Double Exposure
Postcards, self-portraits and autobiography as arts-based research practice

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Introduction

“You know,” he went on; “novels are the fruit of the human illusion that we can understand our fellow man. But what do we know about each other?”

“Nothing,” said Bibi….

“The only thing we can do,” said Banaka, “is to give an account of our own selves. Anything else is an abuse of power. Anything else is a lie.”

“True, how true!” Bibi agreed enthusiastically. “I don’t want to write a novel. That wasn’t what I meant. What I want to do is exactly what you’ve been saying: write about myself, an account of my life. And I won’t hide the fact I live an absolutely ordinary, everyday life and nothing special has ever happened to me…Because it’s what goes on in me, on the inside, that’s worth writing about, that people will want to read about.”

—Kundera 1982:89-90

In order to explore life-history research in the context of education I embarked on a process of creating art from autobiography that was both visual and written. This project involved a series of postcards as a public display entitled My Trip to the Ivory Tower: Postcards Sent to Myself. This project engages with both creating autobiographical narratives and self-portraits, what I term double exposure. The paper begins by exploring, in detail, the four postcards and reflects on the process of creating them. I first provide a description of the image and second, I focus on the writing on the back of each postcard. I relate the creation of these self-portraits to visual culture theory and theories of photographic representation. I explore the process and theory involved in writing autobiographical narratives as public art. From this, I ask: why is this series of postcards useful for thinking about education?

On Postcards

I decided to create this autobiographical narrative of being a graduate student as a series of
postcards to say something about my desires and my fears. To weave into this artwork both theory and reflections from my readings would create something more than an academic paper. My interest was to try to bring divergent ideas together in ways that took into account hopes, dreams, fears—and that allowed for playing with theory in a way that was not a linear progression from academic reading to the writing of an academic paper with a linearly developed argument. As W.J.T. Mitchell (1995:5) suggests, “all media is mixed media,” and it is the interaction between text and image that constitutes representation. Following from Mitchell who suggests that we “picture theory” instead of focusing on a “theory of pictures,” this project embarked on creating a textual and visual autography and was an experiment creating images to help think theory. The text and images read as co-constitutive and weaves in my understanding of theory and how as a graduate student I have experienced this theory.

I had been thinking about this project for almost a year, after I had written a section of my Master’s thesis as a letter to my Mom. I had decided to write that section as a letter remembering writing advice, grade school writing exercises that involved letter writing to pen pals, and having read how letter writing can be a teaching tool to improve literacy. After working on this section of my thesis I became fascinated with how, when and to whom we write letters and how much of this letter writing is about writing to those back home.

My fascination with writing back home did not stay focused on the letter. It was the postcard with its interesting weave of image and narrative and its form as an open yet closed letter that piqued my curiosity. Yoke-Sum Wong (2001:355) refers to the postcard as an “open post sheet” (offenes Postblatt). For Alan Bock and Sheri Klein (1996:23) “postcards are visual announcements: often images of historic landmarks, scenic-by-ways, waysides; panoramic, birds-eye, or close-up views of places or objects of desire; suggestions of intrigue or historical importance.” Block and Klein (1996) also suggest that the postcard is an effective way that students can embark on currere, that is, writing about their experience with education. By not only writing these postcards, but creating self-portraits as the images for the postcards, this project exposed through both images and narrative my experience as a graduate student in education.

The form of the postcard is provocative. Postcards are often seen as transitory; ephemeral, everyday items that are designed to be discarded after they are used. It is this everyday quality of the postcard “and the ritualistic performance many Westerners engage in when writing and sending postcards which makes them important objects of cultural analysis” (Waitt and Head 2002:320). If the ritual of writing a postcard is used as a way to write one’s experience with education, what is included in this message and how is the ritual changed?

