

# Horizons of Self-Composure: Using Poetry and Scribble-Portraits to Explore an Aesthetics of Care

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**Abstract:** We are teacher-educators who use poetry and drawing as ways to evoke the aesthetic dimensions of care and to encourage the expression of vulnerability and perspective-taking in ourselves and ultimately within our classrooms. This piece describes an auto-ethnographic process surrounding the exploration of teacher-writer identity through the use of “scribble-portraits” and poetry. We created self-portraits and shared poetry related to our conceptions of ourselves and of our personal and professional identities. Central insights related to how poetry and image allow for dialogue and reflection related to a productive space where new identities and aesthetic experiences can enhance the practice of teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Auto-ethnography; writing identity; self-portrait; academic writing; imagery and the symbolic.

In a positivist neoliberal era, postsecondary institutions are emphasizing the importance of measurable, quantifiable learning outcomes, seeming to leave little room for more nuanced understandings of questioning and probing human experience (Ross & Gibson, 2007). The imaginative and the aesthetic open doors for more complex and richly textured ways of experiencing and noticing the world. Quite often, the emphasis within art education is upon aesthetic experience and the emotive and imaginative dimensions of being human. Art also allows us to attend to the tactile and embodied aspects of being a teacher and learner, and to explore vulnerability, not as a weakness but as an occasion for caring, listening and creating new expressions of identity.

Poetic language is sensual and often draws its power from an invitation into the present moment. Although form and rhythm is one way we recognize the poetic mode, another is through its insistent and recurrent use of the metaphorical. The sensual, the embodied and the parsing of experience into the lived sensual moment, are all used by the poet to touch the mind and body of the reader, to try to invoke a shared sympathy or a mode of thinking and feeling that somehow resonates beyond the particular. Maya Angelou (1994) does this, as does the poetry of Anne Sexton (1991). Poetic images, as in the case of William Carlos Williams’ (1991) famous red wheelbarrow and white chickens, can be a means of evoking striking immediacy or drawing the reader into a world of experience, or they may be symbols, perhaps even archetypes, as in the poems of Yeats (1996), or Eliot (2011). Sometimes, as in the case of Berryman (1989), images can be deceptively ordinary, but rich in symbolic meaning and emotive intensity.

Sometimes poetic images are simply building blocks that allow the poet to create a world that is textured and open to shared meanings. Like language itself, they allow for play, for

tension, for ambiguity, for shadow. None of these things are so easily available in the worlds of descriptive prose, and while they can be achieved in narrative, the poetic universe is most often one of stark immediacy and startling wonder. In this sense, poetry has a unique capacity to arrest, to touch, to draw out something in the reader even as the poem pulls us inward. It asks us to pause and to encounter the elusive, often in the spaces found when we look askance at the taken-for-granted and the everyday. The poet never makes it her job to judge us; she lives in a different space, where we see the human intensity of loss and grief, pain and love. In many ways, these notions have somehow become foreign to us as academics, and all too often, as citizens of the modern world.

Using poems and self-portraits, this auto-ethnographic study placed us within unfamiliar spaces that required performance and self-disclosure as we struggled to come to terms with the types of identities and experiences that we have willingly, but unknowingly, closed off for ourselves. Even though the recognized currency of research forms like auto-ethnography and narrative provide space for new explorations of writing identity, poetry and poetic language, since they are intensely metaphorical, open-ended and often embroidered within a landscape of sound and image, they offer an intensely rich but also vulnerable and unsettled space for creating new conceptions of persona, shadow and self. Poetry and self-portraiture, we hoped, would offer powerful opportunities for self-disclosure and sharing of personal insights that allow education to be more critical and transformational (Leggo, 2010; 2005).

