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# Beyond words: Academic writing identities and imaginative (artistic) selves

## ABSTRACT

*Exploring the de/construction of our imaginative (artistic) selves in relation to our academic writing, we foreground the notion that imaginative processes are part of the assembly of self/selves even as they are part of that de/construction. These imaginative selves are important for our professional identities and the daily negotiations we undertake in the context of institutional norms and expectations. Significant for our outward identities, these imaginative selves allow us to speak from different positions, possibly ones that resist conformity and compliance and actively contribute towards a personally ethical academic identity. Through narratives, images and a post-structural research lens, we explore our 'hidden' imaginative (artistic) selves in relation to our academic (writing) selves. Two themes emerged from the analysis of our narratives: (1) Into the unknown; and (2) Finding ourselves. We suggest that engagement with artistic, expressive and aesthetic activities in our personal time are important for processing – through metaphor and sensory means – our understanding of our professional identities, particularly, our writing selves. These incursions into our subjectivities reveal incongruity and ambiguity but also provide a sense of renaissance and regeneration.*

## KEYWORDS

artistic subjectivities  
academic writing  
academic identities  
professional identities  
imaginative practices  
public-private  
subjectivities

1. 'Gluebook' is a popular term found on Facebook and YouTube for journal-bound collages.

## INTRODUCTION

As academics interested in arts-based research, we are aware of our constant negotiation of identities including home-identities, teaching identities, writing identities, professional/student identities as well as our artistic identities. Cecile and Heather primarily identify with professional identities and have kept their imaginative (artistic) identities separate from their academic lives. Haley has kept her artistic identity separate from her previous work as a therapist, but is now beginning to consolidate these identities in her doctoral work. The systemic conditions in which we work provide strong pressures to produce a competitive neo-liberal self that focuses on publishing output and one that often becomes appropriated by others. Being reflexive about the construction and re-construction of selves, particularly our hidden and imaginative selves, we have come to realize is an important part of a personal ethical practice. Through reflective practice, we can begin to acknowledge the socialization processes we experience day-to-day, but rarely notice in the busyness to perform. Reflexivity and deepening self-knowledge contribute to a critical renegotiation of further reconstructions of self (Lyle 2013). In these processes of self-inquiry, we question how institutional demands often shape our practices unknowingly and run counter to our personal values and imaginative selves. Reflective inquiry provides us with the space to scrutinize ourselves and to see ourselves with new eyes. Yet we also recognize the impossibility of investigating the self since the negotiation of selves is always fleeting, impartial, temporal and inevitably always under construction (Davies et al. 2004).

We explore the de/construction of our imaginative (artistic) selves in relation to our identities as academics and writers. We foreground the notion that imaginative and creative processes can be part of the assembly of self/selves, while the same processes can simultaneously de/construct the self (Metta 2011). We believe these imaginative (artistic) selves are important for our professional identities and the daily negotiations we undertake in the context of institutional norms and expectations. These imaginative (artistic) selves are important for our outward identities because they allow us to speak from different positions, possibly ones that resist conformity and compliance. They actively contribute towards an ethical and congruent academic identity, one where we align our performances with our values. Through narratives, images and a post-structural research lens (Koro-Ljungberg 2016), we explore our 'hidden' imaginative (artistic) practices, such as the creation of a gluebook,<sup>1</sup> assembling and collecting, and painting memories of places – in relation to our writing selves. We suggest the de/construction of our imaginative (artistic) selves is important for understanding how we engage in our academic writing and our writing selves.

## ACADEMIC, WRITING AND ARTISTIC SUBJECTIVITIES

As academics, we enact our identities daily. Butler (1997) shows that we perform our identities through repeated acts using categories that are in many ways prior and external to us. Through repeated acts, we create a sense of individual professional identity. In the neo-liberal university, overtly we measure our successes through papers published, grants awarded, classes taught and other activities as active academic citizens. Rationally, we list these outward measures for review and we engage in the social construction of the 'ideal' perfect academic (Lund 2018). Neo-liberal universities, with managerialist practices and techniques of efficiency, quality, effectiveness and the focus