The postcard with its “open” text is very different than the letter, or the journal and this intrigued me. Carson (1998:100) explores how writings are “sealed up in the folds of books,” and with it how writings are not only sealed, but conceal meaning since meaning is made through the collusion between the reader and the writer. Even though the postcards seem to be an open letter, I want to suggest that my project, with its openness of form, plays with both revealing and concealing.

Many well-known writers and artists have also turned their attention to the postcard (Derrida, Schor, Edwards, Geary, Block and Klein, and Cronin to name but a few). One such example is Derrida’s well-known work La Carte Postal: From Freud to Socrates (1983), according to Spivak (1984:29) “History is seen here [in La Carte Postal] as a series
of chain letters written on postcards.” The construction of meaning and with it what will count as meaningful or the making of history is recognized in this work as a range of complex social processes that rely on naturalized practices of representation.

History is not a series of discrete events that narrate themselves. “Carried in and through pictures and languages are social constructions, or naturalized, commonsense views or ‘ways of seeing’ the world that are more than the sum of the words or imagery” (Waitt and Head 2002:320). Postcards and the ritual of sending them home when one travels to new places constructs a view or “way of seeing” the new destination. As well, the writing back home serves to re-establish the meaning of home and one’s place at home even while absent.

As I began this project I started collecting old postcards. Some of these were postcards I had sent home while I was away traveling in Asia or working in remote regions of Canada. What all of these postcards had in common was that they told about being somewhere new, somewhere that was not home, yet these were everyday stories. Everyday stories, especially the stories of struggling to understand new situations and contradictions held within these situations, can be a site of education. These stories of lives can be found in many everyday writings—from diaries, writings on backs of photos in family albums, to letters or postcards home (Kuhn 1995:13).

These stories and the act of writing them are often only seen as a form of informal personal correspondence and as such excluded from being considered part of education or more particularly discounted as a curricular text or tool. Facilitating the connection of students’ everyday experiences with the curriculum is a way of privileging other stories, other perspectives, and other histories beyond the academic canon. Stanley (1995:25) suggests that some of the most popular stories of lives lived are those of famous, self-made men.

Other stories of lives lived were often not recorded due to an unease about literacy levels—these stories of everyday lives were boring—as well as a lack of time to engage in the construction of complete memoirs. Unpublished stories of everyday lives are often not considered as part of the knowledge making practice. The academic canon might draw on published memories of famous people, but the autobiography of students is often overlooked as a text to be included in the curriculum and is often not considered as the first place meaning is made. This project is interested in disrupting the stories we tell about our lives as graduate students and explore the contradictions experienced in the telling.

The Display

Entitled Postcards to Myself, this series of postcards was publicly displayed. The postcards are 4x7 inches, the size of a postcard you might buy, but these are mounted to foam board making them thicker than a regular post card. For this display, the four postcards were suspended from the ceiling, as if they were floating on air, which contributed to the metaphor of flight and flying. By having them suspended like this people could touch them and read the message on the back. There was only a small tag and one paragraph write-up that accompanied them. The write up was as follows:

My Trip to the Ivory Tower
My work on narratives and particularly autobiography has made me question how and what do I remember and how do I then write about these memories? This series of postcards explores the difficulty of writing the
self, writing to the self and remembering.
I had written privately about my encounters with the academic landscape.
For me, this trip through the academic landscape had let me meet head on
my anxieties about theory, research, expectations and knowing just how
much I don’t know. By experimenting with photographing myself as other
and writing to a muse, I begin a response to the question – how can I write
these memories into public spaces?
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Stories of Self

This project explores visual autobiography, that is, how the everyday can be imaged and
written as a postcard. I am interested in how working creatively with both images and short
narratives can weave together an autobiography of learning. This is a journey about
memories, stories, anxieties, reading/writing and pictures. The practice of creating
autobiographical tellings struggles with the theoretical aspects of life-history. It is by
“doing” life-history re-search that I meet again, and differently, the theory involved with
writing the self. In fact, I see my work as creating a theoretical understanding through

