, "I did not come apart tidily". I could not contain my grief; my body betrayed me when my hair fell out and I became numb.*

I want to know how she coped socially in Oak Bay, Victoria in the 1950s as the only single mother in her neighborhood.

*Soon after I realized that I could not maintain the life I wanted for myself and my children unless I went back to school, I rented out my house, left Oak Bay with*

*my youngest son and Mrs. Walker, and moved to Vancouver to complete a law degree.*

I want to know why she decided that she would never take a lover again.

*I did take lovers at first. In fact I fell in love with a man whom I would have considered marrying, had he not resided in another city... but it was too complicated and I had become accustomed to providing for myself and living in my home. I was too old to change my life for a man.*

These words, divulged slowly through years of conversation with my mother and through the one formal interview I was able to conduct with my grandmother in 1992 for a women's studies course, tell a version of events: the public censored one. Now, through my own writing, I imagine the words whispered in the silences between these lines over and over, the private lives of my grand mother.

### **1.5. Connected Landscapes**

Language is the very voice of the trees, the waves, the forest.  
(Merleau-Ponty in Dunlop, 2002b, p. 4)

#### ***Montreal, Winter 1994.***

I am in my third year of a BA at McGill University, the same school that my grandmother attended in the 1940s to become a social worker. This geography is our bond; two women living similar academic lives in the same city 51 years apart. She wanted me to be here, in a place that is now as much mine as hers.

Langue Maternelle  
(for MEB)

*Two scholars learn the contours  
of wrought-iron gates and worn out brownstones  
walk the broken pavement cracked from cold  
at McGill au centre-ville.*

*In the 1940s  
in the 1990s  
grandmother and granddaughter spend  
days in lecture theatres  
mapping mahogany tables  
charting green chalk boards  
echoing antiquated knowledge of graying professors.*

*They spend weekends wandering in Westmount  
two generations apart  
breathing in the same old English society  
rooted in tea roses and Earl Grey on Redpath Crescent.*

*The grandmother's journey begins  
forging footprints into brittle pavement of academia  
where wild daisies and dandelions will grow  
in another season  
in another city  
when she becomes a social worker.*

*The grand daughter retraces maternal roots  
reads the imprints of her ancestors  
on pages of Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf  
finds her own lines in English and French essays  
that inspire her to be a teacher in both languages.*

*In seasons  
of ochre maple leaves worn into soles of boots  
ice stuck on eyelashes  
mauve crocuses protected in palms  
two women with the history of cedars and arbutus trees  
drenched in their skin flourish here.*

*They learn to whisper their own alphabets  
and to transcend two generations.*

I am at the row of metal post boxes in the lobby of my four storey brick apartment building on Sherbrooke and Aylmer in the student ghetto. The building is old and drafty. A single light illuminates the narrow lobby and corkscrew stairs that lead up to my second floor 1<sup>1/2</sup> : a bachelor suite. It's minus 20 outside and I'm huddled against the hot water

radiator in my Gortex parka and toque. With mitts in mouth and backpack lodged between my feet, I fumble through my keys looking for the right one to open my mail slot, my hands still numb from the three block walk from the Milton gates in the wind and snow.

My key turns slowly in the mail box lock and I know there is a package from the West Coast inside. I shake my key and bang the box in anticipation of the surprise and the package is dislodged, the mail slot open. Wrapped in brown paper and masking tape and sent five days ago according to the blurred ink of the postage stamp, are my grandmother's lemon squares all the way from Victoria. I know this even before opening the wrapping because I recognize her handwriting- blue scrawl on the brown paper.

The package is sticky and full of crumbs. The squares are wrapped in crinkled wax paper. They are stale and some are slightly moldy but I covet this gift like I would a handwritten letter full of vivid descriptions of every detail of life back at home. I imagine the ritual; her thin hands mixing, pouring and tasting the sweet lemon squares before she sent them off to Montreal.

There is never much of a note with these squares; I open them up and find, as usual, a newspaper clipping on something political and a scrap with, "*What do you think? Much love, Granny*". This is how I knew her; through her brown paper packages full of baking, not through long letters or expensive birthday gifts. This food was my only window into the private woman she was and the love she had for me as her granddaughter.

Third Draft

*Somewhere a woman is writing a poem  
as she adds ingredients beyond  
the yellowed, hand written recipe card*

*bittersweet memories  
the flavor of her secrets  
to each batch of lemon squares*

*ancient ritual of mothering  
sweet lemon  
for her granddaughter to taste.*

***Vancouver, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2000.***

I am in my house on Vancouver's west side packing boxes to move into an apartment with my partner. It is late afternoon, the part of the day that I like best because there is still enough natural light filtering through the screen door for me to continue packing without having to turn on the electricity. I am seated on the hard wood floor surrounded by flattened cardboard boxes, books and layers of dust. When the phone rings and I finally locate it in the corner of the room, the line is silent.... and then, my mother who is on the other end in Victoria begins.

*I don't know how to tell you this: Your grandmother, we found her this morning...  
she died last night in the kitchen... of a heart attack.*

*I just thought you'd want to know. I'm sorry.  
I'll let you know about the memorial arrangements.*

I am numb. She had been in the hospital and had just returned home. We had set up a home care nurse for her so she could stay in her house. I had not gone to visit her

because I was teaching Summer School and it seemed too difficult to find a substitute on short notice and after all, she would be fine, she was the toughest woman I knew.

*In the kitchen.*

I kept thinking of her there, feeling her heart constricting like it must have done once before when her husband died so suddenly in the same place in 1958.

*I remember the pastel yellow walls and the miniature stools just for us in the Formica breakfast nook. My sister and I would sit in our matching flannel nightgowns early on Saturday mornings while Gran toasted up her homemade whole wheat bread that she kept in a secret drawer. Out would come the plum jam made from the bounty of the backyard orchard and a piping hot pot of Celestial Seasonings tea, the aromas of chamomile and mint steaming from my mug and warming my hands and face.*

I kept thinking she must have chosen to go, to give up and just die, or she would've picked up the phone and tried to save her life.

*"If ever I can't take care of myself, just kill me. I don't want to ever have to depend on someone else" I heard her say only once, near the end.*

When my mother returned from packing up the contents of her childhood house, she brought me two things that had been left for me in my grandmother's will; the letters I'd sent Gran in response to her packages of lemon squares and two books of poetry. I'd never received words from her before and I craved more, needing not just to have her books of poetry but to have her stories, in her voice.

*The routine was always the same; brush your teeth, climb into bed and wait for Granny to come up and say goodnight. On the wooden stairs you could hear the hollow sounds of her heels as she walked up to the second floor. In hand, she would carry a red checkered bag of Dare mint toffees- humbugs- one for each of us. She would sit on the edge of the bed and say goodnight, the humbugs, our kisses.*

Later, she shared with me the many keepsakes that she had kept from the house on Transit Road- but the simple metal recipe box intrigued me the most.

### 1.6. Rewriting Kitchen Wisdom

I want a poem to grow old in. I want a poem I can die in.  
(Eavan Boland, p.209)

#### The Matriarch

*Now she stands, wig positioned appropriately  
greyed for the occasion  
straw hat  
button down blouse and blue sweatshirt  
grey flannels and hiking boots  
glasses delicately balanced on the end of  
her narrow pointy nose*

*Neighbourhood granddaughters gather and listen  
as she stands in front of her garden maze  
and recites the story of Theseus and the Minotaur*

*Labyrinths of longing  
journeys on cobbled roads  
and dusty pathways previously unworn by women  
now fragrant with thyme and snow drops*

*What I know about my grandmother is  
sweet lemon squares in brown paper  
sent through the mail to me in Montreal,  
toasted homemade bread  
slathered in sticky orange marmalade from the pantry,  
Saturday mornings at the yellow Formica counter*

*Public eyes see her in sepia.  
fossilized woman wife widow  
Mrs. Hugh Botterell  
she is forty  
still slim Hollywood beautiful  
like Marlena Dietrich  
high cheekbones, hair rolled into style on both sides above her ears  
kneeling in the grass with baby*

*Private details on the back of the yellowed snapshot  
revealing*

*bust: 36  
waist: 26  
hips : 32  
dress Size: 6  
whispers of the body  
her watermark  
concealed inside the flap  
of her late husband's wallet  
stored in the attic.*

Would my grandmother have been content to grow old and die in these poems?

\* \* \*

I am trying to understand Eavan Boland's (1995) theory of women as objects and how it relates to my obsession with my grandmother's things. In *Object Lessons*, she argues that the woman has traditionally appeared as an object of men's desire in poetry and that women are:

... Reassembling a landscape where subject and object are differently politicized, where expression... may be an index of powerlessness. I intend them to suggest however sketchily, the distances and differences which open when these traditional elements are disassembled (p. 220-221).

By making my grandmother's recipes her archives, I am reassembling her private life where her objects come to represent her as subject. Eavan Boland (1995) describes this experience when writing the poem, "The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me":

I was writing a sign which might bring me closer to those emblems of the body... I had a clear sense of- at last- writing the poem away from the traditional object (p. 230-231).

The most coveted item I possess of my grandmother's is her recipe box. In it are the recipes of childhood; my grandmother's, my mother's and mine. Her recipe for lemon squares is written in blue ink and is the only memento I have with her handwriting on it. It is stained with oils and yellow with age but it still smells of her kitchen, of baking and

flour and heat. I run my fingers over the tattered cue card feeling for the grooves her pen strokes, tracing the contours of memory, knowing that she sat writing, right on this surface, in order to preserve a family recipe<sup>1</sup>.

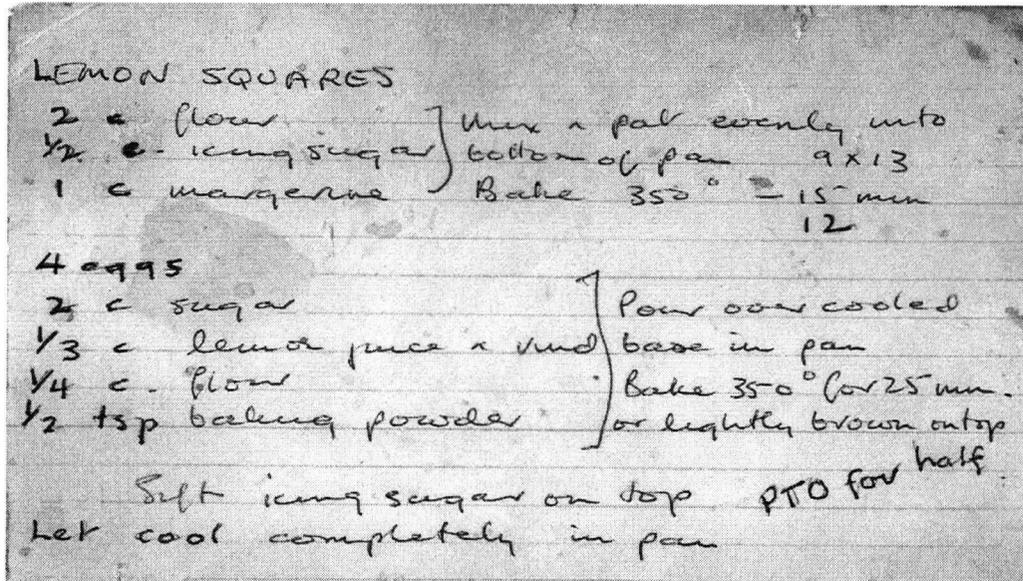


Figure 5. Index Card Recipe for Lemon Squares

Final Version: Sweet Lemon

*Somewhere my grandmother is writing a poem  
adding ingredients beyond  
the yellowed, hand written recipe*

*the flavor of her secrets  
ancient recipes of mothering and widowing  
hidden in each batch*

*sweet lemon squares  
for her granddaughter to taste.*

Women's stories, silenced in cool steel recipe boxes, passed down from generations

<sup>1</sup> See appendix 1 for a clear version of the recipe.

of women before them, are the stories of mothering children and feeding husbands. For my grandmother, they are evidence of her most sacred form of loving.

### **1.7. When It Falls Apart, I Return to the Kitchen**

There are people whose interests and knowledge range widely, whose talents are diverse, yet who are impelled by one preoccupation that shapes nearly everything they think... (Cooley, 1998, p. 63).

In the role of archivist, I am collecting, cataloguing, and protecting my grandmother's rituals of wife and widow. In my role as archivist, I am also the one being archived, collecting, cataloguing, exposing recipes of my identities as wife and writer.

"An archivist serves the reader's desire" (Cooley, 1998, p. 322). Does the reader even desire to know more than her name: Mrs. Hugh Botterell, really his name, and the word "Mrs." meaning mistress belonging to her husband? I'm sure that records also cite her occupations: social worker and lawyer. Really, you may ask, what more can be learned by examining the recipes in a steel box?

\*\*\*

During my master's degree my husband begins his residency at Vancouver General Hospital. He wakes at 5:20 am and works most evenings until seven. He is then expected to study his textbooks, complete patient reports and phone in his case dictations. Every second or third night, he is also on call, his hours extremely unpredictable. Sometimes I feel like a single wife, like I am the only one who has time for our relationship. We begin scheduling a "date night" so that he and I both set aside time to spend together. The first time, he suggests that we meet for Thai food and then rent a video. By eight o'clock, he is asleep on the couch.

How do you argue with a sleeping partner? How do you take on an entire medical training programme and explain that it is not healthy to work students so hard that they cannot forge human relations with their families and friends? I take my frustration and disappointment out on my partner, the issue much bigger than the both of us.

I am caught between identities of independent feminist and committed wife. How can these two identities possibly intertwine without the loss of my sense of self? Which is more important, typing another page of my thesis or putting groceries in an empty fridge? How much do I have to give to each part of who I am to know that I am doing enough? In Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1993), she speaks of this splitting of self: "a life in which she never consciously resolves choices, in which she alternately tries to play hostess and please her husband as her mother (and grand mother) did, and to write her novel or doctoral thesis"(In Dunlop, 1998, p. 114).

When it all falls apart, I return to the kitchen. I open the box and thumb through her torn, stained recipe cards finding the right recipe for forgiveness from my husband and myself.

Berry Crumble

*When she looks at the deep black blue berries  
opaque  
acidic  
sickeningly sweet  
she thinks of drowning herself there  
below the dense midnight surface*

*she is baking her way through this first year of "us"*

*soothing her lonely hands  
kneading  
needing  
lumpy butter, flour and oatmeal  
remnants back together.*

*dandelion flecks of yolk speckle the egg whites  
one teaspoon of vanilla  
turns the elastic liquid murky*

*she makes this over and over to  
heal and be forgiven  
for night whispers wetted on tongue*

*sometimes she yearns to be June Cleaver  
a 1950s matron  
who could be forgiven in a half hour episode  
for much worse than this.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Cooley (1998) asks, "Yet what of the writer's (desire) - is it of no consequence?" (p. 322) I write my poetry in alphabets of remembrance, an explorer mapping landscapes of memory. My words, the contours of her/stories and mine concealed in the kitchen.

### **1.8. A New Community of Kitchen Table Wisdom: The 2 a.m. Collective**

I had another idea, she says, at two a.m.  
What moved you to get out of bed? Her lover asks.  
A word...

(Personal conversation with Dunlop, July 2002)

Our class has become a community of women writers who have claimed room 1128 in the Education building as a "room of our own". We have been reading excerpts from Virginia Woolf's book, *A Room of One's Own*, to open our class discussions about women and writing and how they connect to our own lived experiences:

Mind the Gap: A Poem for Virginia

*Fumbling through words kept concealed between covers,  
we open our books,  
All of us different versions of Woolf in a Room of One's Own.  
Today, a woman is reading,*

So long as you write about what you wish to write, that is all that matters; for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of vision... is the most abject treachery... (Woolf, 1929/2001, p. 125).