on outputs also reinforce the continual measurement of individuals (Hartman and Darab 2012; Teelken 2011). Measurement and reporting structures mean that justifying and explaining efficiency or non-efficiency becomes a key part of daily work. We present ourselves, boastfully, in our texts compiled for grant applications, promotion, in our e-mail signatures, and in our CVs (Lund 2018). Increasingly we are obsessed with the management of our image and brand (Alvesson 2013; Webb 2018). There is, however, a cost in engaging in these competitive practices. Our work, teaching and research, can seem less important than our standing in relation to others. Our writing can become more disembodied, more voiceless and less human (Badley 2017). Furthermore, our imaginative (artistic) selves can become disconnected as words/texts are privileged in academic cultures.

Our academic subjectivities are discursively constituted over a long period of time and this longitudinal nature means they become normalized and invisible. The doctoral years are crucial training grounds for a process of becoming autonomous and competitive academics (Brooks et al. 2018; Gannon et al. 2018). This identity, of a legitimate academic, is negotiated and lived in many ways as individuals respond to contextual challenges sometimes with compliance – and sometimes with resistance. For Butler (1997) and Foucault ([1978] 1990), seeking recognition 'is an act of subjectification, in which the individual subject is pressed toward the norm, even while being recognized in their specificity and difference' (Davies et al. 2013: 681). Through a necessary subjection to the social categories one takes up, whether one chooses them or not, conditions are created for autonomous individuality. Power rests in the way the categories are taken up and how they are shaped in relation to the self. The consequence, for Foucault and Butler, is 'an autonomous, repressed subject – one who is subjected but longs to escape the terms of subjection' (Davies et al. 2013: 681).

This conceptualization of the academic subject resonates with us in the context of current neo-liberal discourses. A punishing intensification of work has become the norm in academia (Gill 2009) and some common features of academic contexts are job insecurity, uncertainty and competition: 'feeling academic means feeling nervous, feeling exhausted, feeling inadequate, and operating in a competitive and individualistic milieu' (Gannon et al. 2018: 263). 'Belonging' in the university is contingent on being Butler and Foucault's academic subject, one who submits in order to become a master of autonomy (Davies et al. 2006).

Yet, we believe, like Taylor and Lahad (2018: 4), 'there is work to be done in stretching these processes, beyond the individual uptake of academic space, self-telling, or self-recognition'. As a way of speaking-back, stepping away from the competition, the success narratives and unsettling the story, we focus on our personal imaginative (artistic) spaces, which sometimes collide with our academic subjectivities. Through this process, we spend time looking inside of ourselves- into the world of sensation and pre-verbal metaphor – as opposed to focusing solely on the external appraised self. In doing so, we move towards a Deleuzian conception of subjectivity as one that is emergent from multiple entangled subjectivities where the past and the present coexist simultaneously (Davies et al. 2013). This is the notion of becoming: 'an ongoing entanglement of mutual agencies through which life/art/being is generated in each present moment' (Davies et al. 2013: 682). Connecting private-public subjectivities 'has always been a part of feminist knowledge production' (Taylor and Lahad 2018: 4) and in this reflexive space, which we acknowledge is only rented, tenuously,

at best, we move 'away from a first-person scholarly narrator who is self-referential but unavailable to criticism or revision' (Adams and Holman Jones 2011: 110) and towards a source of *transgressive knowledge*. Like Brooks et al., 'we transgress by investing in knowledge projects that do not limit what we can know or what is knowable' (2018: 132). In this way, we resist the enticement to 'become the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism' (Brooks et al. 2018: 133). Of course, we acknowledge that we are always entangled in investing in the hierarchies and binaries we strive to resist.

Our writing identities are profoundly shaped by daily performances of writing and publishing. Yet, we join the shift away from perceptions of writing as being a predominantly individual logical and cognitive exercise to one where writing is a range of practices that involve meaning-making in the creation of texts responding to a set of socially situated contexts. We acknowledge that our writing in this context is directly linked to discursive practices. For example, dominant ideas of writing as 'successful' and 'objective/scientific' create norms pitted against other categories such as 'failure' and 'subjective/personal'. In a marketized university system, we are pulled in confusing and contradictory directions as personal and professional subjectivities entangle (Wisker 2016). Legitimizing our writing and becoming a legitimate academic through publishing becomes a space of importance even though it may clash with our personal values of deep thinking and slow scholarship. Producing writing and being seen as productive is one of the strategies that women, particularly, take to guard against 'censure by the neoliberal university' (Burton 2018: 129).