We, Sarah (from counselling), and John and Cecile (adult/post-secondary education), connected over conversations around vulnerability and whether, as long-time teachers, we could still connect to the vulnerability our students feel when they enter our classrooms for the first time. What would shift us out of our fields of comfort? What would peel back the layers of our professional teaching personas? What would invoke feelings of being new, uncertain beginners? We decided that examining conceptions of ourselves using poetry and scribble art would help us to reclaim emotions contained by years of composure. In many respects, because mainstream conceptions of adult education or counselling are seen to have a practical and instrumental orientation, it is even more important to create room for the imagination and the retelling of personal experience in light of new knowledge that teachers and learners have gained. Artistic expression and the discovery of insights through art, prevents the practical from becoming fixated on the prosaic, and opens up new worlds for discovery, that combine the human and emotive aspects of learning. This is a central insight that we aim to explore through our own self-portraits and poetry.

### **Jungian Shadow, Self-Portraits and Poetry**

Rather than seeing engagement with the arts as something that is an add-on to the education of the self, scholars in aesthetic education have claimed that it is integral to the “creation of mind” (Eisner, 2002), that is, to a mind that is capable of recognizing subtlety, of being critical and of being able to vicariously experience other ways of noticing and being in the world. Mapping such a multifaceted and complex self is a task that requires metaphor, and an attentiveness to desire, imagination and the use of language to evoke new aspects of self and other (Britzman, 1998; Butler, 1997; Sedgwick, 2003). In this sense, we are reminded of Deborah Britzman (1998) who once remarked, “now we reach our last lonely discovery: teaching, it turns out, is also a psychic event for the teacher” (p. 134).

Towards this aim, the Jungian notions of persona and shadow offer a starting point through which we can begin to conceptualize the self. Although we recognize the problematic aspects of the more foundational aspects of Jung, we also realize the profound insights offered by the emphasis placed in his work on symbols and other forms of shared meaning and psychic

power. Equally important is his distinction between persona and the outward social self that one projects onto the world and shadow, or the hidden, sometimes unrealized aspects of selfhood that we deny or misinterpret but which also form an integral part of the self (Bolea, 2016). In Jung's (1986) own words, "through the persona a [wo]man tries to appear as this is that, or [s]he hides behind a mask, or [s]he may even build up a definite persona as a barricade" (p. 123). How do we know then, if our engagement with even the most progressive and critical of pedagogies is nothing more than a lifeless mask of the persona?

Building on the work of critics like Hirsch (1997) writing on memory, subjectivity and image, these concepts provide us with a language to begin to understand the functioning of poetry and image, particularly self-representations, within the process of self-expression. Working in a collaborative setting, we have also begun to see how "difference or otherness...is not an external difference, but an otherness within—within a circumscribed cultural group, such as a family, and, also, within the self, reflecting the subject's own plurality over a lifetime, the intersubjectivity that is subjectivity" (Hirsch, 1997, p. 83). Jung's ideas also provide us with a means to understand selfhood that affirms the power of emotion and desire and recognizes our own capacity to ignore, deny or thwart desire in sometimes destructive or counterproductive ways. In this sense, reason and desire are both aspects of an embodied psyche that needs to fully comprehend both the rich joy and sorrow of being a human being continually searching for individuation and connection with others.

Although judgment is integral to the World of the academic, judging, because it requires us to distance ourselves from what we behold and because it is primarily an act of calculated rational thinking, can also separate us from lived moments of experience, from the pulsing currents that give vitality to life. Tension, contradiction and ambiguity equate in the judge's mind to vulnerability and weakness. While dialogue and critique can move understanding forward, art, since it is often employs the metaphorical and symbolic, remains beyond simple reduction or translation into a single system of meaning. To quote Jung (1986) once again, "art by its very nature is not science, and science by its very nature is not art; both these spheres of the mind have something in reserve that is peculiar to them and can be explained only in its own terms" (p. 302). For these reasons, attending to and noticing the resonances that are evoked by the interplay of artistic texts are just as important as analysis and critique. In other words, art compels us to notice the world in different ways (Dewey, 1934).

Sometimes the results of an aesthetic experience can be unexpected, resulting in dissatisfaction or dissonance. This troubling or problematizing, although unsettling, can be a rich source of insight and transformation (Greene, 1973). It requires a series of encounters and sharing vulnerabilities, desires and aspirations in the hopes of unlocking something far more elusive and mysterious than the usual set of perfunctory rituals and cultural mannerisms that define professional behavior. In this sense, these gestures often are masks that hide the shadow selves that provide the rich textures of our inner lives. We are seldom fully one thing or the other, but we live in a space of half-turns and in-betweens. Art, by allowing us to shift stances and look askance at ourselves and others, provides a means of interrogating this very possibility and of creating new, more authentic pedagogical spaces.