*Silence coats the spaces between us as we  
listen for our own muted voices in hers  
women painting echoing moments of remembrance,  
reverberations of scarlet, cobalt, plum and charcoal  
in the spaces between her words  
tarnished alphabets of experience find rhythm in the gaps*

I've volunteered to cut and paste a collaborative piece we are working on in "Women Writing Imagination". It started with the prompt, "Somewhere a woman is writing a poem", and each woman in this writing community has written a verse. Through our discussions about the identities we share and live, we have been trying to find out more about who we are and what makes us different from our male contemporaries in writing style and content. Bains writes,

*Somewhere a woman is writing*

*Her poem*

*prose  
story.*

*In her head  
her blood*

*tumbling from tongue  
flowing through fingers.*

*Shards of her soul*

*Spilling onto the page*

*Free her*

*Save her.*

(in Dunlop, "2am Dedication" section, 2002d)

***July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2002.***

It's 11:45 pm and I'm still waiting to receive all the verses of our collaborative poem. There are guests in my office so tonight I have the laptop plugged into the outlet next to my bed. I am crouching over the screen and checking my e-mail once more. Waiting.

Our experiment in building a community of women writers within the academy has been an important one for me. Over the last few days, we have spent much time workshopping our verses with small groups of classmates; I have been given the chance to be a writer and to be listened to in a safe and caring environment. This is the first time I have received input about my creative writing that has helped shape me into becoming a stronger poet. My poem about my grandmother's recipe has gone through five versions. I am dusting off layers of memory from that recipe and the image is surfacing, slowly, into focus.

One of my colleagues has found this experience of collaboration extremely difficult. On the first day of class, she shared how her mother committed suicide ten years ago by walking into a river with rocks in her pockets, just like Virginia Woolf. This was the first time that she made this connection. This revelation haunts her. When we discuss mothering and its primary role in women's identity, she does not join the conversation; she puts her head down and writes. When we move into small groups to work on our verses, Rishma suggests that she include something about Virginia Woolf because she has been an important discovery for my colleague. She doesn't appreciate this advice and opts out completely of any work shopping activities.

*Quite frankly, she says, this workshopping process doesn't work for me. I do not feel that this piece is a true collaboration and I don't think I should rework my verse. The process has been hurtful and it's not going to be okay with a discussion and an apology. A hug at the end of class will not change things.*

\* \* \*

Debra calls, she's still working on her verse and has been all evening. She is struggling to convey the complex emotions of a custody battle ten years ago in which she lost her daughters. She has never written about it before and is passionate about expressing her lived experience in words:

*I guess the way it is now will have to do, she says, I just don't think that I'm going to be able to say it all in one poem...*

I understand her need to have the right words in the right places, to create the right image of her lived experience. When I write my life, I learn my life and live the lives of other women. In the act of writing, I learn to chart histories that are otherwise silent; I bring voice to the experience of the everyday and the extraordinary that have never been archived because they are stories from the private lives of women.

*Somewhere a woman is writing a poem  
After years of hesitation, she writes past impossibilities  
Complex loss and grief interrupted  
Inhabit her body  
Sadness seeped bones  
Rage the taste of blood in her mouth  
Regrets ever-present, heavy  
Too many hard truths  
The flow of ink a healing salve  
Exorcising old ghosts. (Sutherland in Dunlop, Beginnings section, 2002d)*

**July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2002.**

I thought about how the creative act has been misconstrued as a solitary, solipsistic act and how we must correct that misapprehension; we must write about the creative act as it is nurtured by loving friendships.

(DeSalvo, 1995, p. 42)

I stayed up late last night baking my grandmother's lemon squares for the first time, for the women in this new community of writers.

*I am in my grandmother's yellow kitchen listening to the CBC radio. She squeezes the lemons through the juicer and blends the dry ingredients with a wooden spoon. While I watch and listen, she pours the topping over the crust and bakes it all in a worn metal pan. I imagine listening intently for her secrets of how to balance the responsibility of motherhood with a career while being a supportive wife but she does not offer me these words, only the recipe for her lemon squares.*

It's the last day of class and we bring our collective poem, *She Tries Her Tongue: a Blueprint of Women's Collaborative Writing*, to voice by recording it onto cassette. Many tears are shed and the cassette has to be stopped many times before we can pronounce our verses audibly for recording. We release old anger and regret, speak of love and distant families, and the connectedness we feel as women writers.

My colleague decides, after a roundtable discussion and private meetings with Rishma, that she is now willing to be a part of this collaborative work. The power of owning your words can be liberating and cathartic. I learn later, after she shares her mother's story with me in the context of her final assignment, that she has written a moving narrative on the topic of writing to save one's life and writing as locations of hope.

We now have ownership of small parts of our life stories and the process moves many women in the group to tears. I have been struggling to put into words the spaces this course has created for me. I want to speak of the gaps, the silences in the academy that this course and these women have filled with stories that are moving and have allowed me to rethink the stereotypes of woman-mother-wife-widow-lover-daughter-

scholar. However at the same time, I cannot find the words to speak for them and I do not wish to put words in their mouths, mouths that are already full and bursting with words of their own. Instead, I choose to write about the power of poetry and words, a passion that is insatiable for me and that has been restored by the stories and support from these women. "Singing Stones" is for my colleague whose mother committed suicide by drowning. On that last day of class, I thought of reading it to her but didn't. I didn't know whether my writings about her private life should be made public.

### Singing Stones

In the wash of poetry, the old, beaten stones of language take on colours that disappear when you sieve them up out of the stream bed and try to sort them out.  
(Rich, 1993, p.84)

*Somewhere a woman is writing a poem  
pockets full of stones, weight too much to bear alone  
she follows Virginia's footsteps into the river  
yearning to see the colours of the pebbles wet and vibrant.*

*In liquid she empties her pockets,  
sage, sand, dust and copper emerging from rock,  
And holds her breath  
poems sinking into her palms  
body embedded in eternal poetry.*

These voices in my bones are strong; they are the words of women I am connected to through art, ancestry and the academy. These are the communities from which I write my own lines about my own lives, always returning to my grandmother's yellow kitchen.

## **PART TWO**

### **Learning to Look Through Someone Else's Eyes**

#### **2.1 Transforming Student Esteem Through Writing**

I began asking questions about creative writing and its place in the English curriculum in 2000. It was third year of teaching and I had just begun teaching English full-time. As a raffle prize in a staff draw, a colleague offered to come in and teach free verse image poetry writing to my grade ten class of inner-city students. She guided us into the realm of creative writing, focusing on using concrete images to express abstract ideas.

The thirty of us, students and a new teacher sat in a circle and wrote haikus about adventure, poverty, death, peace and courage. We wrote and shared our work aloud with each other, hanging on every encouraging word that our guest teacher gave us. She made us feel that every line we risked was worth it and that we were slowly becoming poets.

We reworked our words and syllable counts over and over. She shared her own poems with us on the overhead projector and allowed us to help her workshop her writing, writing each suggestion on the transparency. We learned to show, not tell the reader our emotions and we began to notice clichés. It was a class challenge to describe love without red roses and peace without white doves. Then we went back and wrote

and shared our pieces again, this time building on our haikus to extend them with metaphors and similes into longer, more imagist, poems.

She was supposed to teach one class but she stayed for a whole unit, collecting students' work and encouraging them with comments on post-it notes that they craved receiving each time our class met. Weeks later, the students felt ready to bring their poetry out into public by entering it in a province-wide poetry contest. What the students wrote came from their own lived experiences and even though they were novices, their pieces had strong voices and descriptive and unique images:

#### A Struggle for Silence

*I walk down the rows of old desks  
Engraved carvings "Vassi loves Jerry forever"  
And "Kelly was here 98"  
I attempt to put my books into the  
Desk full of lunch leftovers:  
moldy tuna sandwiches,  
Scrunched and crippled Minute Maid  
orange juice boxes  
And a rainbow of hardened gum stuck  
Along the inside wall.  
I sit silent and gabbing, giggling and  
Gossiping  
Surrounds me.  
I feel like I'm watching TV on full blast.  
(Tam, 2000, p. 103)*

\*\*\*

I learned more about my students in those few weeks that my colleague taught them than I had learned all year. The students' backgrounds and childhoods were our curriculum, and the group was becoming connected through these stories like they never had in previous units. In the process of sharing our first attempts at creative writing, the playing field had been leveled for weak and strong students, unbeknownst to any of us,

and everyone could participate in the playing with words. What was intangible but even more telling was the change in attitude this class had towards writing. They now believed that they were writers, poets actually, and they were surprised and joyful of their newfound pride and ability. By nurturing them and guiding them, my colleague had found a way to instill confidence in a group that was otherwise marginalized by their low test scores and predominantly ESL backgrounds.

The unit brought my students their first recognizable success outside our classroom also; they had put their words about their own worlds on paper for a panel of province-wide judges and three students were chosen for publication in the BC Teachers of English Language Arts *Student Writing Journal*. Three more received honourable mentions. Luke's piece was one of the three chosen:

#### The Funeral

*The desolate winter night...  
The tears from my father's death,  
Snuff out the flame.*  
(Kuroko, 2000, p. 53)

## **2.2. Research Questions and the Literature Review**

This is when my questions began: What was it about creative writing that my students found so empowering? And, what process and environment need to be present in the classroom in order to nurture this creativity?

I was intrigued by the power my students found in this type of composition and began looking for research with student voices; journals, poems and stories that would

give me some first hand evidence of the allure of creative writing for them.

In the field of teaching composition, the National Council of Teachers of English (2001) states that, "Writing is a powerful instrument of thought. In the act of composing, writers learn about themselves and their world...writing confers the power to grow personally and effect change in the world" (p. 1). Nelson (2001) and Greene (1984) both agree that creative writing is a personal window into the world, a new way for authors to see themselves and the world around them. Further, Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that narrative writing is often empowering and therapeutic. This is what my students obviously found in the poetry unit. However, Thomas (2000) states that currently arguments for the increased emphasis of creative writing in the English classroom have been sidetracked in favour of research concentrating on the results from standardized writing tests. These exams focus on mechanics not content, and on final product, not process.

In British Columbia, the provincial standardized reading and writing exam for secondary students, known as the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA), is comprised of two writing exercises: a persuasive letter and an expository essay. From these two writing samples, the Ministry of Education classifies students as not yet within, minimally meeting, fully meeting, or exceeding grade-level expectations in writing. This minimal form of assessment is a component used by the media to rank schools in terms of the quality of their English programs and the quality of their students. The Fraser Institute publishes an annual report on schools in *The Province* newspaper that relies heavily on standardized tests to assess which schools are the best.

These tests tell part of the story of what's working and happening in language arts classrooms. However, they do not account for much of the writing curriculum that is mandated in the government's Integrated Resource Packages (IRPs) that includes poetry, narrative, and informational or research writing (Ministry of Education, 1996). The *BC Performance Standards for Writing*, another Ministry of Education document, outlines how teachers of language arts can evaluate writing assignments. It is comprised of rubrics for impromptu, poetry, narrative (short story), essay, research and informational, and letter writing tasks.

This makes me draw the following conclusion: if the curriculum and the classroom assessment tools include creative writing but it is not a component in assessing students' writing abilities on a larger scale, the message is clear: meaning and creativity in both the structure and content of poetry and prose writing is not valued outside the English classroom by policy makers. It is just "icing on the cake" when, according to many teachers and politicians, the real test of a good writer is whether they can write a cohesive, expository essay.

An example of this is the number of English teachers who only teach the thesis statement and the standard formulaic essay structure. Often there is no discussion of style nor is there an acknowledgment that some of the best essays do not follow this form and that this can limit students' originality. Those who teach this form of essay writing will argue that there is no time to play with words when there's the serious business of

learning the essay to master, especially since it's the culminating task on the English Language Arts 12 Provincial Exam.

I wish to pose questions that will address matters of self expression, new ways of seeing the world and making sense of a writer's personal world, and issues of voice through using creative writing in the secondary classroom. I seek to know what it was that happened in my classroom when my vice principal-poet began teaching my students to write poetry from their own experiences. The community that was formed and the successes that all students felt were not there when we were studying the good old expository essay earlier that year.

The issues I will address are as follows:

- 1) How do students come to make creative writing part of their school life and personal life?
- 2) How does creative writing help students to live and grow in the world?
- 3) How has creative writing affected how students see themselves both as individuals and as writers? Or do they see themselves as writers?
- 4) How does a community of both teacher-writers and student-writers affect the writers' experience?

It is with these questions that I approached the literature in the field in order to know what researchers and teachers had to say about creative writing as a tool of self expression and empowerment, and as a way of seeing and making sense of the students' personal world. I also wanted to know the personal stories of these students, what did they have to say on the preceding topics? Would their voices be included in the research for which they were subjects?

### **2.3. Creative Writing as a Tool of Self Expression and Empowerment**

Rich and Nedboy's research (1977) with a group of inner-city adolescents in Brooklyn documents the impact of poetry writing on student self-esteem. Within their classroom experiment they worked with a control group of adolescents, aged 12 to 15, twice a week for a month. Students began by writing a group poem wherein each student contributed a line, and then spring-boarded into writing more meaningful poetry about a topic from their collective realities: graffiti and trains. The experience of choosing their own topics and successfully writing poems was empowering and they began naming themselves poets after two or three guided poetry writing lessons (p. 93). The rest of the class was impressed and surprised by the quality of their peers' writing and was now eager to join in.

Although Rich and Nedboy's (1977) study appeals to the humanist in me, their experiment lacks depth and length. The only methodology employed seems to be observation of poetry lessons and students' reactions. Where are the student voices, through interviews or story telling, that could have attested to Rich and Nedboy's findings? Also, what were the long-term effects of this approach to poetry? Did students continue to grow and build self-expression by writing creatively or was it only a short, month-long unit?

In Nelson's research (2001) he argues that to focus on the content of writing, as an instrument of creation, "has to do with power of another kind, personal power that can transform students' lives" (p. 57). This gives license to student writers to find their own voices and make choices. Further, Nelson (2001) believes that "truly powerful writing

comes from being nurtured, not from being tested” (p. 58). The Young Adult Writing Workshop (YAWP) which he helped develop in Phoenix, Arizona focuses on creating such an environment. Both students and teachers write about their lives and their struggles, and create a community of writers. For their final publication, teenagers turned their pain and confusion and anger not to violence but into art and powerful literacy (p. 61).

Although Nelson’s article speaks passionately of the power of writing in defining and dealing with ourselves and our world, his research does not satiate my thirst to hear the “real story”. The voices of these students whose writing he claims is a testament to the Power of the Word are silent and their testimonials are left unwritten.

Shafer’s (2001) research concurs with Nelson (2001), Rich and Nedboy (1977), in that he also champions the act of writing as an act of empowerment and self-expression. In his study, he spent four months teaching a college writing course to a community of female inmates at the Coldwater Correctional Facility. For these women, “literacy was an opportunity to give voice to their feelings of consternation, alienation, and pain and a chance to try to succeed after so many failures” (p. 75).

Shafer adapted the college English curriculum to include ethnographies and the theme of community and a person’s place in them. Students were asked to analyze their experiences as a way to solve the problems in their lives within the framework of the cause and effect essay. Students were encouraged to compose for themselves and their community instead of the instructor. These women were empowered by the word and felt

the liberation of language and storytelling. However, Shafer does not provide first hand testimonials here; his claims are based on observation and field notes.