Personal writing agendas spar with the goals of the institution, even though at times these may align. As we write and publish, we cultivate and constitute our writing subjectivities. Writing is work-time and we frequently separate our academic work-time from leisure-time, or the realm of 'trivial', 'fragmentary' and 'superficial' leisure activities that are entirely separate from 'serious' work. Nevertheless, we have come to realize how important these creative down-time and home-based activities are and how connected they are to our professional spaces and identities. We acknowledge that our leisure or down-time is where the construction and re-construction of selves also takes place (Christensen 2011).

## **EXPLORING IMAGINATIVE SELVES THROUGH LEISURE-TIME ACTIVITIES**

For us, leisure may involve temporarily escaping from the stresses of the work day, but it also means engaging in a creative and non-evaluative process that generates new ideas and identities (Moddle 2017). These activities are done for pleasure, are outside of the evaluative and critical gazes of others, and are not created for compensation. We engage in them to meet an internal need that compels us to explore and create despite time constraints and external requirements. By engaging in these comfortable, leisurely and pleasurable process-oriented activities, we begin to see our professional selves in a new light filtered by creativity. As women who generate domestic arts, we are aware that leisure art/crafts are often seen as frivolous and unnecessary (McLeod et al. 2018: 54). We question why we define these activities as leisure activities, as opposed to fine art. A gluebook created by Cecile could be perceived as a fine arts collage linked to a turning point as in the Cubist style artistic practice of Braque and Picasso (Greenberg 1961). Heather's found objects process was used by Marcel Duchamp to redefine modern art through his infamous *Fountain* sculpture of a signed urinal turned upside-down (Sejten

2016). Haley's painting is often regarded as a fine art. Wrapping our creative processes within the framework of a 'leisure activity' may limit and discount the meaningfulness of these activities in our lives. Yet, we feel it important to acknowledge these domestic, after-work, non-commercial activities and the role they play in our lives. These self-soothing, identity-constructing and dialectic leisure processes are ones we often hide from the critical academic gaze. Like Christensen (2011), we believe these activities, especially for women, are neither trivial or neutral, as they have been regarded historically.

## **METHODS OF INQUIRY**

Our collaboration is the result of shared artistic and academic interests. Heather and Cecile are university educators and Haley is a doctoral student. Our process was to engage in individual and collective reflexivity through autobiographical reflection including the integration of imaginative-related pursuits, specifically, collage/gluebooks, collecting/assembling and memory painting. These explorations were a way of understanding what we perform publicly and a way of revealing the parts of ourselves we often do not interrogate or explore. Our main aim was to acknowledge our complex social positionings and to examine our multiple identities that could possibly subvert dominant discourses (Choi 2015) or at least surface them. We recognize there are deep tensions in the practice of reflexivity (Lather 1993). How can we be the gazer and the object being gazed upon at the same time? In attempting reflexivity, we create conditions that are shifting, contradictory and fragile, where the self is, but is not, fiction (Davies et al. 2004). Rather than establishing truths, we attempted to look closely at 'spaces of constructed visibility' (Lather 1993: 675) within and across our autobiographical reflections.

Our data consisted of narratives. We each constructed a written personal narrative describing an emotionally significant event, or series of events, in which we engaged in imaginative (artistic) practices we felt were relevant to our writing. The narratives, though short, provide detailed glimpses of enacting identities and lived experiences. We used the narratives to hook and hold onto parts of ourselves that are sometimes intangible so we could subject ourselves and our stories to scrutiny. After completing the narratives, we read them individually and collectively several times. Using the *aesthetic intersubjective paradigm* (Chilton et al. 2015), we analysed the narratives. Through dialogue with one another, we examined each other's narratives looking for what we could not see in our own. Haley's role as an art therapist was invaluable. She identified two possible themes and together we discussed the validity of the underlying and pre-conscious intentions of these themes. We privileged inquiry, ambiguity and fluidity rather than looking for rigidity or solidity in our analytical process (Eisner 2008). Once the analysis was complete we decided to include images. These images were not part of the analysis and were included only because they add subtle but meaningful non-verbal aspects of our narratives.