What we might term an aesthetics of care is a pedagogical stance that uses art to evoke the experience of caring and allows for participants to receive care as a reminder that we are all vulnerable and that we all fear being judged. Caring is both an experience as well as a personal virtue or disposition, and one that relies on the ability of the care holder to imagine the experience and the standpoint of the one who is being harmed or seeks love, consolation or connection (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Noddings, 2002). The care needed in the process of artistic creation then, becomes a touchstone for emotional caring needed to create families of

practice and the types of trust and empathy necessary for vulnerability—for to care, is to make oneself more vulnerable but also more open to love and transformation through authentic connection.

### **Methods: Creating Shared Spaces**

We engaged in two methods to evoke vulnerability in our self-expressions: poetic inquiry and scribble self-portraiture. Self-study and poetic inquiry are two “powerful agents” in beginning to understand ourselves as teachers (Dobson, 2010, p. 132). Poetic inquiry is both a method and a product of a research process (Leggo, 2005; 2010; Wiebe & Snowber, 2011). While writing poetry is often perceived as an individual activity, we engaged in a collaboration that allowed meaning to emerge through relational processes (Gold, 2012). In this way, we used writing as method (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008) as both a way of connecting within our own group and to explore the hidden, often unrecognized textures of our own intersubjective identities. We are compelled to use poetry because of its “slipperiness and ambiguity, its precision and distinctiveness” (Faulkner, 2018, p. 209).

As children we all happily engaged in scribble drawing, enjoying the experience of curiosity as images emerged on the paper. Caught up in expressing ourselves in a language other than the verbal, we relished the creativity and spontaneity of uncritical mark-making. As we grow, we begin to see scribble-drawings as “backward or regressive” (Maclagan, 2013, p. 7), something to be ashamed of, something to hide, something to avoid. Scribbling refers to a range of rudimentary, spontaneous, and relatively unconscious marks. We intentionally sought to scribble our self-portraits to recapture that childlike spontaneity while at the same time recognizing that as adults, particularly adults who do not often engage in scribbling, drawing or self-portraiture, the process might be risky and anxiety-provoking (Hancheruk, McBride, Witczak, 2016). The process we used to draw the self-portraits was to use the camera function on our phones as a mirror. Then we drew five portraits on printing paper with black markers. We focused on the images in our phones rather than on what we were drawing on the paper, and tried to draw without lifting our markers. We gave ourselves permission to be non-judgmental, to make mistakes and to draw horribly. Once we finished the five drawings, we chose one we liked and added spot colors.

Like our poems, our self-portraits were not only deeply personal, but we also hoped that they would be “a reflection of, and a reaction to, our teaching and our learning, and a point of reference at which we may engage with others on matters of mutual educational interest” (Hancheruk, McBride & Witczak, 2016, p. 298). To reduce an identity to one thing rather than another is, in a sense, a distortion that brings with it the risk of misrecognition (Levinas, 1987). Images of faces that are fractured or prismatic remind us of the complexity of trying to reduce something that is three dimensional into two dimensions, much as artistic forms embody the real even as they leave it open to interpretation or to questioning. They also remind us that it is possible to experience loneliness even when one is recognized and among others. If our own faces can seem inscrutable to us, is that a trick or a mere after-effect of an off-image or does it point towards something more mysterious about the nature of the self and identity

In this sense, the act of interpretation and of meeting another is not pointless since it cannot be neatly reduced to a proposition; it is enigmatic, mysterious and signifies the capacity for creative writing to teach even as it brings up to the very horizons of what can be conceived and known. As Barthes (1968) notes, “modes of writing appear only when the language, being established...becomes a kind of negativity, a line which separates what is forbidden from what is allowed, without asking itself any more questions about its origins or the justifications for such a taboo” (p. 56). Although academics have been taught to look at something directly, to capture its

essence, and to distill its core attributes, the poetic and the poetics of the lived-image remind us of the value of looking askance, of shifting the gaze to encounter oneself as something that is at once strange and that can be known even as part of it remains elusive, shifting and stubbornly unknown. Inspired by Barthes, we wondered about the possibilities inherent within a mode of teaching and living where we stopped trying to live by, or to untangle, those hidden lines.