The value in this study lies in giving voice to those who are marginalized. Shafer makes an important point when he states that, “education is forever alienating when it does not consider the culture and language of the student... we sometimes forget the cathartic, even therapeutic power of writing in the day to day grind of teaching” (p. 81). However, by restricting his students to write in the standard essay format, he does not fully consider the unique culture of his inmate/students. Would it have been more therapeutic for them if they had had the opportunity to write poetry or short narrative stories for example, instead of being limited to one genre of writing?

According to the research, clearly creative writing is an important tool for self-discovery and empowerment of writers. What remains unseen in the research is a strong voice from the subject of this type of research. Where are the voices of these newly empowered, self-discovered authors? Why haven't the researchers felt it necessary to substantiate their research claims with these students' voices?

#### **2.4. Creative Writing as a Way of Seeing and Making Sense of the Writer's World**

Creative writing is personal and open-ended and as such, leads the writer to explore how one sees the world in which one lives.

Greene (1984) believes that in an age where schools are seeking conformity and top scores on standardized tests, that they have forgotten about the individual and his or

her ability to think critically and creatively about the world. Greene argues that students' experiences with the "aesthetic", that is experiences with creativity and fine arts and the appreciation of the artistic and emotional encounter, change their perception of the world, lead to a questioning of the here and now, and foster an acceptance of multiple and individual realities.

Greene draws on Gardner's multiple intelligences theory for a validation of the arts, including creative writing, and left-brain thinking:

The point is that ways of being intelligent are expressed that are not usually expressed or encouraged in other classrooms. It may well be that, if expressive and creative activities are carried on within sight and sound of the various art world, there will be more occasions for the expression of a range of capacities than there are when attention is confined to the "right brain" (p. 127).

Further, she argues for altered schools where students can be empowered to perceive differently, so that they may resist a fixed definition and a stagnant sense of reality. Creative writing, as it draws on personal experience and imagination, facilitates finding a place for the students' own ways of seeing the world; it opens a window of possibilities. Greene also believes that aesthetic learning such as this gives voice to marginalized groups: "Works of art cannot but surprise if persons are present to them as living beings who live with others and feel themselves existing in the world" (p. 134).

## **2.5. The Classroom Writing Community: A Microcosm of Society**

In Lensmire's (1994) research, both positive and negative core values are exposed in his grade three class when they approach creative writing using a writers' workshop model. Lensmire relies on Bakhtin's notion of carnival to affirm what he views to be the

core of the workshop – commitment to a vision of students exploring and ordering their experiences as an expression of a unique self, as well as to participate in naming and renaming the world and the places within it (p. 372).

Lensmire studied a class of grade three students over a one year period in which he taught writing for thirty minutes every day and collected evidence in the form of field notes, teacher and classroom documents (lesson plans, rules, and notes to students and parents), audio tapes of classroom sessions, student conferences, student interviews, and samples of students' writing.

What he began to notice were patterns of association that divided children along gender and social-class lines. Participants sometimes used the free and playful space not to work out humane new relations, not to lampoon and discredit an unjust, official order, but to reassert ugly aspects of exactly the same unjust, larger society (p. 388). In one case, the class ostracized a female student because of her low economic status and weight problem. Others seemed to seldom acknowledge her voice; in the peer culture: "Jessie was not beautiful in the stories others told about her if they did acknowledged her at all" (p. 388). In response, Jessie began to write herself and her vision of the world on the page. Through her personal stories, she gave herself a voice and created her own version of the world in which she was the beautiful, popular princess (p. 389).

Lensmire includes the students' voices in his study, but they are younger students and they are not discussing their writing so much as they are discussing the social

hierarchy and dynamics in the classroom. What would Jessie have said about the power of her own writing in shaping an alternate reality for her?

The writing workshop creates a very important and powerful community of peers and writers. As a result, we need to pay attention to the communities that we create in the classroom (Lensmire, 1994, p. 389). Although they can be nurturing places where students can make sense of their personal world, not all students are good-willed and not all outcomes are necessarily positive when students are given such freedoms.

## **2.6. The Inclusion of Adolescent Students' Voices in Writing Research**

I am finally able to see an example of adolescent student voices as an integral part of the text and research in Taylor's Master's thesis, *In Search of Play: A Performance Kit* (1999). In this case, Taylor examines playing with words as the main objective for his small group of four students in a Writing 10 course. And play with words they do; through their dialogue journal with each other and Taylor, the reader gets a sense that this is an environment of caring and a community of writers that are learning together (p. 15). Taylor and his students explain how through this dialogue journal, students were able to struggle and define their own curriculum, thus ownership, of the course. In the following quote, Taylor's writing is in regular type and the student's response is between his lines in italics, just as it appears in his text:

It is clear ... that my aims for the course were to make it a place  
*\*The course was always very emotional for me and continues to evoke*  
where students could examine their lives personally and socially, and  
*emotional responses. A bit of regret. I wish I had recognized what was*  
through writing, transform those lives. I wanted to create a writing  
*available and helped make it happen. I was afraid to accept what was*  
culture that we could share, one characterized by individual freedom

*offered and now I would do things differently. But at the time what I. through dialogue and group support. We would make meaning for did turned out to be what I needed. ourselves with our group.....I write and live in a world of words, in wonder and awe. I expected that this wonder would form a large part of our time together (p. 18).*

Thus, students were not only “researched”, they were also his co-authors in writing and describing the experience. That his subjects, the four students, disrupt the traditional narrative is important because it is their narrative too; what most of the other researchers have neglected to address is the respect for the research participants. I agree with Leggo in that “narrative research, people telling their own stories, is the most respectful research that you can do; it honours the people that you are researching and working with” (Personal conversation with Leggo, 2001).

## **2.7 The Significance of This Kind of Creative Writing Research**

Writing research is in need of student narratives that will tell the stories that test scores don't, that will tell the personal tales of how students become writers and how the act of writing and being a part of a writing community is important and empowering. If we believe the National Council of Teachers of English position statement on teaching composition (2001), wherein “writing is a powerful instrument of thought [that helps] writers learn about themselves and their world and communicate their insight to others” (p. 1), then shouldn't we be listening directly to these young writers? They are one of our most valuable sources in determining the power and effect writing can have. The test scores will always tell us the writers' abilities in structure, form and grammar of a composition, but a shift needs to be made towards the content (Thomas 2001; Nelson

2001). The students' own narrative about writing is this "content". It's the significant missing link to having a more complete picture of creative writing in the classroom.

Therefore, this research will serve to further inform teachers and policy makers of another perspective on the importance of creative writing composition. It will also serve to validate the experience of those interviewed and to respectfully honour their creativity and risk-taking in calling themselves writers.

Finally, Leggo (2001) expresses the power and importance of giving voice to our lived experiences in the following poem:

Life writing acknowledges  
how each one of us  
is written by many others.  
In my life writing  
I do not seek a factual record.  
I want evocation, a rendering,  
a performative space  
where stories can be conjured  
out of memory imagination heart.  
I want others to catch  
the spirit of possibilities  
in the alphabet,  
to read my words  
and know their words,  
to read my stories  
and know their stories,  
to know how writing  
transfuses translates transforms  
life lives living liveliness  
(p.10).

## 2.8. My Research Project<sup>2</sup>

My research project is a case study of one Creative Writing 12 class, its students, its teacher, its researcher, and the community that was formed over a four month period in the winter of 2002. Through the use of ethnographic methods such as observations, field notes, a personal journal, student journals, surveys, interviews, and the analysis of student writing, I began exploring through my research, the same questions as outlined when I began my literature review:

- 1) How do students come to make creative writing part of their school life and personal life?
- 2) How does creative writing help students to live and grow in the world?
- 3) How has creative writing affected how students see themselves both as individuals and as writers? Or, do they see themselves as writers?
- 4) How does a community of both teacher-writers and student-writers affect the writers' experience?

The themes that resonated were the following: the difference between in and out of school writing, the exploration of student identity through writing and student stories as curriculum, and the power of a classroom writing community that includes both students and teachers.

I learned first about how students came to make creative writing part of their school life and personal life and how they felt about their first writing experiences. I learned about the dichotomy between the kinds of writing they did in and out of school and how each made them feel. Thirdly, through discussions and interviews, I began to see how writing impacted each student's own sense of identity and self esteem.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2 for more information on methodology used in this study.

In the creative writing classroom, their teacher and I had worked hard to create a community of writers, of both student-writers and teacher-writers, in an effort to see whether this experience, one that I would later learn was unlike any other class they took, would build the trust and risk-taking that is present in other writing groups. My inherent belief was that this type of classroom community was going to help the students see themselves as “real” writers and build their confidence so that they would share their own stories with other students and teachers and eventually the public. Through activities such as one-on-one editing, small group workshops, and classroom readings, we set out to make their stories from their own experiences the curriculum.

My story of becoming a writer and being a part of their community of writers included team-teaching this unit with their teacher who is my colleague. This gave me another vantage point, that of teacher. Thus, I was teacher- researcher, writer, teacher, and student in this study. My personal experiences were written in my journal entries, my own creative writing, lesson plans, and field notes. Once the research period was completed, the students’ stories and my stories formed a larger body of narrative work from which I could draw themes and personal relevance. In addition, the students’ polished poetry based on this unit formed a public exhibit at the Vancouver School Board during the summer of 2002. Finally, much of the learning and research prompted me to formally propose a new course, that of creative writing 10, to my administration in order for students to have more options for creativity in writing within the English department’s course selections.

## PART THREE

### **Journeys on a New Curricular Landscape: A Research Story**

Poetry is sort of like doing anything you want – it's complete freedom.  
(Ernest's Interview Transcript, 2002)

Each story has its own setting, including time and places, its own main and supporting characters, plot, and themes. This story is no different. It is a narrative account of the people, places, events, and learnings that took place for me, the researcher, and the students, as we explored ideas and identities together on the landscape of the Writing 12 classroom. Students' profiles are italicized; they interrupt the narrative that I tell with their own stories, creating a collage of voices that paint a vivid portrait of this writing community.

#### **3.1. The Landscape at First Glance**

It's early, sometime after 7 a.m. on a Friday morning. From my vantage point above the track on the concrete basketball court, I can see the dew gleaming on the playing field below. The group of senior citizens meets as usual in the west corner of the track by the chain link fence. They smile and greet each other in Cantonese and Vietnamese as they arrive from all four corners of the neighborhood. The women are dressed in colorful sweatpants, windbreakers, multicolored runners, and rain bonnets. They assemble around a thin Asian man in his seventies. He begins the tai chi routine, as he always does, at 7:30 sharp. This scene is peaceful. As the sun burns through the clouds and the dew begins to evaporate, the group continues their salutations to the sun and the earth in slow motion; their movements like shadows on a sundial.

By 8 o'clock, their routine is finished and they begin their eight laps of the track. In pairs and small groups, they walk and laugh and gossip together, this ritual is a tradition that holds their community together. As they walk, the morning tranquility is broken. Students who attend the school above the field begin to arrive in their suped up Hondas with ground shaking bass. On foot, they dawdle down Penticton Street looking for familiar faces. The scenario is nothing new for these seniors and they are not intimidated by the youth. They've been meeting here every weekday morning since before these teenagers were born and they know that appearances far from tell the whole story of this place. There is a synchronicity in the fact that generations use this school complex as an integral part of their community life.

This is Eastwood Vocational Secondary School<sup>3</sup> and the name conjures images of gangsters and violence for most people who have never been inside the mammoth structure in East Vancouver. If you drive east of Commercial on Broadway, you can't miss it; its two smoke stacks stand higher than any building in the neighborhood. The property includes two alternate schools in portables, a track, tennis courts, a gravel field, a black top for basketball, and a massive factory-like building that is home to 1800 working-class students and 145 teachers and support staff. It's a massive machine. Inside the main school, students have a multitude of program options: some of these are the regular stream, a French Immersion Program, a First Nations program, a gifted Program, an integrated/ flexible studies program, and a Life Skills program.

The general public's perception of the school has been negative for as long as I can remember. It doesn't provide a good first impression for visitors; the buildings are almost

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<sup>3</sup> This name is a pseudonym.

a hundred years old, the halls are overcrowded and dirty, and the sheer size of the plant intimidates people. Then, there's the name: Eastwood Vocational. Outsiders are left with the impression that the school is a vocational centre and that the students who go here are unruly and not academic. The only thing "vocational" about Eastwood is the fact that it does house the largest woodworking, graphics, metal work, and electronics shops in the city because it was a magnet school when it was built in 1934.

Our last Principal thought of changing the name of the school to get rid of the 65 year-old stigma but too many graduates wrote to say that they loved the name and were proud of what it stood for. This is the key: Eastwood Vocational is not welcoming and it's not inviting but, once students spend some time here, they realize that there are wonderful things that lie just below the surface. That's what graduates remember and that's what I remember also, now that I've spent five years between these walls.

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I remember the first time I walked through the west doors. I parked my car right in front of the steps and wondered whether I needed to lock the doors in this neighborhood. A group of grade 12 boys, wearing baseball caps backwards and puffy ski jackets were savoring the smoke of their cigarettes coolly and blocking the entrance to the school. I could tell from the graffiti, the gum, and the splashed slurpee and chocolate milk remnants on the doors, that this hangout was well worn in. A group of girls in their skin tight jeans, blue eye shadow and silver bangles, the uniform for this location, slouched on a lower step smoking and flirting with the boys above.

I watched all of this from my rear view mirror and hesitated, intimidated to walk in. I walked up the stairs, head down and humble, and uttered a feeble “Excuse me, please” when I reached the doormen. The main boy blocking my entry moved aside slowly while in mid conversation with his friend, and seemed to care less that I was there at all. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The main hall was jam-packed with students in the same attire as the girls’ outside. While some students were sitting on the floor talking, others were decorating their lockers or snuggling with a new soul mate. I continued walking and no one paid much attention to me until I stumbled and one of my binders slipped out from under my arm. Now their eyes were on me. A girl, who introduced herself as Anna, retrieved the binder and offered to carry it up to my new classroom. Again, I breathed a sigh of relief.

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Five years later, I enter through the west wing that is home to the Flex Studies. There are kids, predominately Asian and Caucasian, who are leaning against lockers talking or sitting on the floor discussing math homework. It’s almost the same scene as that first day but now I walk through as if I belong here; I’m part of the scenery too.

On this morning there’s a staff meeting about the budget cuts to the inner city schools and Eastwood stands to lose its hot lunch program. This means that more than two hundred students a day won’t get a meal at lunchtime. All the classroom doors are shut and locked when I arrive. A perfect morning for havoc, I think, if students wanted to create it. But they don’t; for the most part the students here are mellow and enjoy the safe zone that the school has become for them over their years here. Often, the building is

buzzing from as early as seven in the morning to ten at night with students who are volunteering in the office, in the school store, or at the Night School. There is a sense of safety and family here.

I turn down the main hallway covered in grad composites and lockers decorated in wrapping paper left over from Christmas. Anna is sitting by her locker and she waves and smiles as I walk by. When I go to enter the office, I see Tiffany and Florence<sup>4</sup>, both ex-students of mine from English nine and ten- one of them a published poet. Now both in grade twelve they are barely recognizable; the girls are taller and more self-confident, I can tell from their stance and the ease with which we talk.

My role here is different now; I am a graduate student researching the role creative writing plays in students' lives. I am a temporary outsider to the intricate workings of this school. Many of the faces in the hallways are still familiar but just as many faces are not. I will spend four months here journeying into writing with a group senior writing students. I will teach, observe, interview, and write with them and their teacher.