## **CECILE'S NARRATIVE: GLUE, IMAGES AND AESTHETIC ECSTASY**

Being constantly reviewed and assessed is part of the job, but the outcome of assessment, despite one's achievements, is often a felt sense of deficit – and a feeling that somehow one has not quite measured up, and produced enough. The publishing arena, with the often-uncompromising eyes of reviewers, can be brutal on a writer's sense of self and one's relationship with writing.

2. For more on 'found' poems see: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/found-poem-poetic-form>.

Over the past years, I have experienced some extremely hypercritical reviews. While acknowledging that certain reviewers are helpful, it is equally true that others are not. Over time, the nit-picking and fault-finding can be wearying. The soul – the creative spirit – that carries my writing has become battered and bruised, particularly during the pre-tenure years. As a result, writing has increasingly become a chore, one that I am now tempted to avoid.

In my alone-time, I find myself actively resisting evaluation and judgement. Crafts provide me with an outlet to counter the stresses of work and the forces pushing me to continually measure myself. I like the mess of altered books, art journals and mixed media. One particularly busy and taxing semester, too exhausted to do anything that required much imagination or planning, but needing an aesthetic fix of vibrant colours and stimulating forms, I found myself gluing magazine pictures into a journal. Focusing purely on colours and images, this 'gluebook' became a source of renewal and satisfaction. The process of putting together the gluebook was impulsive and intuitive. Watching TV with my family, I flipped through a pile of old magazines. Anything that caught my eye was cut out and kept. When I had enough, I glued them onto a page in my book. There was no planning, no composing and no structure. I was guided by a love of colours and the appeal of certain images. I completed one to two pages every evening.

With only ten pages left in the book, I reached a point where I no longer needed to glue images. Whatever process needed to happen, had happened. Later, almost instinctively, I added 'found' poems to some of the pages with images. The found poems<sup>2</sup> were words cut out of magazines and books collected and arranged to form a poem that had meaning for me in relation to the images. The words and sentences were quite randomly chosen, but they often came together with a surprising synchronicity.



*Figure 1: Cecile Badenhorst, Gluebook and Found-Poems, 2017. Collage. Courtesy of author.*



Looking back through the pages, I see how this process was a retreat, an oasis and a sanctuary from the push and pull demands of my daily life in academia. In making gluebooks, I felt my worn spirit begin to rise again. My relationship to my battered writer-self began to shift. Something in this process of juxtaposing colour and image fed my imagination, and awakened the poetic writer allowing her to live again. One of the found poems in my gluebook is particularly apt: 'Haven from/the siren world/marked the beginning'.

I have subsequently learned that collage – the art practice of cutting and gluing paper to a substrate – is a popular technique for exploring identity and subjectivity (Chilton and Scotti 2014). The art materials are accessible and inexpensive and few technical skills are needed. Indeed, collage reduces the emphasis on the need for individual 'talent' that is often associated with other art practices. Collage tends to bring together disparate elements, making the ordinary into something extra-ordinary: 'collage fragments space and repurposes objects to contextualize multiple realities' (Gerstenblatt 2013: 295). Surprising meanings emerge and the collage becomes a visual poem: 'a simple collage of magazine photos may at the same time evoke inexpressible feeling states that "seep" through the fissures and layers, tugging at what lies below, behind or beyond the choice and arrangement of picture: an "elsewhere"' (Davis 2008: 246).