I see my autobiographical writing as a form of feminist confession, yet not an essentialist
claim to identity. My work is about confessing to my actions, my writings, and to what I
think are the motives behind the writings. This is a confession—a confession about the
performance and ritual of confessing and is also a response to the question—who do I write
these memories into public spaces? Memory is always partial, fragmentary and by bringing
one story of the past into focus, other stories are left untold. Versions of my past might be
told differently at different times depending on my present perspective. My role as author
privileges my interpretation and my selection of what is remembered and how it is
remembered. Once written and an image made only certain phenomena are defined as
meaningful (Weiler 1998:40). I have made choices about how to frame my experience,
choosing to record and reflect on what, at the time of writing, I found engaging. Stanley
(1995:25) eloquently weaves together the constructed nature of experience, and limits of
language needed to represent these experiences as she states:

In diaries, letters and photographs we present a version of ourselves that is
partial. It leaves out bits of us that we think the reader or viewer might not
want to know about, or that we might want to keep a secret. The account has
a specific frame. There may be no such simple unproblematic thing as the
‘real truth about me’ in a journal, letter or picture, just endless interesting
versions of ourselves, different not only each moment but in each letter,
journal page, poem or photograph.
The view of the past depends on the perspective of the present for its interpretation. This
fragmentary nature of memory narration is an important aspect of autobiography. For
Lambek and Antze (1996:xiii), “…memory begins when experience itself is definitively
past. The ground between the spectator and the object of her gaze begins to lengthen, the
connections between the two grow uncertain.”

I align my engagement with autobiographical narration with how bell hooks in her
autobiographical book, Bone Black (1996) describes continually re-visiting, re-visioning
and re-negotiating the past as part of knowing the present, and as part of creating a process of one’s own sense making. Autobiography, or the process of making sense from experience is an integral part of identity construction and involves the continually reweaving of personal and public history. As Kuhn (1995:4) states:

Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between ‘public’ historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and ‘personal’ memory.

Autobiographies are joint tellings created by listener and teller (Borland 1998:73; Skultans 1998:13; Lambek and Antze 1996:xix). The author/artist and the audience co-create meaning from the art of autobiography. As Anne Carson (1998:108) suggests writing is seductive, and the relationship between reader and writer is like symbolic intercourse whereby two halves are brought together to make a whole, a collusion of meaning making. However, the meaning made from autobiography can be prescriptive. Jago (1996) argues that stories are constraining since they set out “norms” that in turn render other stories as abnormal.

Although we constitute our experience through narration, stories can be constraining…As vehicles for social control, these canonical or received stories provide a cultural frame through which we construe our lived experience. For example, in Western culture, the canonical family story outlines the loving and secure presence of a mother, father, and their biological children. Growing up in Western culture, our experiences as family members are interpreted in relation to this narrative frame, and when a family does not fit the canonical model, words like abnormal or dysfunctional are often applied.

Jago (1996) focus is on the stories we tell about families, but all stories can be constraining and this project is interested in disrupting the stories we tell about our lives as graduate students.

The visual and narrative artwork of this postcard series creates multiple layers of autobiography. The self-portraits provide one autobiographical narrative and the autobiographical writing on the back of the postcard provides another. These layers offer a complex woven story of the self, where a plot and also the beginning, middle, and end of the story are ambiguous. The non-linear autobiographical narratives and distorted self-portraits as postcard images open out into multiple readings where there are many ways to make meaning from this story.