### **3.2. Room 421**

I unlock the Writing 12 classroom. The walls and floor are institutional pale yellow and the furniture is dark wood laminate. The class is huge and consists of two teaching areas. In the west corner there are two rows of old PC computers. The white boards above have notes and instructions for the yearbook class that uses this room in third block. The east end of the class is where Writing 12 takes place. The desks are arranged in rows of six or eight along the length of the classroom and are divided in half down the middle so that

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<sup>4</sup> All student names are pseudonyms.

the east side of the room faces the west. Their teacher uses the middle space to teach. The walls are covered with sketches of famous authors such as Shakespeare and Edgar Allen Poe. There are two spinners that are stuffed with science fiction novels that were donated by an English teacher who was retiring and wanted a good home for his reading collection. There are copies of "Awakenings" (2001), the in-house creative writing publication that their teacher creates for the school, stacked twenty high on the side bookshelf with other creative writing texts. The room is overflowing with desks, tables, chairs, and books. This is normal for this school. Despite the fact that this room contains all the supplies an English teacher could want, the space looks tired and worn out. In here, my colleague teaches four different courses; a second teacher teaches yearbook; on Tuesday and Thursday nights a third teacher teaches desktop publishing; and on Saturdays, the Korean Heritage School is in here with elementary school kids from nine to three o'clock. In the summer, this room will be booked again as the site for remedial English 9. The Vancouver School Board has had to maximize the use of this old building in order to balance their budget.

At the teacher's desk in the front corner, I sit and arrange my papers and prepare for the lesson. So far, I have interviewed, observed and written with these students. Today is the first day that I will teach them. I flip through the binder of transparencies that includes famous and thought provoking visuals such as Wood's "American Gothic" and Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning". The sequence is always the same for this unit: announcements, a journal topic for reflection and then a visual as a writing prompt. I am rehearsing my instructions in my head when the morning bell buzzes. Clancy and Ernie stroll in and greet me with a "Hey Ms. House". I am somewhat at home here now because

so many of these students have been in my classes over the past five years, but I also feel like a student teacher at times because I am new at research and I am new at teaching this unit. I joke and tell them this when I begin my portion of the lesson and it breaks the ice.

By about 8:50, ten minutes after the morning bell, most of the class has arrived and their teacher and I are ready to begin. This late start is not unusual; the pace of this elective course is deliberately slow when it meets first thing in the morning; if their teacher started on time, he'd only be teaching Clancy and Ernie. By 8:50, the writers who want to be here are ready to get down to business. This seems to be the philosophy at Eastwood; teachers tend to choose their battles wisely and student tardiness, in the grand scheme of things, does not rank high on the list of priorities. In my journal, I write:

Day One-

1. Writing 12 Unit Introduction

2. Artwork for Writing Lesson: Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning" and Rockwell's "Triple Self-Portrait".

(Research Journal Entry, January 18, 2002)

Since reading Laurel Richardson's work, I have a better sense of what my presence in this research is all about. I want to share their stories as authentically as possible, knowing that this will often mean interrupting my narrative to weave in their poetry and journals. I agree with her feminist research approach that "lived experience is not 'talked about' it is demonstrated. Space is left for others to speak, for tension and differences to be acknowledged, and celebrated, rather than buried alive" (1993, p. 706).

In teachers' narratives about education, authors become "I", readers become "you" and subjects become "us". I want to live in these students' writing space for the next four

months; I want to see what it's like to teach and write with them and I want to write about these experiences. As Connelly and Clandinin argue, "the essence of reform is nestled in an interacting matrix of life stories within the classroom" (1988, p. 13). Reflections on teachers' narratives of classroom experience validate teachers' personal knowledge of what is really being taught and going on education, not just what the authorities and theorists have prescribed. I want to tell this insider's tale.

I was excited on my way to Eastwood, and I surfed the air waves for any song at all that I could sing en route... I was filled with energy and I just had a good feeling about this research. As it slowly becomes clearer what I want to do with my time with these writing students, I'm beginning to get more and more excited about all the possibilities and all the poetry that will fill my ears and eyes over the next few weeks. I can taste it already... snippets of peoples' own favorite and secret recipes of writing. I know I'll have to reveal my own recipes and experiments to them too.

I walked in to D's class and explained to them about narrative research, that I wanted to tell their stories and what the teaching unit would entail and realized that I recognized many of the faces in the crowd.

As D finishes up the details about the BCTELA writing contest, both Ernest and Roxx pipe up, "My writing's in there!" Roxx seems especially proud of this accomplishment and wants her teacher to read her poem out to the class. I explain that I will be interviewing students at various points throughout the unit and that I want to know their stories about coming to choose this class and about making creative writing part of their lives...

Roxx speaks up again, "Can we say ANYTHING?"  
"Yes, you can say anything."

Her face lights up and I am glad and curious about what her interview will reveal.

The class finishes with me speaking to a number of students about being interviewed and arranging dates to meet with them. I can't wait to hear their stories..... And, I guess, at some point, share my stories with them.  
(Research Journal Entry, January 18, 2002)

This is a new vantage point for me. I am not just teaching; I am participating in an exchange of stories that reveals who each of us is as writers.

### **3.3 The Main Characters: Erin, Clancy, Tzitel, Crim, and Hint**

#### ***The Outsider Living In a World of Fan Fiction: Erin***

*We start by announcing the results from their submissions to the province-wide BC Teachers of English Language Arts (BCTELA) writing contest. In this class, Erin has had both of her pieces chosen and another two students have earned honorable mentions. Erin's face lights up when she hears the news. In her grade, she's an outsider; a gifted student who doesn't seem to know the social mores of being a "popular teen". She's quiet and thoughtful but slow to speak; when I interview her, I have to stop myself from finishing her sentences. When I watch her in this class, she has her head and pen buried in her writing notebook and wastes no time to record her thoughts. Writing is her way of interacting with the rest of the teenage world; she only speaks to other students about her ideas once she's polished them in print.*

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This class is comprised of some of the students who took part in the first creative writing workshop that my colleague introduced to my class a few years ago. Tony, Anika and Neville have a confidence in expressing their creativity that has grown since that first time we wrote poetry together; I see it in their willingness to share their work and in the diversity of writing styles they are now willing to try. I wonder if writing is in their bones like it is mine.

I ask them how they feel about the whole idea of publishing. Do they get nervous when other people read their work? Do they feel they have accomplished something if their work was deemed "good" by someone else? How important is it to them to have others read or acknowledge their work?

***The Reluctant Writer:  
Clancy***

*This boy with dreadlocks and an army jacket who was in my modified English 10 class last year doesn't wait to put pen to paper. His oral response to the journal topic is so quick that it seems instinctual:*

*"I can't be silenced", he says matter-of-factly, "if I am I'll explode with words."*

*And I believe him. For him, words are his lifeline. He is a spin doctor of the spoken word but has a learning disability that affects written output. I remember last year how hard he worked with the Special Education teacher to get his ideas down on paper. Now I find him signed up for this senior writing elective, wanting to find a place for his creativity, even if the writing presents him with a great challenge. This image of Clancy, a word wizard speaking his mind, moves me and makes me realize the importance of giving students room to create ideas and share them in our classrooms.*

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The class begins writing and I watch them, wondering if having their voices heard is as important to them as it is to me.

Then, I show them the first visual, a painting by George Hopper called, "Early Sunday Morning" and after some joking around from one student about wanting to make the cityscape into a mafia scene, they all get down to writing again. I write too; free writing flows out of my skull and on to the lined paper in graphite whispers:

I am pressing the pencil so hard, I'm sure that the girl in front of me can hear every letter. I am transported into "the old days" in New York City and I am drawn to the hydrant in the front of the painting and the potential it has to be a story on a hot summer day, when city kids can bask in the sun from their very own Sinclair Street

pool. I can see it in my head and it feels good to put creative words on paper again....  
(Research Journal Entry, Jan 22, 2002)

In the second half of the class, they view Norman Rockwell's "Triple Self-Portrait". I give them the option of reflecting on what we learn about the artist in his multi-layered self-portrait or imagining how they would write a character sketch of themselves. What images would be included? This is an idea that I first tried as a student in Renee Norman's course at UBC on autobiographical writing.

***Writing Her Cultural Identity:  
Tzitel***

*Tzitel is a quiet student whom I have known for four years. She does not appear self confident in her stance; she sits hunched over, always averting her eyes to the teacher's gaze. Whenever she asks a question, she smiles even if the response she is given is negative or rude. She has a slight speech impediment and speaks softly in order to conceal it. After reading many of her assignments, I realize that appearances do not tell her story. Through writing, she is more comfortable and more able to freely express her thoughts. In response to Rockwell, she writes:*

*I wouldn't sketch myself. I see myself inside out. I wouldn't know how to sketch myself as others see me. My face is familiar to me; I see all my traits and my weaknesses and my little quirks. I prefer Picasso's style or Chagall's, painting what you feel. Looking at the picture reminds me of my grandfather. My grandfather kept books about this guy (Rockwell).  
(Tzitel's Journal Entry, January 2002)*

*She continues by exploring her cultural identity and personal identity and writes the following about the Holocaust and how it has shaped her family and her as a Jew:*

*I wouldn't hurt anyone but I can't forgive that easily either. "There is nothing new under the sun"; who said that? I believe it. Whatever we do has already been done; whatever we have done, we will continue to do. I can be a Nazi too; that's why I'll never wear a uniform.*

*I was about eight years old when I joined Brownies; my mom didn't want me doing it. I wore a brown uniform, like the SA, Hitler's Brown shirts. I recited a prayer to the Queen and to God. Brownies, I believe is a Christian organization.*

*My uncle joked when my cousin wanted to get a tattoo; made him think of the (Concentration) camps, the blue numbers they tattooed onto the skin of prisoners. My grandparents left Quebec because of the Nationalist French singing; reminded them too much of the Nazi singing. All families carry with them scars. (Tzitel's Journal Entry, January 2002)*

### **Writing for Enjoyment and Entertainment when Creativity Is a Challenge: Crim**

*Tzitel's writing partner Crim is joyful and relaxed. She is an intellectual who could go to university on scholarship but instead she will pursue a career working with horses as a farrier. She is taking Writing 12 for fun and for a challenge since she doesn't need anymore credits to get into farrier school. In her self-portrait, she writes:*

*In my own self-portrait I am in a forest full of tall thin trees stretching out forever-  
the sun beams slipping (sic) through the trees and I am sitting no saddle no bridle  
on a horse dappled with the light. Long flowing hair, Mane, forelock, tail with its  
head sloping down. Me, with my arms up and open face in a sun ray, all lit up.  
That's it (sic).  
(Crim's Journal Entry, February 4, 2002)*

When I turn to the next page, there is more; a silent protest of how others view her:

*You see me as the strong silent type  
You see me as the kid next door  
You see me as the book worm  
You see me as the perfectionist*

*But it doesn't matter what you see me as  
It only matters what I see myself as: and  
I don't look in the mirror*

*(Crim's Journal Entry, February 4, 2002)*

**The ESL Writer and Journalist:  
Hint**

*Hint is a grade eleven student who has always loved to write but who has only been writing in English for a year. He is well-liked by most of the other kids because of his funky clothes and cool glasses and because he is somewhat mysterious to them; he moved here from Guangzhou last year and is already in the mainstream English program. He wrote for the local paper in his town and loves to write in both Chinese and English. When he reads out his "Self-Sketching" piece in this class, Clancy utters, "You the man, Hint!" (sic):*

*Who am I and  
How do I look like?  
I don't know  
Look through the mirror  
There appears myself  
Yellow skin. Dark short hair  
Small eyes stare at another identical pair  
Without my senses, in this mirror  
I can only see a corpse  
Who had lost his goal in life  
Once that pair of bright piercing eyes  
Are now no more  
Remaining only an abyss  
Hiding the spirit and passion  
By the pressure of life  
that gets harder and harder.(Sic)*

(Hint's Journal Entry, February 4, 2002)

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I remember when I read my own very personal poem, "Berry Crumble", in the writing workshop for TESOL teachers. It was the first time I had publicly shared my work. I felt naked, and wondered what they would now think of me, after I shared a personal moment between my husband and me. Right before reading it, I remember making excuses for the sad tone, I remember trying to clarify that we really usually had a very

good relationship. And then afterwards, I remember thinking to myself, “Let the poem speak for itself; you don’t need to explain it. Dive into the cold water and after the initial shock, you’ll be fine”. And I survived it; some people even reacted aloud to the last stanza about being June Cleaver; I had evoked some emotion in my readers and that was rewarding.

Does this public sharing of words make me a real poet? Do the students consider themselves real poets? What kind of a community do we need to be in order to be willing to share our work?

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The class finishes with me speaking to a number of students about being interviewed and arranging dates to meet with them. They’re excited and I can’t wait to hear their stories. I collect their journal entries on publishing and D invites me to come down to the staff café for a coffee.

“After all”, he says, “I’ve got to thank you somehow for teaching my class”.

On the way down the stairs, I spot Tracy in a sea of familiar faces, outside the school store. A creative writer from last year’s grade eight class, she catches my eye for a moment initially and it looks like she is yearning to talk; like she is happy to see an ally. I stop her in the hall and encourage her to take my Creative writing 10 class next year but she tells me that she isn’t sure that she’ll be at Eastwood. I hope desperately that she will as she was my best writing student last year and I think that being able to do creative writing again would make her feel a sense of purpose, a sense of success. By the end of the conversation, she admits that she hasn’t had any chances to write creatively this year in

her English class. She's close to tears. Writing is her personal outlet for her emotions and imagination. Last year, her family did not know that she was a writer until she got published twice.

*How did you ever get her to write? You know, she doesn't really enjoy it...*

I think to myself, this voice has been silenced by the wishes of a grade nine English teacher. Does he even know the power he is having over this student's sense of self?

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Over my second cup of coffee in the staff cafe, once all the other teachers have gone up to teach their second class, I begin to read the journal entries on publishing from this morning's class. I find myself lost in the world of teenagers; a world that is full of contrasts and the struggle between exhibiting confidence and pride in your work and being humble or underachieving to be accepted.

***Thoughts on Publishing:***  
***Erin***

*The first paper is Erin's. She is an extremely driven, gifted grade eleven student writer who has been publishing science fiction stories on the internet for over a year. I know from talking with her that she writes novels and fan fiction on a regular basis. She writes:*

*I have to admit, for me, publishing is very important. It sounds tacky but I've wanted to be a published author since before I can remember. It's one of the greatest dreams for years and though I haven't always had time, I've been working for it when I can. I ended up being published for two poems recently and I am currently feeling guilty about it and yet very happy. I hate my reaction and wish it doesn't deface me in front of other students (Sic). What happened was I yelled, "YES!" when I realized both my poems were going to be published and then I realized no other students got chosen. What I am afraid of is that being*

*published will make me an arrogant ass. I guess the potential for that to happen has good and bad sides.*  
(Erin's Journal Entry, February 4, 2002)

### **3.4. Supporting Characters**

#### **James**

*James is not a student that I knew before my role as researcher. His second language is English and he struggles to express himself, like Hint, in this class. Even during my time with this class, he has never spoken or shared his writing. In his journal entry on publishing and sharing your work publicly, I learn so much more about him and the obstacles about writing in your second language. He writes:*

*Every time we write for others, we send our "letter to the world". It is often terrifying to expose our innermost thoughts and private ideas to the judgment of others. "What will they think of my writing?" we worry. "What will they think of me?" we fear. I remember my first experience of creative writing. I was a huge fan of soccer and Maradona was my most favorite player at that time. I watch every game of Argentina or World Cup 1990s (sic). I couldn't express exactly how much I liked Maradona's games to my friends. All I could say is that, "Maradona is good! He kicks ass!" I knew that only expresses 5% of my feelings toward soccer (Sic). So, I wrote a poem about Maradona in Bengali which is my first language. Through the poem I expressed 95% of my feelings and not only I caught my friend's attention but also many other people as it was published in a kids' section on one of the newspaper (sic). I was really happy that my poem was published and felt relieved because my feelings finally came out of my stomach.*  
(James' Journal Entry, February 4, 2002)

As I pack up my pens and their papers, I am realizing how different the vantage points of the inner city high school classroom and the university institution really are. In the academy, I do not find my students' voices or stories; they are, by their working-class status and their non-European ethnicities, un-researched, unimportant, and unarchived. Writing 12 itself is a marginalized course in the context of university entrance marks; it is not counted as an academic credit nor does it have an Integrated Resource Package (IRP).