### **Sarah: Song as Poem and Colour**



My partner is an artist. With no formal training she can draw images as she sees them, see creations in scraps of wood and carve life into them. Our home is filled with scripts and scraps for future projects and creations. I, on the other hand, am the organizer. I like our home neat and tidy, I find it relaxing. This is not to say that I don't recognize my artistry. I was a competitive ice skater, a dancer, dance teacher, a choreographer and completely credit my success supporting myself waiting tables through university to the kinesthetic artistry associated with maneuvering through a busy restaurant. My sister is a poet, my grandfather a wood carver and my cousin an accomplished violinist. Coming from a family of teachers, I love a good craft and secretly love fashion. I eventually found a creative home as a therapist; I'm intrigued with people, relationships, how we construct meaning, and found a knack for creative ways of working with what most consider challenging problems. I flourish in this space.

I, however, have never blossomed with drawing. In fact, I've been terrified of drawing for most of my life. In my elementary years, much like with writing, I was encouraged to focus my energies on my 'natural abilities'—athletics with a not so subtle dose of 'you can't draw so don't waste your time' on the side. So, I stopped drawing, scribbling or attempting to put pen to paper, other than to write words or sketch a graph for someone to illustrate an idea, always with a disclaimer—I can't draw. Given my history with drawing I anticipated that the scribble self-portrait activity would be uncomfortable and I might give up. Surprisingly, I found it quite fun. Sure, I was uncomfortable, but I'm a therapist and counsellor educator; I've learned to embrace discomfort. What was surprising was the fun. I found myself laughing throughout the process, connecting with my peers. I also improved with each drawing. What an amazing feeling. I was

reminded of the exhilaration new counsellors feel when they witness improvement with their skills and their comfort in the role of counsellor. My 6-year-old is learning to tie her shoes and I found myself wearing the same cheeky grin and twinkle in my eye as her delight in this accomplishment. In reflecting on this experience, I believe it was the opportunity to learn with my peers, the chance to be vulnerable, to show my rough edges and to risk connection with unearthed parts of myself in their company that was so joyous. If I had engaged with the scribble self-portrait alone I do not think I would have experienced nearly the joy or accomplishment.

Another surprise was that while drawing #5 was far better than drawing #4, in terms of drawing quality, it lacked a zest, the quirkiness that I see in myself, and others witness. In drawing #5 it was as if I lost the essence of me in the image in favour of a better, more detailed drawing. Image #4, the image I chose, has many imperfections and it is a self-portrait, not merely a drawing. Is this what we do as ‘professionals’, as teachers: do we snuff the spark out of our students’ work in pursuit of perfection, an academic ideal and then call it rigor or ‘true’ scholarship? Do we void the human behind the writing, the assignment? As academics we often isolate to think, create, write, and then wonder why our insecurities arise, why joy is lacking in our institutions. Perhaps it would help our academic condition to spend more time creating and thinking together. I’m reminded of Brene Brown’s (2012) research on vulnerability being the birthplace of creativity and innovation.

### **Disassembled Indigo**

Complicated beauty sister  
Moonlighting Mariner  
Song feed, sing forgiveness  
Moments, collecting you  
Highway deliverance  
bitter tears, saving me  
Galileo fears  
California skin  
yields  
lost kid fear  
Feel the watershed promises of hope  
One lost day, saving me

My writing often explores memories and how I see myself through the eyes of others in my life. These moments are sometimes disruptive, but by retelling, I hope to create a space for witnessing my own claiming of the identity of a writer, even though I struggle with a past intimated that this identity was not for me. Like John, I often speak from a liminal standpoint, one that at first glance may seem troubling or disorientating but which, on retelling, becomes a space where different conceptions of self—often empowering ones—can grow and take hold. I bear witness to the transformative power of the writing act as I create a poem using reclaimed words.