On My Trip of Feather and Flight

These narratives work as a series moving from the idea of a single feather, to the search for wings and finally to the creation of my own wings from finding feathers. The images develop this metaphor as it is carried through the narratives. I used the theme of flight—flying, wings, travel, and the ghost-like muse of Amelia Earhart to link together my experience with graduate education with my childhood desire to be a pilot, my fear of heights and flying in planes. By using the metaphor of flight to represent my experience with the quest for knowledge, I wanted to explore the complexity of language and the use of metaphor.
Carson (1998:50) describes how written words have edges; there is an individuality of words, and edges to their meaning: “In language there are only differences” (Carson 1998:51). However, it is through the imaginative nature of metaphor that differences and sameness are positioned together. Carson goes on to explain how, with metaphor, the imagination brings together two different things and it is the realization of their differences and similarities at the same time that is the delight of metaphor. How might metaphors be used in memory work by and of the self?

All of the postcards have a similar structure with a message section, postmarked stamps and the same address. The postcards begin with Dear Amelia, which is then followed by the news of my “travels” and end with a closing salutation. Amelia refers to Amelia Earhart, the first female pilot who flew the Atlantic in 1937 and whose plane was lost over the Bermuda Triangle. I decided she would be the muse to whom I would write these postcards. The first three cards end with suggesting I will be writing more soon and the fourth postcard ends with “Bye for now.” Even though the postcards were never sent they all include stamps and are postmarked. Postcard 1 has a stamp from the US, postcard 2 has a stamp from China and both postcard 3 and 4 have stamps from Canada. All have the same address: Amelia, Clouds or Waves, Sky or Sea, S0S 9I1.

In the first postcard I used the image of a feather floating. The image is in sepia tones and is a lone feather on its side. It is an image that seems simple, but the feather is the main component of a bird’s wing used for fight. The feather is also a writing quill and a symbol for writing that is main component for the flight of an academic.

For the back of postcard 1, I addressed the postcard to Amelia, and began by suggesting that the card reminded me of her and our mutual dream “to fly.”

I do not specify what type of flight, just that we both have a dream to fly. I am suggesting
here that my dream to fly is to have creative ideas that take flight—that take me to new places of understanding. I go on to talk about a here that is different. I use the line from a Joni Mitchell song “the strange pillows of my wonder lust” to suggest that I am away from the comfort of a home where I can take refuge in the familiar. In the narrative I play with the idea that the authors, the famous academics, such as Marx, that I am reading are actually having conversations with me. I suggest in the narrative that it is not only the theorists who are speaking to me, but many others. I use the idea from my readings in feminist epistemology of listening responsibly to the Other.

![Message on Postcard 1](image)

The postcards are one of the ways that some of my personal writings are “put into circulation” (the etymology of the word published/public). As a graduate student, I am now faced with having to publish academic papers, present at conferences, and make my work public. The form of the postcards was one way that I explored the fear of making my writing public. I also wrote these postcards with an audience in mind by using a muse to focus this writing and to make the writing process more intimate. However I still knew that this project was public art and that many others would be reading and judging these images and narratives. A muse is described in the Oxford Dictionary as “one of nine sister-goddesses, the offspring of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Memory), regarded as the inspirers of learning and the arts, especially of poetry and music.”

Amelia Earhart extends the metaphor of flight and for me is a heroic figure that embodies the challenges of being a woman in a position that is socially constructed as masculine. Initially, I had wondered if Amelia Earhart was a fictional character, and this contributed to an ethereal, mythical quality of who Amelia was, and who Amelia Earhart is now. I did not disclose in the postcards any details about Amelia. I chose to include only an address and postal code. By addressing these postcards to Amelia I hoped to create a sense that as readers the audience was reading someone’s secrets, someone else’s mail. I wanted to
seduce the audience into reading what they might think are private letters. I was playing with the desire we have to know someone else, to read about their life.

By leaving out Amelia’s last name I wanted to suggest the uncertainty of the postcard’s arrival. The process of postcard writing is uncertain; will the postcards be received? Would they be read only by the person to whom the postcards were addressed? Writing the narratives for the postcard project involved similar uncertainty: Who was going to read them? This returns to Spivak’s idea of History being a chain letter written on postcards. The uncertainty of the postcard reaching its destination is a metaphor for the uncertain practice of writing in academics. Who will read your writings and what will they do, how will they respond?