Therefore, its credibility as a place where learning and growth occur is not highly regarded by the Ministry of Education. The student voices are out there; we, as educators and decision makers, just need to listen.

***Writing as Musical Voice:  
Manny***

*Manny is an academic and a musician. He is a free spirit who likes to explore his own identity and the relationships he has with others through song and poetry writing. Most lunch hours, he jams on his acoustic guitar, pencil in hand, lyrics being created with every chord. Manny writes:*

*If you're a musician, is it enough to enjoy playing and writing songs purely for personal reasons or do you need people to hear your music and appreciate it? I spend countless hours at the piano playing and writing songs. I do it 'because I really enjoy and love it and wouldn't stop. Some songs people have heard... it's definitely vulnerable feelings (Sic) playing a song for someone that you wrote. If they appreciate it though, it makes it all the more... fulfilling I guess. It's the same with writing. It's one thing to write for yourself, but I want people to read my stuff and tell me if they like it or think it stinks. I think ultimately we need to expose our writing or it's like living in a world inside ourselves.*

*(Manny's Journal Entry, February 4, 2002)*

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I leave out the backdoor from the café and I'm back on the black top above the field. The senior citizens are gone and the track is full of teenagers in worn-out t-shirts and gym shorts practicing their 4x100 relay for the track and field unit of physical education class. The tranquility of the early morning has evaporated along with the clouds. Replacing it are the teacher's whistle, the athletes' shouts and laughter, and the onlookers' radio cranked to the pop music station. Eastwood Vocational Secondary is buzzing with sounds and words; it is alive with the energy of youth and waiting for someone to listen.

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Day Two:

Artwork for Writing Lesson: Bellows' "Stag at Sharky's, "Zissou and I as Race Drivers".  
Journal prompt for students: Write about your first creative writing experience.

In my notebook I write on my first creative writing experience and rebirth:

I was reborn last spring in Carl's course when I suddenly felt the power of my own words, my own voice on the page and being spoken through my poetry. What I had to say was suddenly so important, valued and unique and these gifts were received thoughtfully by the class members.

(Research Journal Entry, Jan. 29, 2002).

***Paralyzed by Words:***

***Kaze***

*This was my experience but it definitely wasn't Kaze's. My theory that creative writing would help students learn more about themselves and in the process build their self-esteem was not true for Kaze. His English was so weak that each writing task seemed to elevate his stress levels and accentuate his weaknesses with language and expression. I didn't know how to help him and I struggled with this throughout my research project. I observed him often, tried to help him one on one, and met with D to think about ways to put him at ease and help him feel like an important member of our writing community. I asked many questions in my journal entries and attempted to interview him on three occasions. Whenever I thought we were making progress or we'd make a meeting time, he'd miss the next class. By the middle of the second month, Kaze was frequently absent and had missed so much material that he was drowning in a sea of words and I didn't know how to help find the shore again. Of the research stories that I will tell in this document, his is the one that I feel most sad about:*

During the exercises today, one student, Kaze, was having a really hard time getting started and understanding the idea of writing what you see in an image. He asked Erin numerous times what to do and D helped him too. He also came up to ask me what I meant. When I went over to clarify that he should start with just

writing down everything he saw in the photo of “Zissou and I”, he piped up before I could even speak “Miss, I’m getting started right now”, as if he was worried that I might think he wasn’t focused, which of course, he was so focused that he “couldn’t see the forest for the trees”; I mean, he couldn’t even begin to spell the title of the photo.

Kaze is trapped by language, not liberated by it at all, and D says that he’s like this in all the exercises they do. I don’t know how to make the task any easier for him; I hadn’t thought that I would actually have kids who would have so much difficulty. (Research Journal Entry, January 29, 2002)

All in all, I feel like I may not actually be doing research, like I’m walking in daylight with a mask on or a bandana over my eyes; I don’t know what’s important yet, I don’t know what to record, and I don’t know what I’m looking for, if anything; this exploratory journey leaves me questioning myself and what I’m doing all the time.

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Day Three: Introduction to writing from faces:  
Artwork for writing prompts: Grant Wood’s “American Gothic”, Norman Rockwell’s “Triple Self Portrait” and Harbutt’s “Restaurant Rougeot”.

***The Fearless Poet:  
Roxanne***

*We start by collecting student submissions for the BCTELA Student Writing Journal and Awakenings. I interject by reading a sample of Roxanne’s work; her self esteem is well intact and I know she can handle being used as an example. Roxx is very proud of having her work published because she loves being in the limelight.*

*“Two years in a row I’ve been chosen, I think”, she interrupts us,*

*“And I think they spelled my name right too!”*

They all write on the importance of audience and Kaze is confused again. D. goes over right away to get him started, then he turns to Erin and she tries to clarify: “Kaze,

how do you feel when other people read your work?" I thank her for this because I am not sure what else I can say to him in plain English that would simplify the task for him. Near the end of the 15 minute writing period, Kaze turns to Neville and asks him how much he has written. Kaze is worried about what D or I will think about his writing I guess; why else would he measure his personal work against Neville's? When I collect their journal entries, Kaze has left this entry out. Perhaps the blank pages are there because he doesn't know how he would feel having his work published, perhaps he can't even imagine it. In his journal, this is what I read:

*As a writer I am most like... to become a writer I have to make sure my writing makes sense and is interesting to the reader. They help me to write and organize better. Also I will find out how to correct my grammar mistakes when I write a story... Every writer must have patience and be willing to spend time writing. I believe I will write better and more interestingly too. The other thing (is ) that I have to enjoy writing so that my English grammar will be improve (sic) in each day... I think I can do it.*  
(Kaze's Journal Entry, undated)

I flip through the rest of his journal entries and they are all meticulous structured and reasoned, like a good expository essay, but they shed little light on Kaze as a creative writer. Does his difficulty with the English language keep him from being able or willing to expose his true self and to be a part of this writing community? And if so, how can I ever bring the voices of our marginalized students into the mix? I'm beginning to realize how messy this research is becoming. I went in with the bias that all students who had the opportunity to write creatively in school would experience a sense of freedom that otherwise only exists in out of school writing. I thought of writing as liberating and yet Kaze does not feel liberated at all; he seems to still be concerned with his ability to write a grammatically correct piece more than anything else. His imagination is trapped by his second language development and although it seems from his journal that he longs to be

creative, as a writing community, we are not privy to this creativity throughout my stay. In fact, D tells me that he has not shared his work with more than Erin and Neville all year.

### **3.5. The Plot Thickens: Interviews and Emerging Themes**

I begin interviews with Roxx, Crim, Hint, Ernest and Tzitel. I have to watch their stories unfold rather than unfolding them myself. There is something different in a student unfolding his or her story and sharing its layers. Themes emerge quickly and the interview questions below become a way of beginning the conversations on writing. In small groups we discuss the tangents that stem from these questions and soon student pairs are engaged in dialogues with each other as I try to listen and help clarify their ideas with more questions:

#### **Interview Questions**

- 1) What was your first creative writing experience?
- 2) How does creative writing help you live and change as an individual?
- 3) How has creative writing affected how you see yourself both as an individual and as a writer?
- 4) Or, do you consider yourself a writer? Why or why not?
- 5) How does working in this classroom community where both teacher and students share and write affect your writers' experience?
- 6) What other writing experiences have you had in school?

As a researcher, I find this particular aspect of ethnographic research most challenging; as a teacher with a preconceived passion for writing and the transformative power it can have on the writer, I find myself wanting to guide their conversations

towards this end. When I hear the students talking about how “Writing is like, freedom”, I want to push for more elaboration but I don’t; I consciously bite my tongue so that I can learn from them what they mean when they say such things. I cannot talk about the power of voice in the research and then stifle these young voices at the same time. At intervals throughout the interview process, there are long uncomfortable silences, digressions and repetitions. This again, is part of the messiness of doing classroom research and the learning process that I had to go through in order to learn from the experiences. After transcribing multiple hours of audio cassettes, redistributing the transcripts to the participants for corrections, omissions and additions, and re-reading and categorizing their answers, there are three clear themes that emerge with the five students whom I interviewed in depth:

- 1) The differences in writing opportunities in and out of school including topic, genre and audience, and attitudes toward writing in the out of school and in-school settings;
- 2) The introspection and exploration of identity that is fostered in creative writing tasks;
- 3) The effect of an in-class writing community and writer’s workshop framework on student’s writing experiences with risk-taking and reflection.

### **3.6 Theme One: The Dichotomy Between In and Out of School Writing** ***Out of School Writing Equals Freedom***

I began all interviews by asking students to describe their first writing experience and most spoke of an out of school experience that was extremely positive because it was

fostered and encouraged by a parent or influential adult in their lives. Even before she could write, Roxx tells of positive writing experiences with her mother:

Even before I could write, my mom would sit me down and say, "Tell me a poem and I'll write it down for you", so we still have books at home where it's like, "The Sky is blue..." I don't know, just stuff like that.  
(Roxx's Interview Transcript, 2002)

***Personal Writing in the Public Classroom:  
Roxxanne***

*Roxx has always used writing as a means of personal expression and communication. Early on, she brought the genre of personal writing, in this case secret notes, in to her in-school writing to maintain communication with her peers. For Roxx, this was the first blending of her in and out of school writing experiences:*

*I remember in elementary school we weren't allowed to talk in class and so we would write notes to each other and pass them back and I still have a bunch of them (it's) crazy stuff.  
(Roxxanne's Interview Transcript, 2002)*

*Nowadays, she still writes for her peers, in this case she writes most often for her classmate Ernest:*

*Often I'll write short stories when I go on trips like when I fly somewhere I'll often write a story on the plane, just 'cause you're sitting there for a length of time... I have some stuff that I totally like to share with people. Like I share a lot of stuff with Ernest.*

*Q: Why is that?*

*Because he has a very open mind. A lot of people, if I showed them my poetry they are like, "I kind of don't understand..." it's not for you to understand, just appreciate it. I think a lot of people have trouble with that. I write mostly about what's going on in my life not in a way that's really obvious. A lot of times I write stuff and people think it's about something but it's really about something else.  
(Roxxanne's Interview Transcript, 2002)*

The purpose of out-of-school writing that is shared in class seems to be to appreciate each other's ideas through poetry and storytelling. The audience is one's self and one's peers while the genre varies. This is not writing for the teacher or for marks but writing for writing's sake; for creativity and self-exploration.

**Writing as Protest:  
Ernest**

*Ernest's out of school writing began in protest to the task he was being asked to do in school:*

*Even as a child I used to try and go whole day writing. Well, there's definitely a lot of reasons, (why) I got interested in writing. I've sort of always been interested in it (because) all this stuff about poetry in school really irritated me as a kid it was so: "This means that" and they (the teachers) would come up with the "that". It's almost as though we're overanalyzing it.*

*Q: Do you mean stuff you did with analyzing poems or stuff you did with writing them or both?*

*Analyzing them I guess. It was sort of like I could do that so I did but I didn't like it. It's sort of like you hear all this stuff when your analyzing the poem and you're like was the poet really thinking all that when he's writing it? What if we're wrong? Then this is WRONG. I don't want to have to think about that. It's wrong, just wrong. That's how it (my interest in writing poems) sort of started. Then I just started to challenge poems and stuff, then I sort of liked it and I kept doing it. Then it got more complicated and more meaningful but yet I'd try. It's not necessarily an objective exercise of what I'm trying to say; if someone's reading it and it could be entirely different for them. That's cool.*

*(Ernest's Interview Transcript, 2002)*

*Ernest's out of school writing also became an outlet for personal expression and emotional exploration three years ago when his father passed away suddenly:*

*I think for a while it was sort of therapy because, after awhile I just needed to talk (about my dad dying), actually I didn't need to talk, I just needed to get things out and not particularly in any sort of order that anyone could understand, it was just*

*sort of like what was coming out of me.*  
(Ernest's Interview Transcript, 2002)

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For all students except Kaze, "freedom" was a recurring word that they used to describe their out of school writing experiences and their in school writing experiences in the Creative Writing class:

**Freedom: 1. ability to act freely:** a state in which somebody is able to act and live as he or she chooses, without being subject to any, or to any undue, restraints and restrictions  
(MSN Encarta Dictionary, 2004)

In Ernest's case, he also extended the idea of freedom to any writing task, in or out of school, in which he could express himself using poetry. Students participated in "New Shoots", A joint Vancouver School Board and UBC Creative Writing Program initiative wherein a creative writing student offers workshops in the secondary school writing classroom. For Ernest, this was one place where he found in school writing and freedom was interconnected:

*The most freedom I've had (in school) is in this writing class. Especially with the New Shoots thing because she's just like, give me any poem, I'll read anything.*

*Q: Do you do other kinds of writing besides just poetry?*

*No, not really.*

*Q: Why poetry so much?*

*You can do anything. I guess some of the poetry I write could be prose I guess. I don't know it's just total freedom. Like I don't even know if I'd call it poetry, it's just writing. It's just total freedom.*  
(Ernest's Interview Transcript, 2002)

## ***In School Writing Beyond the Creative Writing Classrooms Teacher Driven and Expository***

The word freedom was never used to describe the writing experiences in any other course, besides Creative Writing, in which the students were assigned writing tasks. In fact, in all interviews, students had very strong opinions about the form, audience and topic choices for their in school writing experiences. In most cases these students could not find any similarities between the writing they did of their volition outside of school and the writing that they were being assigned to do in other courses including English, History and Philosophy and French Immersion. They categorized the writing that they did in these classes as “writing for the teacher in the form of an expository essay” and rarely received feedback or the opportunity to share ideas with classmates or other audiences.

### ***Tzitel***

*As Tzitel states, “I think school kind of takes out your creativity in many cases”. As a student that will pursue post secondary studies in History, she feels cheated that there has been so much emphasis on the five paragraph expository essay. Her impression is that she will get to university and this will not be good enough: “They (the teachers) teach the five paragraph essay and then you go to university and they ask you why you wrote the five – paragraph essay.” Even in her culminating thesis on Jewish resistance for History 12 her teacher is not allowing her to include the first hand stories of her own family’s experiences in Nazi Germany: “I won’t have room for that kind of creative and personal writing but I’m analyzing (the topic) through literature of the times and some of that will be creative”.*

## **Erin**

*When Erin describes the differences between her writing in Creative Writing and in other classes, she talks about flexibility:*

*We've got more flexibility; it's not like we're writing a comparative essay and doing page 225, numbers 1-5029... We're given basic ideas to work on and I wouldn't mind doing a session where we just do what we want but more than anything, we're given a plan but there isn't an expected way of doing it. You've got definite patterns in how you do math and even with essays there's a definite structure you're not allowed to break through. (Creative)Writing (class) has more of flexibility; you can make sentences end in different spots because it adds to the mood.*

*(Erin's Interview Transcript, 2002)*

Since she is only in grade 11 when she takes Writing 12, the following year Erin finds herself without a creative writing course to take and signs up to be my community service student. I schedule her in to help with my new Creative Writing 10 course and she mentors many of the students. Often, she shares her writings with them and talks about what it's like to get published and write fan fiction. She becomes part of this new community and as a result, continues to find a community within the school setting to maintain her creativity.