The Indigo Girl’s music has streamed alongside my life. Since first hearing them in the early 90s, as artists they have offered me solace, a place to weep, to rage, to purge, to find relief, visibility and empowerment. What would my experience in coming out as queer, engaging with vulnerability, becoming a researcher, an academic, a psychotherapist, an institutional activist have been had I not found them all those years ago? How has persona been influenced by their music and what shadows are revealed through poetry?

I was inspired by a session on blackout poetry I attended, using ‘found’ words to create a poem. I was curious to see what would happen if I used only Indigo Girl song title words. I find the way they place words together alluring and full of resonance. I wondered if I simply used these words would poetry become more accessible to me? Throughout this process I found myself connected to images, feeling states, aesthetics and meaning in a way that I struggle to when sitting down to write a poem ‘from thin air’. It helped me to ‘back into the poem’ or construct it from askance, given I already have a relationship with these words and images. In this process their songs began swirling around my head alongside the images I’ve historically associated with them. This opened space to shake up both the words and the persona I’ve carried of a non-poet. I became curious about how the words and images in deconstruction were recycled or reincarnated, infusing my historical relationship to the words, titles, and songs with new meanings. As a counsellor educator, I found this process similar to how I ask my students to be vulnerable in looking at themselves while at the same time both indirectly and directly inquiring about existing strengths they may leverage when acquiring new skills, and knowledge in their development as counsellors.

The vivid arresting images are provocative—how a song can give form to thoughts and emotion in something very much like color or texture, sensual, thick and uninterrupted. How can one disassemble a color? Is the band itself truly present? This is the paradox that confronts the reader at the beginning of this poem, a paradox fleshed out through images of leaving and returning, of home and exile, and yearning and hope.

### **Cecile: The Secret Lives of Crows**



Although I had made scribble self-portraits before and did not feel anxiety when engaging with this process, I found looking at my own image deeply uncomfortable. I like the young and energetic image I carry of myself in my head. Staring at the double chin and lines around my mouth and eyes was jarring and a strong reminder of the fictions of internal self-imaging. Do I really look like that? Am I that old already? Yet, the drawing, which contains all the signs of age, is surprisingly delightful to me. It reveals unexpected character and depth and I am amazed at the results.

### Self-portrait as crows in the garden

These big-bodied birds  
have big-bodied hearts.  
Fierce parents and loyal offspring  
stay close to the place they were born  
unless threatened,  
then they are adaptable,  
making homes  
in all types of habitats.  
Pairs build love-nests  
in tall trees  
using branches, twigs, hair, twine,  
bark, plant fibers, mosses, cloth  
and other materials.  
While family oriented,  
they are social creatures  
and see strength in numbers.  
Their blue-black creation colours  
are at once, nothing,  
and something.

A pair of crows has nested in our back garden for a number of years and I feel an unusual affinity to them. The poem emerged from this connection. While I write a lot of poetry, I very rarely expose this part of myself to public view, and before this occasion, would never contemplate showing my poetry to an academic audience. For me, poetry is about exploring the nature of how we come to be and mean within different aspects of our lives. In the academic realm, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of counting publications and research grants until they become a substitute for the person herself. Similarly, teaching over many years creates a sense of comfort and sometimes even detachment. Even more strangely it often seems like so many of us feel the weight of this burden and yet we comply, sometimes without question. This is an issue that has been on my mind frequently lately. Exploring this and how it informs my academic persona is a way of working through these feelings without surrendering to the false binary between quitting and staying within the walls of the academy. There are ways of staying that are subversive and ways of quitting that do little to change the status quo. These themes are touched on in this poem. The fiercely intelligent, curious and irreverent crows embody a type of spirit that resists being out of place in a backyard garden in that it is both domesticated but also wild. It is these types of juxtapositions that remind us that living and teaching are meant to be exhilarating and worthwhile.