### **HEATHER'S NARRATIVE: FINDING: OBJECTS, STORIES, HOME AND WRITING**

I sometimes leave my academic responsibilities to sift through junk. When words begin to feel like debris pushed around in arbitrary piles, I am refreshed by searching for the unfamiliar. Found objects intrigue me. The trawling can be especially rich in Victoria because it is the most temperate city in Canada and many people choose to retire here. They bring treasured items acquired during long lives and when they pass away, certain things are donated to charity thrift stores, while others are left with signs saying 'Free' at the sidewalk's edge. Since my student days when I researched stories about my house (McLeod 2009), the process of finding objects and the objects have afforded me aesthetic pleasure. I am rejuvenated by contemplating them as they surround me in both my temporary and permanent homes.

Sorting through shabby fragments, I feel a responsibility of care. I might want to stage a rescue. A tarnished brass cup needs polish. A small picture frame with filthy glass shows a black-and-white print of an English stately home. Yet underneath the print hides a vintage photograph, a sepia-toned landscape of Asian stone temples perched at water's edge. Without my protection would anyone recognize this storied object? Tiny doodads once part of something else intrigue me. As I scabble through dusty bins in a Salvation Army store, or the tidy shelves of household items at a United Church weekly sale, the advice of William Morris echoes, 'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful' ([1880] 1882: n.pag.). Some days a journey will be just to look at articles different from the day-to-day. Searching alone, I focus amidst the chaos. Occasionally, remnants call out to become something new, for example, with scraps of clean vintage curtain fabric and basic hand-sewing I create a throw pillow.

The notion of *finding* is also important to my academic writing. Using an approach of writing as inquiry (Richardson 1990, 1995; St. Pierre 1997, 2007), allows me to discover my arguments and the shape of a piece through the process of writing. Prowling through readings and rich discussions with



*Figure 2: Heather McLeod, Staging a Rescue, 2018. Found objects. Courtesy of author.*

colleagues encourages me to jot down evocative or provocative phrases. The phrases become word clusters, which through editing, become coherent and polished sentences, paragraphs and ultimately papers. Just as my found objects almost always require work on my part to help them shine, the goal of my extensive editing is to pare away non-essential clutter to produce useful and beautiful prose.

### **HALEY'S NARRATIVE: REMEMBERING IDENTITIES WITH BRUSH STROKES**

In a gesture typical for a millennial, my index finger sweeps across my iPhone screen. I scroll through thousands of saved images charting my life and travels across Botswana, Alaska, Thailand, Mongolia, Russia and Canada to land upon a photo. Alighting on a salient and profound memory, I click the 'heart' icon to narrow down the images I will later paint. When, as a second-year Ph.D. student, I need respite from my wandering mind and the self-imposed pressures to achieve, I plan my paintings and quickly prime my canvases. Transitioning from working as an art therapist in hospitals and internationally, I am generating and consolidating a new identity as an academic. While embracing this identity, I am aware of the challenges ahead with less job security in the field and increased competition within our current neo-liberal paradigm (Caretta et al. 2018).

Motivation to paint images often arise from a sudden need to self-regulate and relax when I feel stressed. Among other authors, Kaimal et al. (2016) found that art-making lowered cortisol levels, while Lawson et al. (2012) found that brief art-making improved concentration and reduced sluggishness for a wait-list control group. Since childhood, I have integrated





*Figure 3: Haley Toll, Painting of the Mongolian Steppe, 2017. Oil, acrylic and pen on aluminium panel, paper and canvas. 12×6 inches. Courtesy of author.*

both drawing and painting practices into my life as a coping mechanism, while also asserting, discovering and exploring my identity through my choice of subject matter. As I begin to paint pictures of my past experiences—a picture of the Altai mountains from the window of a propeller airplane, or the image of a guide smoking with his horses in the Mongolian steppe (Figure 3), I remember the brew of feelings in that moment. As I study the colours and the ways that the tones splay across shape and form (which depicts the minute details of the image), I am transported back to these moments of awe and excitement. Through the focused study, I battle against how time inevitably erases memories and the precise way I felt in that moment.

Half-finished paintings are strung across the walls and surface areas of my small room in St. John's, Canada, reminding me that life extends beyond each semester's final assignments. I work on paintings between papers to take a break from 'being in my head'. The painted images remind me my rich life experiences have led me to this particular moment of silence – in my quiet space, as I type the next assignment and gather new research on soundless evenings. These acts of remembering, painting and viewing transformative moments through the images that surround me, give me confidence to persevere beyond the messy process of academic writing, submitting content for evaluation, and building my academic career.