## **Writing as a Cultural Experience:**

### **Hint**

*Hint's in school writing experiences are mostly from Guangzhou, China where he studied until two years ago. There he says, all writing is done for marks and you write for the teacher; "the teacher gives you the topic and then you write on it. It's not much of writing what you want to write; it's like you write to please the teacher so that they will give you a high mark." In fact he sees the Creative Writing course as a cultural experience:*

*I like just to experience the difference between two cultures.  
It really helps to experience the different things between two countries... I mean I  
need to get used to it because if I'm writing in my second language it's not as easy  
or as free as when I'm writing in my own language.*  
(Hint's Interview Transcript, 2002)

In his other courses, however, he characterizes the writing in much the same way as other students have; essays and analysis driven by the teacher. There is, of course, an important place in the academic curriculum for essay writing and analyses of texts. The BC Ministry of Education's Integrated Resource Packages (IRP's) in English and other subjects prescribe "Comprehend and Respond" as one of the curricular organizers. It includes emphasis on reading and writing strategies and skills, comprehension, engagement and personal response, and critical literary analysis. The document rationalizes this as follows:

People use language to comprehend a wide range of literary and informational communications and to respond knowledgeably and critically to what they read, view, and hear. Students' abilities to understand and draw conclusions from communications whether written, spoken, or displayed visually and to defend their conclusions rationally is a major goal of education and the particular focus of the English 11 and 12 curriculum.  
(Ministry of Education, 1996)

The provincial government also prescribes curricular emphases in Communicating Ideas and Information and Self and Society with sub organizers for knowledge of language, composing and creating, improving communications, and presenting and valuing, personal awareness, working together and building community. Both the "Communicate Ideas and Information" and "Self and Society" organizers lend themselves to writing in multiple genres, for varied audiences and on creative topics.

### 3.7. Theme Two: Writing as an Exploration of Identity

The classroom that incorporates creative writing allows out of school writing characterized by students as “freedom” to be the curriculum. It’s personal writing in the form of poems, letters, stories, plays and narrative essays for diverse audiences, mainly classmates, family, or the public. As a result, there is room for the student’s personal choices in topic, genre and audience that does not characterize writing in other school courses and that allows individuals to explore and play with thoughts and words. The importance that students placed on being able to write about their own lives and what interested them surfaced again and again in the evidence from student journal entries, surveys and interviews. Erin, who writes fan fiction for audiences on the internet, likes to write imaginative stories to explore the ideas in her imagination.

#### **Erin**

*I’ve always sort of played imaginary games when I was little and even now I sort of have tons of little fantasies and I like to sometimes write down little fantasies so there’s a solid foundation and then explore it. It feels good to take a concept or idea and just turn it in to a world of your own.*

(Erin’s Interview Transcript, 2002)

*The fantasy genre is her passion and she readily explores it for her online fans:*

*Well, I’ve always been a big magic fan and I almost always have an idea I’m interested in like I was wondering what an ice age would be like and how humans would adapt, I’ve read a bunch of magic stories and there’s ideas that I like but I wouldn’t necessarily show the same way other people might.*

(Erin’s Interview Transcript, 2002)

When James and Manny write their opinions about the creativity and ideas that the visuals we use in our unit spark, both speak about personal themes and introspection.

## **Manny**

*I like making a story from visuals because it wakes up a frozen world and all of a sudden it's living. A brushstroke becomes a shaft of pain or light tumbling from a burning fuzzy sun. Faces start talking, telling their story, sharing their glory, filth and grime and sometimes you find what's really on your mind when you see a pulsing ocean and you wish you could say what you really think about till it drowns your thoughts out.*

*Everyone sees something different when they look at a visual, it's interesting to see what other people think of when they see something you saw.*

*(Manny's Journal Entry, February 18, 2002)*

## **James**

*As I write for self discovery, I start looking inside myself and probing my feelings. Then I take these feelings and express them on paper. The paper remains a document of my sadness, happiness, anger, etc. The act of writing can also help peel back layers of meaning, as well as create meaning... I'm not a robot, I'm a human being and every human beings (sic) have their own way of expressing their feelings.*

*(James' Journal Entry, February 18, 2002)*

## **Crim**

*Writing takes you at the weirdest times. Once, when I had just come back from the concert, it was like 1 am and you know that buzz you get in your ears from the music? I still had that and I couldn't hear anything. So then you get those little moments where you just have to do something artistic like I just wrote this weird thing about plush squish cushions. It mostly hits you at the weirdest times; it's not a constant thing with me.*

*(Crim's Journal Entry, February 18, 2002)*

Crim uses writing to capture her emotions and record her experiences. For her, writing is another way of creatively engaging with her world. Crim also incorporates art into her Creative Writing journal to make sense of her emotions and in this case, the death of her pet:

*It's just every once in while, you just get this mood and you have to do something. Like when my guinea pig died, I really liked that pig, and the first thing I thought was that I have to do something artistic. So I grabbed a pencil and I drew the best picture I've ever drawn in my life was right after he died and was lying on my*

*bed. And then right after that concert it was just like that high so I wrote something good after and it was actually pretty good.*  
(Crim's Journal Entry, February 18, 2002)

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When I surveyed the class, I asked them if throughout their year in Creative Writing class they wrote their own stories, about their own life experiences and about themselves. Eighty seven percent of students responded that they write about these topics often or always. Eighty percent of students who agreed that they wrote about their own lives did this in almost every assignment; many, like Tzitel, say this is because "it is the easiest topic to write about because it is the topic you're most familiar with". Other students said that writing about their own lives helps them learn about themselves and their experiences: "writing makes me write stories of what I'm going to do, what I've experienced and what I've learned from the people around me". Finally one student wrote that she only writes stories about herself that she is comfortable sharing with others. In a sense, she is distinguishing between when and where the personal and school worlds can collide and when and what she wants to keep as out of school writing for a private audience.

The few who didn't write about themselves gave reasons such as their life "wasn't as exciting as the worlds and characters they could create" in their imaginations. This also represents choice and awareness of identity; the students are electing to write about and explore imaginative ideas. They are writing about their interests and curiosities which are also aspects of identity.

Alternately, Roxxanne, who writes, “I pretty much write about my own life exclusively” claims that the unit we conducted during this research project that revolved around the use of visuals, was the one and only time that she didn’t write about herself: “... that’s why it was so much fun, it was something new”. Thus, this class helped her expand her abilities as a writer and see herself differently; also a way of self-exploration.

Clancy, who did not submit any work to me but who did write for his classmates and teacher sporadically throughout the first half of the year, did not like all the writing he did about himself: “I have written a lot about myself and hated doing it; they were all journal entries”. The journals are not usually shared with other students; they remain a private place within a public realm - the writing class - for writing and exploring identity and topics.

What conclusions can be drawn from Clancy’s remarks? Perhaps words on paper do not easily represent who he is. I know he is passionate about writing from his declaration, “I can’t be silenced, if I am, I’ll explode with words”. His writing disability makes writing output slow and his printing almost illegible. This may make writing polished pieces for an audience of his peers or his teachers intimidating or frustrating. Orally, Clancy is gifted; he engages and challenges others easily with humour and insight about their writing. Is it too much of a risk or disappointment to share a piece of himself in his writing that would reveal his learning obstacles? I wish I knew the answers but I was never able to interview Clancy; he would gladly participate and support the research I was doing in his class with the whole class or other students but he did not want to be singled out and “analyzed”. At the end of his survey, he wrote,

“I’m glad I could help Ms. House but I sort of feel bad I disappointed D by not finishing my project”.

Throughout students’ personal writing in the Creative Writing classroom a new canon has been created; it includes the stories of teenagers from all walks of life and the stories that their imaginations have dreamed of and risked sharing with peers and their teachers. Throughout the process, a community of writers is emerging in which self expression and reflection is at the centre for this marginalized group.

### **3.8. Theme Three: The Ability of a Classroom Writing Community to Promote Reflection and Risk-Taking**

The qualities of good writing *are* complex and nuanced. But they can be named, and I’m convinced they can be taught. Of all the arts, writing should be among the most democratic: all one needs is a paper and a pen- and, I would suggest, a teacher or two along the way who work to make the intangible tangible, so every student might know the joy of writing well.  
(Atwell, 2002, p. xvi)

#### ***Workshop Sessions***

The in-class writing community is unique in the secondary setting. It is comprised of both students and teachers writing together, on a daily basis, and sharing their work with each other on a regular basis. The sharing consists of workshopping each other’s pieces for voice, word choice, images and meaning in pairs or small groups. Writers may also choose to use the sharing sessions to ask questions and receive feedback on specific aspects of a piece that they are struggling with such as a short story lead, a specific poetry stanza or the description of a particularly important setting.

In the Writing 12 classroom there were also sub-communities within the classroom writing community. These included Roxxanne, Ernest, and Manny, all French Immersion students, who, as Roxxanne has stated in her interviews, they trust each other, know each other well, and write explicitly for this peer audience. There is also the partnership of Hint and James, both second language learners, who share their writing with each other. Erin is an outsider; she writes for an external internet audience and submits most of her class writing to the teacher for feedback. Crim and Tzitel always share their writing with each other in and out of the classroom.

### ***Using Workshop Circles to Model Constructive Feedback with Writers in Sub-communities***

At the beginning of the year, these sharing sessions are highly structured; one writer begins by reading their piece aloud to their group and each group writes an initial response to the piece using sentence stems such as: *your piece reminds me of...*, *I could see...*, *questions I have are...*, *I wonder about...*, *I want to know more about*, *it makes me feel...* After an oral sharing of these responses, the workshopping session continues using an approach similar to Harvey Daniels' Literature Circles. Workshopping Circles (Muir and House 2001) are role sheets created to help readers look at a piece from a number of vantage points and to help students begin to learn how to discuss what can be reworked and reflected on when draft writing is ready for revision or presentation. The roles include: image consultant, logistics leader, discussion director, passage finder. Once the teacher has modelled this process and students are capable of giving each other constructive and specific feedback, the role sheets are no longer used and may in fact limit discussion.

### ***Workshopping Sessions and Their Limitations in this Classroom Setting***

As this idea was new to their classroom teacher, one of the limitations of the workshopping sessions was that they did not occur often enough or with enough mixing of writing sub-communities. In all cases, workshopping sessions were scheduled for one or two eighty minute class periods at the end of a particular unit of focus. Most units lasted eight weeks and up until the end, the teacher did not incorporate sessions where writers had opportunities to share their works in progress with each other. As a result, when it was time to workshop writing, some students were so far behind that they could not contribute; they were not ready to share their work in a workshop circle or feedback session. This was a constant source of frustration for their teacher who diligently prepared for these sessions. I later learned when planning my own creative course that using Nancie Atwell's workshop approach (1998/ 2001) throughout the unit of study could have avoided this. In her research, she finds that it is more effective to begin each class with a lesson on a writing skill followed by opportunities for students to work together to reflect and help each other with their pieces at each stage of development from pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and polishing. This way it is more likely that students are developing their writing at a pace that allows them to work within their writing community on common writing skills and towards common deadlines. For ESL students like Kaze who really struggled with each step of a task, he could have been paired up with other writers who could have helped him improve his writing step by step. I wonder if this might have led to him feeling some success in this course rather than dropping out before the end of the unit.

In many cases, sub-communities in this classroom became more comfortable places to share work because writers knew their audience and were secure. If their teacher had adopted Atwell's writer's workshop approach, students would have had many more opportunities to work with their peers and receive feedback from different class members. This may have resulted in fewer entrenched sub-communities and outsiders within the larger classroom writing community.

### ***Oral Readings***

Once a unit, the sharing also consisted of oral readings to the whole class, students and teachers alike. In this class, these took place at the end of a particular unit when students had revised their writing for presentation. The idea was to have student's creativity be shared with everyone; for everyone on the class to hear the diversity of ideas, genres, and approaches to writing that were present within the community. For some students, like Hint, Clancy and Tzitel this was the most difficult part of the course because it meant speaking and sharing their thoughts orally; a challenge for a second language student, a learning disabled student who rarely has his work ready when it is his turn to read, and a shy student who writes about her Jewish identity for herself, not for an audience of peers other than Crim.

### ***"Sharing Sessions" and Their Limitations in this Classroom***

*One by one, they made their way to podium at the front of the room as the class listened. Each person read as their peers listened and their teacher evaluated.*

The limitation of this kind of sharing session is that, unlike my experience in university writing courses, there is no immediate or meaningful reaction from the audience. In my writing courses, each speaker had a respondent who had to listen intently to the speaker and respond orally after the reading. This was valuable in that the writer knew they had been heard and that what they had read had resonance with the audience. In this type of sharing session, the other limitation is that the teacher subjectively evaluates each writer after their reading. There were no specific criteria set out beforehand so what was being evaluated? Was it how they read their pieces? What their topics were? I was confused as an audience member and I know the writers were also.

Such a sharing process also changes the nature of the writing community when one member has the power to determine the worth of a piece of writing subjectively but is not subject to the same evaluation. This is a dilemma in the classroom setting; even in creating a community of writers where students and teacher write and workshop together, there is always a hierarchy in which the teacher is responsible for assigning a mark for the task. Using self reflections and peer evaluations would help in such a setting as they would make writers think and learn more about their development as writers. If the goal of a sharing session is to share our creative works, then evaluation should come at a different time and should include various types of evaluation including self and peer. The role of the teacher should be that of a mirror and listener, otherwise what we are creating is a sharing session in which the real audience is not the community of writers but the teacher. We are recreating another in-school writing experience where the audience is determined by the teacher and all writing is done for the teacher.

## ***Advantages to the Writing Community: The Confidence to Go Public***

Of course, there are many obvious advantages to forming a genuine writer's community within the school setting and despite its limitations, there were many benefits to this model that their teacher created. Through the workshopping process, students did learn about what makes good writing; through instruction and the reinforcement of workshop circles role sheets, they were told to focus on the following:

Begin by writing down your initial reactions and emotions to the first reading of the piece. Be honest with yourself and concentrate on giving the reader a sense of what you thought, imagined, or wondered about while listening to the piece.

And then they were directed to assume a specific role for providing feedback:

**Passage Finder:** Your job is to find a few sections of the text that you would like to hear again. These sections will help the group focus on some specific aspects of the piece. You decide which passages should be re-read aloud and then you need to explain why you chose them below:

**Logistics Leader:** Your job is to find parts of the piece that are confusing or vague. Think of the parts where you say to yourself "I don't understand" or "What are they talking about?"

Pay particular attention to the overuse of pronouns (he, she, and it) instead of proper nouns. Highlight references to place, time, people, actions, and objects that are imprecise. Also, focus on the verb tense the author is using and make sure that it is consistent throughout the entire piece (present tense works really well in most cases).

**Image Consultant:** Your job is to listen for the images being described in the piece. What can you see? Hear? Feel? Smell? Touch? Taste? Does the author use showing, not telling?

Think about images that give you a very clear mental picture. What comparisons (metaphors, similes, personification) resonate with you? You can also suggest new words that might help clarify an image.