My poem also explores the notion of presence and how presence is something more than an either/or. How we are present and how we choose to be present is something that can be a site of immense trepidation, but also discovery. As every academic knows, loneliness can take hold of the self in a way that closes off connection and vulnerability. This is very different from solitude which can be a feeling that is healing and a source of renewal and hope. In some ways, the crow is an emblem of this tension that also finds its expression in shadow and persona. It is an image that offers a cautionary tale, but also hope.



Crows are also symbols of independence but they need care to exist. This unexpected juxtaposition mirrors, in many ways, everyday life in the academy. These metaphorical crows also build nests from fragments and things that are cast off or discarded so that they can build a home, a place for creation, returning and warmth. There is still, though, a subtext of threat of displacement and misadventure that perhaps echoes academic life and the need to exist in the world that Jung attributed as the reason for the psyche's need to create the persona. Like the crow's nest, all of these things hang in a precarious balance, one that is nonetheless wondrous and full of promise.

### **John: Writing, Judgment and Fire**



I confess that I was very uncomfortable with the scribble portrait activity. I am not a skilled graphic artist by any means and adding to my anxiety was my own insecurity about my appearance, having broken my nose a couple of times in the past. Although I anticipated this discomfort, experiencing it was much more intense. It was also, from my point of view, one of the most important outcomes of our collaboration. I enjoy creative writing and I often hear my students express similar anxieties when I ask them to write narratives or poems in my class. Now I wonder if I am truly present and attending to my students' needs when they have similar fears and frustrations. Given that I also did not expect the final "product" to be "good", I also was forced to ask myself, what is the point? Well, the point turned out to be the process of sharing itself—an experience that made me feel like a novice learner. Indeed, my scribble portrait actually looked like the type of persona mask that Jung warns us against growing into one's skin. Perhaps this is the source of the brooding melancholic quality that I also seem to see in the scribble portrait, all aspects that also seem to surface in my poetry.

I like theory and I use it as a tool to analyze the world around me. However, the notion of a "theoretical me" seems strange for some reason and I am not quite sure why. Perhaps it is because it refers to a construct that is divorced from experience, emotion and the imaginative aspects of human being and doing. Or perhaps it is just because deep down I want a me, an I, that can flit between these subjectivities and that is honest enough to acknowledge this fact. Creative

writing seems a little more open and available to experience than its “academic” counterpart. Being more metaphorical perhaps, it is more fluid and offers a capacity to awaken the reader to the complexity of life and the power of an invitation into other modes of experience. In part, this is because “poems carry within them coded information not readily available to the logical brain engaged in purely analytical writing” (McLeod & Ruebsaat, 2014, p. 45). So, when we talk about a writing identity, to me it is quite a profound question, since writing is itself about creating places for the “I” to enter into the world differently, through different positions and forms.

### **The Adjuster**

I once heard about  
an arsonist who would  
dip a rag in kerosene  
and tie it to the tail of a mouse.  
He had gone on  
to become a movie star,  
then died.

Would you also believe  
that at the heart  
of the milky way galaxy there  
are hundreds, if not thousands  
of black holes, that hold billions of  
spiraling stars in  
divine  
tortured symmetry?

Some nights walking alone  
under yellowing street lights, the  
pavement cool and slick  
somewhere far beyond the fading music of bars,  
I can feel something lift me up  
look me in the eye  
and spin me round on its  
celestial hips;  
I can feel the pulsing flame  
driving me through the empty warehouse  
packed tight with crates and crates of stars,  
Their damp fuses slick with hunger. An eerie glow fills its reflection  
in the window pane as the  
feral fire shrieks and scurries and flits.  
It all ends with  
some mad-scrabbling  
after a forgotten grace, there on  
the fire-ringed floor.

As if by some unfathomable law,  
tomorrow the adjuster will come

putting long finger to glasses, hacking and coughing  
as he stands there amid the smoldering wreck;  
Somewhere a mouse without a tail  
winks and the mystery of chaos pulls  
the ragged fire of whiskey  
from my breath.

How many strikes, I wonder,  
until  
the final match  
sings?