### **RECONNECTING: IMAGINATIVE (ARTISTIC) AND ACADEMIC WRITING SELVES**

Our narratives describe occasions when we have engaged in intuitive, aesthetic, creative and visual/tactile practices that enabled us to connect with feelings, senses, memories and our imagination. While the narratives are individual, we identify similarities across our experiences. These practices – non-verbal

by nature – create spaces that connect the mind, imagination, emotions and body in ways that we have yet to understand (Czamanski-Cohen and Weihs 2016; Nisbett and Wilson 1977). The tactile, sensory experience of creating, touching and holding objects does much to contribute to a tacit knowledge of self, to respond to the structures and pressures that surround us; it is a way of knowing (Allen 1995). Our processes have not been totally conscious or deliberate and we have relied upon intuition and instinct to guide us. We relate to Chilton et al.'s *aesthetic intersubjective paradigm*, where 'intersubjective realities [are] created and co-constructed through aesthetic – sensory and imaginal – knowledge, the investigation of which results in understanding multiple dimensions of human experience' (2015: 3).

Relaxing into these ways of knowing, value arises. Two themes that emerged from our narratives are worth exploring further: *Into the unknown* and *Finding ourselves*.

## INTO THE UNKNOWN

Underlying our narratives is a tendency to embrace the unknown in our leisure activities. Heather illustrates this when she notes: 'A small picture frame with filthy glass shows a black-and-white print of an English stately home. Yet underneath the print hides a vintage photograph, a sepia-toned landscape of Asian stone temples perched at water's edge'. Looking with new eyes, and following spontaneity derived from instinct and emotions, can present deeper and unexpected insights and collectively create meaning through personal metaphor. There is potential for discomfort, yet, we describe our experiences as relaxing and motivating. By jumping into the unknown, we open ourselves to transitional and transformative processes. In art therapy, transitional spaces are created through art-making and meaning-making in safe relationships (Chilton et al. 2015). In our narratives, we bridge external aesthetic experiences to internal worlds through what Bresler (2018: 651) calls 'intensified perception', where seemingly ordinary objects, patterns, images and colours take on a transitional (Winnicott 1971) and transformative existence through our imagination and connections. Open curiosity and awe emerge in the 'here-and-now' (Yalom 2002: 52) moment generated from the process of seeking, finding and creating. In mindfulness and meditation practices (Kabat-Zinn 2003) and existential psychology (Yalom 2002), the here-and-now concept represents being fully present and aware in the current moment, something we often do not experience during our work-time. This non-judgemental and grounding awareness and presence in the here-and-now is a healthy practice, as compared to the intense preoccupation with the future and uncertainty connected with anxious emotions and thoughts (Grupe and Nitschke 2013), and depression that is linked to continuous rumination about the past (Kashdan 2010). Cecile's artmaking process exemplifies a drifting towards the here-and-now when she states, 'There was no planning, no composing, and no structure. I was guided by a love of colours and the appeal of certain images'.

Bresler notes that the major challenge to research inquiry 'is our human predilection for security, grasping for what we "know" rather than being guided by curiosity' (2018: 653). This happens in academic settings that emphasize sequentially accumulating knowledge and skills to perform research, writing and teaching tasks, which results in 'surface searching', often leading to surface findings (Bresler 2018: 653). During the here-and-now,

however, deep aesthetic intensified perception and embodied experiences occur, as when Heather's hand wipes away the dust from the antique framed photograph, Cecile immerses herself in colourful and patterned paper and poetry, and when Haley loses herself in anticipated painted memories. The sense of a subjective 'I' drifts away and leaves space for new possibilities to emerge with this de/construction of the imaginative (artistic) self. This can also be described as a creative flow-state (Csikszentmihalyi 1996). In this state, we create the conditions for non-attachment and non-judgement so necessary for our writing selves that are often constrained by the critical eye of academic review. It is here we find joy in creating – a joy that overflows into writing and feeds our writing selves.