\*Keep your ears open for clichés (red rose = love).

**Discussion Director:** Your job is to develop a list of questions that will help the group discuss the piece. Think about themes, places, emotions, and images that run through the piece. When you're writing your questions, think about how the author and the group members might connect their own experiences with this writing.

(House, 2003)

This process did seem to help them learn how to give others constructive feedback. As a result, they inadvertently learned how to reflect more thoughtfully on their own writing because they were learning about the craft of writing and doing what “real world” writers do when they trying to write literature. When I asked them to reflect on their favorite writing pieces, they were able articulate this without much difficulty; they felt that they owned their words.

Despite the imperfections of this writing community, all writing communities grow and develop by evolving through the messiness and the challenges of human beings negotiating meaning and relationships with one another.

### **3.9. Conclusions**

In the end what I observed most importantly was the ownership these students felt over the curriculum of personal stories that they wrote and read, and the confidence that stemmed from this. Students actively played with ideas and language, often taking risks and pushing the boundaries of genres and form. Their risk-taking was also reflected in their willingness to write for audiences outside of their own writing community; students actively sought publication in the *BCTELA Student Writing Journal*, *Youthink* Adolescent Newspaper, and online poetry and fan fiction websites. At the end of my unit with them, each student submitted a piece of writing of their own choosing to exhibit at the Vancouver School Board for the public. Students had, by the end of that school year in May, clearly found their voices and were willing to share a little bit of themselves with the unknown readers beyond the classroom.

## ***The Exhibit<sup>5</sup>***

For the exhibit, student picked their favorite pieces from the unit but like many other end of unit assignments, these trickled in slowly and some not at all. Kaze was gone, Clancy hadn't chosen anything and Erin was too stressed from staying up all night finishing a grade 12 Biology project that she retreated to the corner of the room to try and focus on her writing. The tears came quickly as she realized that she didn't have her latest draft here and that time was running out. I made arrangements to pick up her assignment later in the week, trying to relieve some of her stress.

Ernest and Roxx and others were not ready with their assignments either and I wondered if it was because they were reluctant to share their work or because they did not realize the opportunity this exhibit provides. Perhaps their teacher and I haven't done enough to show them the importance of their voices and stories. Or, perhaps, their voices are not looking for the audience that this exhibit provides. It is an opportunity for authentic publication and presentation of their work which helps bridge the gap between writing for self, writing for class and writing for others. By the time the exhibit is mounted, all but Kaze have come through; some have even submitted multiple pieces with artist's statements.

On the end of unit survey, I asked students, "*Tell me about the piece that you are submitting to the exhibit. How did you come to choose it? What is it about? How do you feel about the public reading it?*" Most choose pieces that they feel the audience will identify with because of the writer's use of vivid description. One student explains, "The piece that I chose is about a boxing match and is from 'Stag at Sharkie's'. I think it is well

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the exhibit documents, see appendix 4.

descriptive poem that is easy to visualize (sic). Another has learned about appealing to emotion: “I chose Tensho Gallery, (student’s own visual), it expresses my true feeling for art and says how much I enjoy many works of art...”.

This tells me that they are learning about how to write for specific audiences other than their classmates and teacher and what makes a piece of writing appealing and engaging to a reader. However, one student, Tzitel, chooses the piece that she thinks reveals the least about her: “I am submitting a poem from the picture Zissou and I as Racing Drivers. It was the picture that inspired me most with a story so I felt it was my best written piece. I am comfortable with the public reading my poem because it is not personal.” She doesn’t want to reveal herself through her writing but she still picks her best piece of work to display. Even if her own stories are not revealed through this choice, her writing ability is and with that she has inadvertently revealed a part of herself.

### **3.10. Wading through the Muddied Waters of Research: What Are the Implications for my Teaching?**

This research helped me come to the conclusion that there were many changes I needed to make in the way that I would teach writing when I returned to Eastwood. The idea of teaching a new Creative Writing course at the grade 10 level, as a precursor to the Writing 12 course in which I had conducted my research, was still an idea I wanted to bring to fruition but I also wanted to make sure that I incorporated my experiences as a writer, researcher, and teacher in designing the curriculum and approach.

I knew now that Creative writing class was the only place where the parameters of topic, genre, form and audience were expandable and flexible and that students had told

me that this was important. In fact, it helped bring together both in and out of school writing thus making the task of writing seem more authentic, personal, and meaningful. Finally I had learned the importance of building a writing community where students could feel confident sharing their work and giving and receiving feedback. For student's self esteem and growth as writers, this was essential and these sharing opportunities needed to be provided often and with scaffolding and gentle encouragement at the beginning.

Through my struggles with Kaze and Clancy, I realized how difficult it can be, even when you have the desire to express yourself, to write what you really want to say. I have regrets about not being able to help Kaze before he stopped coming and about Clancy's fear of putting pen to paper and not working with him one on one. In designing this new Creative Writing 10 course, I did not just want first language learners or advanced level students; I wanted any student who was genuinely interested in exploring ideas through writing and being part of a writer's community.

Lastly, I have learned that part of the reason why many students did not submit their work on time was because it was an elective course that did not count for graduation credits. At the grade 10 level, I would like Creative Writing 10 to be a course that is offered to students as a version of English 10 that counts as academic English. This is one way of elevating the status of creative writing within our school and valuing other forms of writing.

## PART FOUR

### Through the Looking Glass: Teaching Creative Writing English 10

Viva Voce: Voices Alive

*Somewhere a teacher is writing a poem*

*throats dry, she pours  
the elixir of poetry on tongues  
dissolves cobwebs in throats  
as crimson tongues pronounce lost chronicles.*

*Baptized in the promise of voice  
students' stone vowels crumble  
with each whisper of ink on paper.*

#### 4.1 A Not-So-Modest Proposal

During my research year, I began to wonder how it would be possible to meld the research I was doing on the power of creative writing for students and the courses we offered in our English department at my school. As I interviewed students in the Writing 12 course, I heard words like *freedom*, *community*, and *creativity* over and over again. The students' stories, poems, memoirs, and plays were the curriculum that was read, workshopped and evaluated. If this kind of curriculum leads to freedom, creativity, and community, I wanted to offer this lens on an academic English course also. In the spring of 2002, I wrote the following proposal to our new course committee:

#### *Creative Writing 10 Course Proposal*

Eastwood Vocational's English program has, over the last four years, provided its students with opportunities for creative writing. The Writing 12 students, along with their teacher, have produced three volumes of "Awakenings", a journal of student poetry and prose. Furthermore, over one hundred students from English classes at our school enter their poetry and prose each year in the province-wide

BC Teachers of English Language Arts writing contest. Many have been chosen for publication and the feedback from students has been very positive. I have found that students who would not otherwise have an outlet for self-expression or who do not see themselves as capable writers find this in creative writing.

Our department would like to build on these successes in writing by implementing a different course in grade ten that would emphasize creative writing as a window into the curriculum. This course that would be open to all students, would replace their regular English 10 block if they elected to take it. It would still fulfill all the IRP requirements for English10 but it would look at the curriculum through the lens of a writer. Students would, for example, study short stories with the aim of understanding how they are written and what makes them effective so that they may learn how to write their own. The same approach would follow for novel study, essays, and poetry. This group of students would be encouraged to write stories and poems from their lives.

Ideally, such a course would help maintain a love of writing and a value of the imagination throughout high school English. It will also help maintain our senior Creative Writing program. Most importantly though, it would help students build on their successes in creative writing by allowing it to be a focus throughout an entire course.

I propose that such a course be offered in the 2002/2003 school year. I am willing to teach it, and am currently researching the impact of creative writing on students' abilities in and attitudes towards English at UBC for my masters' thesis.

(House, 2002)

The course proposal was accepted and has been oversubscribed for the last two years. In that first year, thirty students and I negotiated the parameters of creative writing 10 through class meetings, self- evaluations, journal reflections, and one-on-one conferences. Through units on poetry, memoir, short stories, novels, essays, and a personal project, students became writers with strong voices because of what they read, wrote, and had published. What follows is our course outline:

## 4.2 Through Writers' Lenses: Our Course Creation



Ms. L. House

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*"You must write, and read, as if your life depended on it" – Adrienne Rich*

### Welcome to Creative Writing 10

#### Course Outline

- Ⓢ In this class, you will have the opportunity to experiment and play with words, your own words and life experiences, in the forms of memoir, poetry, short stories, journal free writing, and the personal essay.
- Ⓢ You will become part of a supportive writing and reading community in which you will take risks in your writing by sharing your works in progress, receiving and providing feedback for fellow writers, and presenting and publishing your most important and most polished pieces. You will also have the opportunity to write and respond collaboratively with your peers.
- Ⓢ You will also have the opportunity to read and discuss literature, both poetry and prose, by a variety of published authors through the lens of the writer in order to better understand and learn to use writing techniques and stylistic devices.
- Ⓢ Local writers will be guest speakers in your class and will give workshops on aspects of their craft.
- Ⓢ You will also be attending the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Writers' Festival on Granville Island where you will have a chance to hear a variety of Canadian and international writers.
- Ⓢ We will also explore the world of theatre by writing, performing and viewing a live production.
- Ⓢ You will be submitting entries to the BC Teachers of English Language Arts Student Writing Contest and other local and international writing contests.
- Ⓢ Certain themes will be discussed and explored in depth. So far, these will include voice, writing as a social and political act, autobiography and life writing, and descriptive writing that is focused on five senses. Other themes will be developed and incorporated based on students' interests.

### **Materials: These are Your Artist's Tools**

- Ⓢ You will need an Artist's Notebook for your studio time and free writing. I suggest that this be an unlined notebook that is 8 1/2 by 11.
- Ⓢ A good pen and some colored pencils or felt pens, and anything else you may need (Magazine clippings, stickers, a highlighter) for your Artist's Notebook.
- Ⓢ At home, you will need a good English dictionary and a thesaurus to help you improve your vocabulary.

### **Assignments and Assessment**

Conferences with the teacher will be on-going. You will be asked to discuss the strengths and growth in your work orally with the teacher and your peers.

- Ⓢ You will be responsible for submitting your Artist's Notebook every term for evaluation. Please see the handout with criteria for evaluation for further details.
- Ⓢ Work in progress, portfolios, and poetry and prose collections will be collected at the end of each unit of study (usually twice a term). They will be assessed using the *BC Writing Performance Standards* specific to the genre and self evaluation criteria.
- Ⓢ All assignments must be submitted in pen with your NAME, the DATE, BLOCK, and a TITLE. Alternately, assignments may be double-spaced and typed.
- Ⓢ Late assignments and presentations will be penalized 10% per class.

### **Evaluation**

Ⓢ Journal entries (daily writing practice)	10%
Ⓢ In class writing assignments/homework	20%
Ⓢ Portfolio/ End of Unit Projects (readings, performance, publication)	20%
Ⓢ Conferences	10%
Ⓢ Responses to class readings	20%
Ⓢ Community participation (oral contributions, peer editing, risk-taking)	20%

### 4.3 The Spirit of a Writers' Workshop

There are things that one can never know about oneself- roots that are untraceable, water whose depths can't be taken- but the act of writing will often bring up drowned or buried treasure.  
(Rowe Michaels, 1999)

Each day we start the class with a reading, a poem or prose passage. Then, both the students and I write freely for ten or fifteen minutes in our artist's notebooks on a visual prompt, a quote, or a topic of our own choosing. Next, I present a mini-lesson related to the topic of study. For example, I may do a lesson on the importance of sensory language by showing them an excerpt from *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels (1996) and asking them to underline everything they can see, hear, and feel. Then it's their turn to go back to a piece of writing they are working on and to look for the sensory language and begin to build on this aspect with a partner. Near the end of the block we'll close with a whip around in which each student shares a few sensory lines aloud with the class in the form of a voice collage.

The class structure is predictable; students know exactly what is expected of them in terms of oral participation, reading, and writing. They also know that there is always room for self-expression, imagination, and community in the classroom. Indeed, I have received poetry projects in the form of Japanese lanterns, memoirs that speak candidly of divorce, essays that condemn the universal coffee culture that is Starbucks, and screenplays told from end to beginning<sup>6</sup>. It is an absolute pleasure to be in the

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<sup>6</sup> For Student and teacher references for teaching creative writing, see appendix 5. For an outline of the components of Atwell's Writers' Workshop, see appendix 7.

presence of so many fresh voices; it has inspired me to write more in order to capture the chemistry of the classroom.

#### 4.4 Year One: When These Walls Talk

Voice Lessons

*SEPTEMBER*

*silence*

*students listening  
to the language of signs*

*watching my lips move  
my voice only  
motivated to whet their tongues with the liquid of poetry*

*I introduce them to the flavour  
of the bleached paper of their notebooks  
urging them to wet the slate with their words.*

*They trace letters  
worrying about grammar and correctness  
Is this for marks?  
How much should we write to be right?  
their tongues knotted before they ever taste the sweetness of their own alphabets*

*the root of the word grammar is grammare  
Magic                      Enchantment                      Alchemy  
not correctness.*

*OCTOBER*

*Dinah speaks first  
reads staccato phrases about her crushed heart  
Courage, ma belle.*

*the root of the word courage is corage is 13<sup>th</sup> Century French  
Heart Love Nerve  
in the face of danger.*

*Azaia, behind wisps of auburn hair that have protected her,  
takes flight  
in a childhood remembrance poem  
where she believes in wings and weightlessness*

*In that moment we are all with her  
on that swing set  
feet touching clouds.*

*Shaugne  
raps in the beat of the street  
Her poetry slam dunks  
politicians for their treatment of the homeless  
in the downtown East Side  
her rhythmic rhymes  
shove capitalist apathy for the working poor in their faces  
line after cadenced line.*

*NOVEMBER  
Norman clears his throat  
lets his words colour the air:*

*Somewhere a teenager is writing a poem  
Where anything goes...*

*he turns black sheep into prized dogs*

*I listen  
the liquid of his language  
echoing on these four classroom walls.*

*Hannah, a ballerina  
dances easily with the words of Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky  
her voice diaphanous in the syllables of others.*

*At the end of term, unchoreographed,  
she decides to trace new footprints  
of a peoples' struggle for democracy and freedom:*

*In Argentina they shout  
Todo el mundo debe irse!*

*Unmapped territory for most satin slippers.*

*DECEMBER  
Cocooned caterpillars evolve  
drunk with the politics of poetry on their tongues,  
no longer needing protection from the cacophony of the classroom,  
students become writers.*

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## APPENDIX 1: LEMON SQUARES RECIPE

### M.E.B.'s Lemon Squares

2 C. flour

1/2 C. icing sugar

1 C. margarine

Mix and pat evenly into bottom of pan 9x13.  
Bake 350 Celsius- 15 minutes.

4 eggs

2 C. sugar

1/3 C. lemon juice and rind

1/4 C. flour

1/2 tsp. baking powder

Pour over cooled base in pan.  
Bake 350 Celsius for 25 minutes or until lightly brown on top.

Sift icing sugar in top.  
Let cool completely in pan.

## APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### **My Classroom Study: The Premise for My Research Topic and Methodology**

Creative writing is a powerful and personal experience that is different for each individual; the individual stories therefore ought to be told. It is with this idea in mind that I will advocate, through my research, to share in the telling of my creative writing students' stories. There is little research that gives voice to adolescent writers, teacher writers/ writing teachers, and the interaction and community of writers that can be formed in the high school writing classroom.