This was a poem inspired by Billy Collins' poem "The Country" in which Collins imagines a mouse who steals a match and catches his friend's cottage on fire. A ridiculous, perhaps impossible notion, but one that Collins seems to intimate mirrors the magic and impossibility of the creative act. Despite the humour of Collins' poem he also imagines the mouse being transformed somehow by this wondrous act: "now a fire-starter, now a torchbearer/in a forgotten ritual, little brown druid/illuminating some ancient night" (2013, p. 3). The dichotomy in Collins' poem between his friend who worries about the mice burning down her cottage and the magical act of the "little brown druid" in my mind captured the strangeness of engaging in creative work in the university. As a novice academic I often feel that we ourselves have an impulse to control this fire, to contain it and to restore order lest the creative impulse transforms ourselves and our institution beyond recognition. This is why perhaps I imagined the adjuster coming to survey the destruction of the metaphorical warehouse that is some sort of repository of all things magical and dangerously wild.

I guess I am also saying that we don't know who we are until we write it out. This is a poem about judging oneself through the eyes of the other, in this case an "Other" that appears to be subsumed by the academic persona. Perhaps this is one reason why poetry is a way of working through these fears. The poem itself defies this being fixed or firmly allocated to a single space. Once you begin to put those images and events in order, you change and the things themselves change. This is what is so strange and wonderful about it all. There is a me, an I, somewhere, that resists those terms and that this is a deep desire that somehow draws me or propels me in different directions. In this sense, creative writing, especially poetry, is sort of an invitation or a call to step outside the boundaries of those sight lines that would fix us all into greyscale and bleak horizons. I know people like Butler (1997) have written about this, but it makes sense to me in terms of being associated with what we know in the everyday and that writers call "voice". If I perform sort of a Cartesian exercise and try to see what I know with certainty, I can always doubt the subject but I find it much harder to doubt the notion of voice. This is a notion that is more embodied, more visceral, more attuned to the imagination and desire and that bridges the worlds of formal and creative writing. We are known and know as a voice.

So theoretically and poetically I guess I can say that I think of myself as a voice, one that I cannot define all too easily but that can seem recognizable and familiar to myself as well as others. Until the academic in me becomes uneasy at laying a claim to something that seems to be uneasy at the notion of looking for centers, foundations, first causes. Poetic me enjoys this paradox and how it feels in the body and how it demands metaphors, cadences, images and feelings. This is part of the paradox of being alive and being human. I need to stop before the screeching gulls in my skeptical mind pitch down and begin to tear holes in my new garment. The judge is always the mortal enemy of the poet. Strangely, I live with them both and I owe

them both a debt that forms my desire, my thinking and perhaps ultimately, my sense of writing self. Now all I have to do is edit out the seams in the edifice, to maintain the illusion. Or can I resist the impulse? In the words of Carl Leggo (2010), “life is abundant, and life writing is a way of focusing on some particulars of that abundance in order to recognize some of the possibilities of meaning that lie always in the seemingly tangled messiness of lived experiences” (p. 68).

### **Afterthoughts: Scribbling New Horizon Lines**

Creating the scribble self-portraits and writing the self-portrait poems was very much a collaborative process. The accompanying dialogue and reading helped us to dig through layer after layer of sedimented conceptions of writing identity and to create new conceptions of the academic self (Hancheruk, McBride & Witczak, 2016). Did we see ourselves in what we had created? Did we recognize each other? What might we find once we let go of the need for composure and control? Since none of us were experienced visual artists the process of composing portraits made us reflect upon the difficulty of neatly trimming off aesthetic experience from the fear of being judged. This was a powerful reminder of our students’ positioning when we ask them to “be creative” within the constraints created by an institutional currency of marks and course credit that can make it so difficult to create a sense of connection, joy and mindfulness about the creative act (Bower & Thomas, 2013; Kohn, 1993). As Leggo (2010) has cautioned, “life writing is full of danger and promise. Indeed, the danger and promise are one” (p. 83).