The form of the postcard project allowed me to explore the anxiety that I have as a graduate student with the process of writing publicly and with it making meaning/making History and theory. The privileged practices of representation, such as academic writing and photographic “truth making,” naturalize and make invisible the constructed nature of History. However, by imagining History as a chain letter on postcards reveals the random, uncertain, and constructed narrative components of making “truth” claims in the form of History and theory.

The second postcard in the series is an image of me looking through a magnifying glass at a feather and the feather is reflected in my eye, which is distorted by the magnification. The image here represents searching—for feathers, for wings and for the ability to fly. The reflection of the feather in my eye (I) is about the difficulty of seeing, interpretation, and the problems of research coupled with the desire to fly with new ideas.

Postcard 2 Image

The image in combination with the narrative of the second postcard suggests searching for wings and “the difficulty of seeing from here.” What I am suggesting is that perspective poses a difficulty in research and in the practice of theory making. The eye and the
technologies of seeing, as well as the “I” — the creation of the self, are intimately linked. With this image I want to suggest that to think about seeing and seeing differently involves interrogating subject positions and interiority.

This postcard was an exploration of my experience as a graduate student using “I” in my academic writing. My experience as a student was that in many disciplines revealing the constructed nature of the research and authorship in academic writing is discouraged, since it is deemed “subjective.” My work creating this postcard was to disrupt the seductive quality of so-called “objective” writing, where the I is removed and the constructed nature of the writing, in terms of perspective and the constructed nature of theory, could be revealed.

As Spivak (1984:28) suggests “[the] self-addressed letter … is a good definition of the “ego,” an ensemble of a carte postale [postal map] where all sorts of things arriving here and there combine to produce an ego-effect…the subject’s irreducible plurality.” In this postcard project I am both subject and object and the oscillation between the two offers a complexity to the reading of this autobiography. “One must always remember that the word “subject” can mean both subject matter (object) and the self” (Spivak 1984:24). It is this oscillation between subject and object that makes this project a double exposure. Lambek and Antze (1996:xxix) argue that, “[i]dentity is not composed of a fixed set of memories but lies in the dialectical, careless activity of remembering and forgetting, assimilating and discarding.” As postcards are seen as ephemeral, working with them as a form for self-writing is one way this project attempted to take-up the partial and fragmentary nature of memory work.

The third postcard in the series is the image of an open book, with one of the pages being a distorted image of me writing the words of Thomas King, “The truth about stories is that
that’s all we are.” My interest in producing this image involved articulating the complicated nature of reading, writing, and making meaning. What do we do with the ideas we find of others that help us make sense of ourselves? How do we re-write them and re-produce them in our work?

The third postcard is about feeling hazy. This hazy feeling is about ambiguity and about feeling unsure. Past ways of feeling secure have failed, what will help? This narrative is interested in linking theory—that of bell hooks and of the words of Jack Kerouac. Memories and dreams are tied together as is the process of learning, which I discuss as re-working the past.

I wanted to explore how the process of writing and reading are interconnected. As a writer I have a desire to connect with the reader/audience of my work. Yet, there is always the unknown, ambiguous aspect of writing or creating art—what another will do with your work can never be known in advance. As a graduate student I am coming to terms with this ambiguity that is ever present in the practice of writing and making art. The form of the postcard served to incorporate this ambiguity and the resulting anxiety, since the arrival of the postcard at its destination is always unknown, and the name or identify of the person who will read the message on the back is also never known.
The final image is of the feather, my side and outstretched arm linked with an arch and square. This is an attempt to re-create a version of DaVinci’s famous quest for flight drawing. This image reflects the ways in which things are re-visionsed and re-made as a way of linking new ideas to things in the past.
Postcard 4 Image

Postcard 4 continues this idea of re-working the past through the image and the narrative as I write that the wings I am in search of are not to be found, but are to be made from the feathers I find in my travels through academia. In the postcard note my writing focuses on traveling to unknown spaces, and about learning to trust myself to get me there.