## FINDING OURSELVES

Another connection between our narratives was the sense of *finding something*: Heather's found objects, discarded by others, Cecile's found images and words, Haley's found moments of memories. As Haley notes: 'I remember the brew of feelings in that moment. As I study the colours and the ways that the tones splay across shape and form, I am transported back to these moments of awe and excitement'. When analysing psychotherapy case studies, Camic et al. observed that 'objects seemed to act as a trigger that often took a person outside of their immediate focus and concern and made a wider world more available and accessible' (2011: 155). Objects link inner worlds of emotions to an external world, and ourselves to our inner selves with new eyes. Meaningful found objects, images and moments connect people to their unconscious emotions, desires, history and identities (Brooker 2010). Verbal and written language has its limitations to portray all experiences but imaginative (artistic) practices and aesthetic experiences provide additional avenues. Imaginative (artistic) processes can bridge the internal experiences of emotions, ideas and abstract concepts to the external concrete world, thus generating larger-picture thinking and personal understanding (Camic et al. 2011). Connecting linguistic experiences, sensory, kinaesthetic and metaphorical symbolic imagery enables individuals to engage in larger metacognitive processes (i.e. seeing multiple and contrasting ideas about a concept). Furthermore, engaging in imaginative (artistic) practices with an intention for openness and non-judgement can help people intertwine intuitive and tacit knowledge to bind together disparate ideas and 'ways of knowing' through symbolism and metaphor (Chilton and Scotti 2014: 166). Through these imaginative (artistic) practices we re-connect with our writing selves in ways we find difficult to articulate through verbal language. We find the writer-self in us.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

These incursions into our imaginative (artistic) activities reveal incongruity and ambiguity but also provide a sense of renaissance and regeneration as academics. For Haley, painting memories connected her to a confident writing self through resurfacing and remembering pleasurable formative life experiences. Heather noted how her process of finding, sorting and polishing objects mirrors her writing process. For Cecile, working on the gluebooks eased the self-criticism that seemed to grow exponentially with each review on her writing.

While we knew intuitively that our imaginative (artistic) activities impacted our writing selves, before this article, we did not know how or why. Describing our experiences of searching, finding and creating new objects and images has opened our eyes. Like ‘hunter-gatherers’ we comb through images, poetry, forgotten objects, old photographs and Instagram photos and re-create ourselves in the process. Sorting, selecting, cleaning, snipping, gluing, painting and stitching draw attention to the kinaesthetic and sensory experiences of handling and manipulating objects. They also draw attention to the necessary aesthetics and poetics of embodied creation – something that infuses our writing. Worn out by the ‘technologies of audit’ (Bansel et al. 2008: 673) and witnessing how writing has become removed from the body, we no longer use our hands to jot-down secret marginalia in library books or draw bold highlights on printed articles. Yet, using our hands provides an innocent pleasure that bridges the often-separated body-self and mind-self and re-connects us as ‘disembodied professionals’ (Badley 2017: 1). Using our hands moves us towards writing that is more alive, expressive and saturated with breath. It helps us to walk into writing, to fall – impervious to the 1000 cuts sustained by reviewers (and others) – and to walk again. It allows us to listen to our lives and to be awake, present and to ‘live deeply’ in our writing (Snowber 2016: 89).

Thus, individual and collective inquiry helps us recount ‘metaverbal stories through which individuals can re-visit, re-imagine and re-form identities, memories and beliefs while supported and witnessed by another’ (Chilton et al. 2015: 10). For Cecile, the gluebook was a one-time activity but she continues to engage in a variety of mixed media projects. For Heather, thrift store trawling, saving thrown-away items and assembling is an ongoing life-time commitment. For Haley, her painting practice is interwoven with her life and remains vital to helping her process information and continuously re-form her identity. Metaphorical and sensory-based knowledge is fluid and meanings can shift over time, yet, the dialectic process of reflecting on our creative processes and sharing them with one another deepens understandings (Chilton et al. 2015). The three of us continue to collaborate on writing about our imaginative selves not least because in talking to each other, we are witnessed. We recognize in each other the challenge to maintain a writing self that is imaginative and we know that our down-time activities can sustain this evolving writer-self.

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