The shadow is more than a negative mirror image of the self. In an Academy where one is never quite good enough, it also represents this feeling of lack, of loneliness or of being centered on a persona that is presented as being complete, entire and contented but which all too often is a mask for the face behind it. Our self-portraits and poetry explored this experience of loneliness within a space where paradoxically we are always on display and always under the gaze of the assessor and the judge (Bower & Thomas, 2013; Kohn, 1993; Jamieson, 2016). Similarly, resisting dominant discourses in Academy might require us to embrace the thought of the gap between unattainable ideal and the human real. That gap is not a matter of being less than; it is a space like the cracks in sidewalks where somehow life springs up in defiance. It is a space where seeding, pollination and flourishing can occur. Rather than weeding out those aspects of ourselves, exploring the complex interplay of image and shadow, persona and fractured self can help to create a more humane, creative and imaginative space for learning and sharing to take place. Is it no wonder then, that in the strange half-light cast by fluttering shadows the most beautiful things sometimes grow.

The interplay between image and poem help us to see how language became “not so much a stock of materials as a horizon, which implies both a boundary and a perspective...the comforting area of an ordered space” (Barthes, 1968, p. 9). This is also why we were drawn to the notion of “scribbling”, of claiming identity by blurring lines and inflecting conventions. Many times images and themes cross-pollinated the works of each other, themes of judgment, self-discipline and a yearning for freedom or a more creative and self-expressive way of writing and expression formed a unifying thread across our collective pieces. We also recognized that openness and self-disclosure can be a form of ritual, a mask even, if it is not accompanied by real risk and real engagement with the others that constitute our intersubjectivity. To return to Hirsch (1997) again, “the masks are protective screens and disguises, hiding the individual faces and expressions inscribing them into a conventional narrative” (p. 98).

We want to claim that creative writing selves are more concerned with entering into as wide a range and variety of experiences as possible. And the object of its attention is perhaps broad since it is the meaning of meaning. This is the type of writing self that we want to claim

for ourselves, one that is subversive and aims to subvert itself—one that tends to find pleasure, insight and fulfilment in the pursuit of metaphorical metamorphosis. This is a more pragmatic and rational way of answering the question, what is the purpose of all of this, one that perhaps demonstrates how art can at once allow us to move beyond both the professional persona and the staid conventions and empty gestures of a “theoretical me” that does not really risk or authentically encounter the other within the classroom. In the words of Hancheruk, McBride and Witczak (2016), “within that in-between space, between what is obvious and what might be learned, our evolving identities incubate” (p. 287).

Even though we can step into our theory-voice and we can speak in a creative writerly voice, we are not really sure who is doing the stepping. Desire must draw something—or someone—into the absence. But both of these are different from the everyday self and the academic self. Right now we desire a “writerly-me” that is closer to the everyday, to the pulse and ebb and flow of daily experience. This is hard for us and it makes us vulnerable because it requires admitting feeling conflicted or even acknowledging contradiction or doubt. It does however, lead to better creative writing because it creates a space that invites others in, a clearing in the wild maybe, where we can hold each thing up to the light and turn it over in our hands. A place where we can build a language to speak of it and to remember more fully. All of these things enrich our experience and our capacity to live with, and love, each other. At least that is the desire, the hope.

All of these interactions also helped to create a sense of hope that we had found a home of sorts in a shared space and also caught a glimpse of a wider community where such ways of thinking and sharing were valued. Rather than repressing our doubts we learned that vulnerability and shadow were often catalysts for becoming strong and feeling connected on a much deeper and more intimate level. We had all explored these ideas on a theoretical level, but the act of artistic creation somehow made these ideas more tangible and real. Strangely the imaginative became tangibly transformative as it worked its way into the hectic daily routines of all of our lives. In this way too we began to see how being self-disciplined could be a trap of one’s own making. Much more rewarding was to climb the tree without a ladder, never knowing what one would finally see at the very top. Sometimes it was just a glimpse of the bluest sky that made the world sing with possibility and joy that echoed in the body like a boat in the middle of a boundless ocean, the sun making the ocean seem like a window into the infinite rather than an obstacle that needed to be crossed. Could our careers be like that, we wondered? At times this was how it seemed.

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