Message on Postcard 4

I have discussed how my postcard project explored revealing self-images and a sense of vulnerability through writing about anxiety and emotions. However, my work is also about concealing. I created these images and then re-crafted the images, “cleaning up” the image, in particular the image for Postcard 4. I removed the natural outline of my body for a “better,” more attractive body image, and one that I felt less vulnerable having on public display.

As much as I had hoped to create self-images that challenged and contradicted popular images of women, I “cleaned up” my photos. Was I not motivated to disrupt the popular fiction of a woman’s body, my body, of being thin, and resembling the female models in the media? It was here, struggling to negotiate these small contradictions, (first during the making of the postcards, and then again, when I had to write about “cleaning-up” the photos) that led me to a new appreciation of just how insidious normalizing stories (and visual narratives) can be. How my body looked challenged the “normal” story of how women’s bodies should look, and in the visual narrative of this postcard project I chose to re-write my body with Photoshop techniques.

The “cleaned up” autobiographical stories of being a fearless, independent researcher and graduate student are often what we like to tell each other and possibly even ourselves. The
travels of graduate students are a much messier experience than the few lines we include on our academic CVs. Cleaning up these stories might also mean ignoring our fears about education and academics, that is, writing publicly about our experience of seeing things differently.

Conclusion

Do the letters say anything that could not be said otherwise?
—Carson 1998:96

In this project I wanted to explore the writing of everyday stories of being a graduate student and how metaphor can be one way of engaging imaginative meaning making with the audience of my work. I was deliberately elusive throughout the narratives and images in the postcard project. I was very aware of the multiple readings that are possible with work that is publicly engaged with. I wanted to explore how to play with the ambiguity of creating art, never knowing how others would read it. I wanted to leave gaps, openings, cracks for other meanings, other readings beyond my own intentions. The autobiographical story/confession “can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the (not always greatly hopeful) belief that it may somewhere wash up on land, on heartland perhaps” (Felman 1992:37).

I see this postcard project as crafted, playful—a rendering of the collage of the emotions associated with my experience as a graduate student. hooks (1996:xv) states that “the events described are always less significant than the impressions they leave on the mind and heart.” Reflecting on my experience as a graduate student has been important for how I have come to understand autobiography and how it contributes to the practice of making theory and its importance for education. The creation of this postcard project has lead me to document my process of learning. As Anne Carson (1998:55) states:

Think how much energy, time and emotion goes into that effort of learning: it absorbs years of your life and dominates your self-esteem; it informs much of your subsequent endeavours to grasp and communicate with the world.

By reflecting on this time of learning as a graduate student I have been able to play with theory, incorporate it into my own stories and change it, as I need to. As Spivak (1984:30) suggests, “what happens when we read theoretical texts as itineraries of desire? Not a “rejection” of theory, but a recognition that it is subject to production.”

Autobiographical writing when combined with theory offer new ways to read theory that help frame both autobiography and theory as constructed and always, ever partial. The postcard project is an on-going reflective process, whereby re-visiting these narratives and images help generate new understandings of the linkage between theory and practice and the role of autobiography in the study of education. Memory, “literally, a re-saying, a further bearing witness to one’s own witness, this re-saying is not merely a recall, but always a renewal of the possibility of the past, which may innovate and interrupt the performance of the present” (Simon, 2000:23).

References


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**About the Author**

Pariss Garramone is a doctoral candidate at York University in the Faculty of Education. Her research interests include curriculum theory and visual environmental autobiography. Her dissertation research focuses on visual narratives of women forestry workers in Canada. Her related publications include “Tellingsmiths: The work of planting trees and the politics of memory,” included in Wild Fire: Art as Activism (editor D. Barndt. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2006) which weaves together autobiography and the work of tree planting with postcolonial feminist theory.