As a starting point, my research was ethnographic in that I observed and wrote field notes on the community of writers in the Creative Writing 12 class at Eastwood Vocational Secondary<sup>7</sup> in Vancouver over a period of four months during their poetry and visuals writing unit. This was an exploratory study in that it helped me understand the structure and environment in this class.

Secondly, using purposive sampling, I interviewed a selection of students who had different writing experiences, including males and females, accomplished writers and new writers, and writers from different ethnic backgrounds. Age was not a variable that I addressed as the students were all approximately the same age. All students were given pseudonyms in this research in order to protect their privacy. These interviews were audio taped and transcribed and then shared with students. They were able to omit anything that they did not want included in the final report.

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<sup>7</sup> The name of the research site is a pseudonym.

This interview process served as a starting point for the research. I wanted to give voice to these students so that they could tell their stories of journeying into becoming writers. Together, we built on their interview stories with pieces of their writing. This then became part of the final text of this thesis.

Through this immersion, I wanted the students and myself to shed some light on the importance of creative writing in our lives. Thus, this journey into researching student writers' lives and how their lives affect their writing informed me and helped me better understand my experience in becoming and being a writer and teacher of writing.

## APPENDIX 3: VISUALS AND WRITING UNIT OUTLINE

### Student Handout: Unit Outline

UNIT FOCUS: Beyond the Picture: Using Visuals to Write Poetry

*A Celebration of the Creative Interplay between Poetry and Art.*

**APPROACH:** Unit will be team-taught by your teacher and Ms. House. Teaching will be divided, each teacher focusing on a specific aspect of the lesson.

**FORMAT:** Each day, students will be given examples of art work and poems inspired by these visuals. Students will discuss these and then, using a variety of strategies, begin warm up and rough draft writing based on a variety of visual prompts. Each class they will also write in a journal, sometimes with guided questions about the writing and creative process, other times, on topics of their choosing. During each lesson both students and teachers will write poetry. Periodically, students and teachers will share and read poetry in small groups or whole class settings. The aim is to maintain an active community of writers.

**DATES: Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup>- May 28<sup>th</sup>**

- 1) Tues., Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup>
- 2) Tues., Jan. 29<sup>th</sup>
- 3) Mon., Feb. 4<sup>th</sup> Interviews with students.
- 4) Wed., Feb. 6<sup>th</sup>
- 5) Tues., Feb. 12<sup>th</sup>
- 6) Tues., Feb. 19<sup>th</sup>
- 7) Mon., Feb. 25<sup>th</sup> Sharing Session: Students bring a poem or two to read in class
- 8) Wed., Feb. 27<sup>th</sup> Interviews with students
- 9) Tues., March 5<sup>th</sup>
- 10) Thurs., March 7<sup>th</sup> Interviews with students
- 11) Mon., March 11<sup>th</sup> Editing revising work/
- 12) Wed., March 13<sup>th</sup> Presentations/ portfolios due, class evaluation of unit
- 13) Mon. March 25- May 28<sup>th</sup> Make up interviews, surveys, exhibition preparation

*Your work will be on exhibit at the Vancouver School Board from May 28<sup>th</sup>- June 24<sup>th</sup>.*

**THEMES:**

- 1) Art that tells a story: Narrative Poetry through Images
- 2) Faces: Character Sketches and Memories
- 3) Human relationships and interaction: Speaking for the Artwork
- 4) Shapes and Colours: Light, Form, and Space Transformed into Language
- 4) Researching your own piece of art (photo, sculpture, fibre arts, painting): How does it speak to you?
- 5) Final Project: Portfolio of five pieces of poetry: one from each theme, and one of your own

**APPENDIX 4: THE VSB VISUALS AND WRITING EXHIBIT DOCUMENTS  
2002**

## **Beyond the Picture: Using Visuals to Write Poetry A Celebration of the Creative Interplay between Poetry and Art**

**THE POETS:** The poets are grade 11 and 12 students enrolled in Writing 12 at Eastwood Vocational Secondary School in East Vancouver.

**THE EXHIBIT:** What you can see and read on these walls represents the students' choices from their unit portfolios. Each student has chosen how and what to present from nonsense poetry based on abstract art to free verse autobiography.

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**FORMAT:** This unit was co-taught by the Writing 12 teacher and Liisa House, English teacher and Masters Student in Writing Research. Over a period of four months, this group of Writing 12 students experimented with the interplay of poetry and art.

Each day, students were given examples of artwork and poems inspired by these visuals. Students discussed these and then, using a variety of strategies, they began with warm up and rough draft writing based on a variety of visual prompts. Each class they also wrote in a journal, sometimes with guided questions about the writing and creative process, other times, on topics of their choosing. During each lesson, both students and teachers wrote poetry. Periodically, students and teachers shared and read poetry in small groups or whole class settings. The aim was to maintain an active community of writers.

**THEMES:**

- 1) Art that tells a story: Narrative Poetry through Images
- 2) Faces: Character Sketches and Memories
- 3) Human Relationships and Interaction: Speaking for the Artwork
- 4) Shapes and Colours: Light, Form, and Space Transformed into Language
- 4) Researching Your own Piece of Art (photo, sculpture, fiber arts, painting): How does it speak to you?

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**ART RESOURCES:**

- Bellows, G. *Stag at sharkey's*. 1909.
- Burra, E. *Harlem*.
- Harbutt, C. *Restaurant rougeot*. 1970.
- Hopper, E. *Early sunday morning*. 1930
- Lichtenstein, R. *Bananas and grapefruit #3*. 1972.
- Kelley, G. *Fisherman*. 1998.
- Lartigue, J.-H. *Zissou and I as racing drivers*. 1903.
- Murray, E. *Open Drawer*. 1998.
- O'Keefe, G. *Poppy*. 1927.
- Scianna, F. *Laughing at Men*.
- Wood, G. *American Gothic*. 1930.

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**PRINT RESOURCES:**

- Gautrand, J. C. (Ed.). (1999). *Paris mon amour*. Paris, FR: Editions Marval.
- Greenberg, J. (Ed.). (2001). *Heart to heart: new poems inspired by twentieth century american art*. New York, NY, Harry N. Abrams
- Lewis, P. (1998). *Bosh blobber bosh: runcible poems for edward lear*. Mankato, MN: Creative Editions.

## APPENDIX 4: THE EXHIBIT DOCUMENTS CONTINUED

### Students' Thoughts on Creative Writing and the Use of Visuals

.... I like making a story from visuals because it wakes up a frozen world and all of a sudden it's living. A brushstroke becomes a shaft of pain or light tumbling from a burning fuzzy sun. Faces start talking, telling their story, sharing their glory, filth and grime and sometimes you find what's really on your mind when you see a pulsing ocean and you wish you could say what you really think about till it drowns your thoughts out.

- Manny

Everyone sees something different when they look at a visual, it's interesting to see what other people think of when they see something you saw..."

Manny

As I write for self discovery, I start looking inside myself and probing my feelings. Then I take these feelings and express them on paper. The paper remains a document of my sadness, happiness, anger, etc. The act of writing can also help peel back layers of meaning, as well as create meaning... I'm not a robot, I'm a human being and every human beings (sic) have their own way of expressing their feelings.

-James

As a poet I am most like.....

Energy. Swirling. Always spinning. Spinning spinning spinning & doing whatever the hell I want as nature guides me. Weeeee!

Ernest

Favorite type of writing and why? Just writing, just taking a pen & writing & not being restricted by any sort of title what so ever. I don't even like to call it poetry. It's just expression. It's raw. I do what makes me feel good..

I wouldn't even say that creative writing helps me practice my writing abilitys (sic) for school because I like to do all the things that school doesn't (sic) want me to do, or understand... They don't want me being incoherent, disjointed they..

- Ernest

Have you ever opened your eyes and looked, really looked and not just think (sic) "Oh, that's a place with stuff in it"? Well, that's where being creative comes in. If you weren't creative, you would just take things for what you see and you would never imagine there could be a deeper level.

Creativity is perspective (sic) beyond all others, allowing you to make connections they're (sic) wasn't one before. It opens you to a whole new universe and helps us all enter the door.

-Erin

## APPENDIX 5: STUDENT AND TEACHER REFERENCES FOR TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING

### Student Texts

At the beginning of each year, I sign out one copy of *Voices Visible*, BCTELA's *Student Writing Journal*, to each student because it contains good examples of student poetry and prose. I also gather collections of poems and short stories from local and international writers and read or photocopy these to use in mini-lessons on the genre or the craft of writing.

### Teacher Resources and References:

As a teacher of writing, I want to instill a love and appreciation for the written and spoken word. This means finding opportunities for my students to go through the looking glass into the world of poems or prose and to dwell there; to imagine and write their own pieces of literature instead of only reading other authors' works.

My list of personal textbooks is always being updated; I cull articles on writing, themes, and authors from magazines, newspapers, literary journals. I use excerpts from novels I am reading to illustrate descriptive writing, interesting uses of dialogue, point of view, and voice. For writing lessons, I rely almost daily on Nancie Atwell's *Lessons that Change Writers*; it contains over seventy mini-lessons on writing in multiple genres from pre-writing to publication. I supplement Atwell's lessons with genre specific resources. Below is a list of books that I have found invaluable in teaching this course.

### **For Teaching All Genres:**

Atwell, N. (2002). *Lessons that change writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

House, L. (Ed.). (2002). *Voices visible: BCTELA student writing journal*. Vancouver, BC: BCTELA.

### **For Teaching Poetry:**

Behn, R. & Twichell, C. (1992). *The practice of poetry: Writing exercises from poets who teach*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Kovacs, E. (1994). *Writing across cultures: A handbook on writing poetry and lyrical prose*. Accord, NY: Blue Heron Press.

Leggo, C. (1997). *Teaching to wonder: Responding to poetry in the secondary classroom*. Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.

Morrison, C. (1997). *How to build a long-lasting fire: Writing poems from your life*. Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing Group (LRDC).

Rowe Michaels, J. (1999). *Risking intensity: Reading and writing poetry with high school students*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

### **For Teaching Prose:**

Cameron, J. (1992). *The artist's way*. New York, NY: Tarcher Putnam.

Fletcher, R. & Portalupi, J. (1998). *Craft lessons: teaching writing K-8*. Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.

Gardner, J. (1983). *Art of fiction: notes on craft for young writers*. United States: Vintage.

Goldberg, N. (1986). *Writing down the bones*. Boston, MA: Shambala.

Leggo, C. (2001). *Tangled lines: Nurturing writers and writing* (Unpublished Manuscript). Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of British Columbia.

Norman, R. (2001). *House of mirrors: Performing autobiograph(ically) in language/education*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

## APPENDIX 6: SAMPLE LESSON ON TEACHING STUDENTS ABOUT SENSORY LANGUAGE

# Can a Reader See it? Hear it? Feel it?

(Adapted from Nancie Atwell's Lesson 17 from *Lessons that Change Writers*)

### How to do it:

The Mini- Lesson: Begin with a teacher model of the task.

- Read Aloud: opening section of a sensory piece of literature. I use The Poisonwood Bible (Barbara Kingsolver), Fox (Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks), or Fugitive Pieces (Anne Michaels).
- Ask students to listen: What could you see? Hear? Feel?
- This is sensory language: a way to help the reader connect to what you are describing by appealing to a number of their senses. This is powerful writing. This is what we often see in literature.
- On the overhead, using a transparency, jot down their ideas for they can see, hear, feel.
- Distribute and ask students to read a selection of student or published poems or prose in which the author uses sensory details to bring their experiences to life for themselves and their readers. Underline any lines where you can see, hear or feel and mark it with an s, h, or f.
- Debrief this on a transparency with the class.
- Ask students what they notice about the text (almost all of it is underlined).

Guided Practice: Students return to their own writing.

- Ask students to return to their own writing. With a partner, they code their draft work for sensory detail.
- Follow up: Students explore parts of their text where they could paint a clearer picture using sensory detail.
- Show them Katherine's "The Sleepover with my Bestfriend" and then her revised version, "An Unforgettable Adventure". This will illustrate the kind of improvements students can easily make in their own writing by focusing on sensory detail.

Reflection and Follow up:

- Follow up using this terminology in student-teacher conferences and revision groups.
- Ask students to do a rewrite of an isolated part of their writing, perhaps the lead, while focusing on what a reader can see, hear or feel.
- Bring this piece to the group for discussion.

### Why?

This approach to teaching the use of sensory detail is in student-friendly language. Also, you have now begun to develop a common language that both teacher and student can

use (i.e. I can see it but I can't feel it? What did you want the reader to feel in this line?, etc...) when conferring and making improvements to writing.

*Katherine's First Draft*

*The Sleepover with my Bestfriend*

*As the night was coming to an end,  
A new adventure was beginning as  
The lightless sky was starting to take over*

*I am down in Emily's basement of pure dark*

*Emily had warned me about the spiders  
that lived in her basement, in the dark, at  
night digging their fangs into flesh of little ones.*

*Just thinking about it gave me the shivers.  
As fast as we could we ran up the stairs.*

*I slammed the door and prayed no spiders  
would come and get us.*

*Katherine's Final Copy*

*An Unforgettable Adventure*

*Night coming to an end  
A new adventure beginning,  
The lightless sky takes over.  
I am down in Emily's basement of pure dark.  
She warns me of killer spiders  
That live in her basement  
At night digging their fangs into flesh of little ones.  
I shiver.*

*As fast as we can,  
We race up the stairs.  
I slam the door  
And pray no spiders will come and bite us.*

*Safe in the warm carpeted room  
We are tucked into bed  
when I start having growing pains.  
They come at my legs like bullets  
Emily gets me a hot water bottle  
that heals,  
that soothes my pains  
the warmth that brings my legs back to life.*

*Again we tuck ourselves into bed.  
We reveal stories,  
Scary dreams that we once had  
until we fall asleep.  
Our friendship was soon sealed with a cork and put out to sea.*

*Emily moved away later on that year  
my hearts breaks in two,  
a river of tears runs down my cheek.  
As I look two doors down,  
a vacant,  
abandoned house with just spiders  
left in the basement of pure dark.*

## APPENDIX 7: COMPONENTS OF ATWELL'S WRITERS' WORKSHOP

**Structure and Sequence:** The Writing Workshop begins with a mini-lesson taught by teacher (5-25 minutes), followed by independent writing time in which the teacher circulates among writers to follow up on the mini lesson or to do confer with individuals or groups of students.

**Extended Blocks of Time for Writing:** three times a week, at least 45 minutes each.

**Student Materials:** Students use a spiral notebook which they bring to a mini-lesson circle and record lessons chronologically. Students create and update a table of contents that allows them easy access to the help they need.

**Choice:** Students choose most of their writing projects. "teachers push for authority and purpose"- students write about what they know and care about with passion".

**Mini- Lessons:** Lessons are taught using model student papers and examples from literature, coding and evaluating papers, experimenting with a new approach in a guided practice, and teacher- student and peer discussions and reflections.

**Mini-Lessons:** These address topics that students will need or want to know to write "literature". Categories could include:

- Lessons about topics: ways to develop ideas for pieces of writing that will matter to writers and their readers. (Ideas)
- Lessons about principles of writing: ways to think and craft deliberately to create meaningful, literary writing. (Voice, Word Choice)
- Lessons about genres: how to observe and name the qualities of good free-verse poems, formatted poetry, essays, short stories, memoirs, parodies, and book reviews. (Organization, Ideas, Voice, Word Choice)
- Lessons about conventions: what readers' eyes and minds expect from texts, and how marks and forms give writing voice and power and make reading predictable and easy. (Conventions).
- Editing student work with an eye toward preparing it for real readers. (Presentation)