

Exploring the Textual and Tactile Weave of Academic Subjectivities

Self-portraits, Intimacy, and Distance

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Résumé de l'article

Within the neoliberal university, academics become positioned around market-driven managerialist ideologies and the techniques enacting those principles. Audit cultures actively and continuously measure and shape academic subjectivities defined by a specific kind of success. The market-driven individualistic model can conflict with ethical ideals and longings for self-expression, while the mismatch between institutional goals and personal values creates an academic self that is pulled in conflicting directions. We become subjects of the discourse but we can limit our subjectivity and develop authentic insight. In this paper, we engage in a process of embodied making. We create textual and tactile self-portraits as a way of pushing back at neoliberal subjectivities, and to make visible our multiple selves. Although we recognize that we are always a part of what we resist, we use making as a way to create micro-resistances for our own renewal. Our self-portrait assemblages and stories are ambiguous and fluid but capture a view of selves hidden beneath the professional self. We are reminded that we are creative beings, and that there is room within neoliberalism to open intentional spaces. We may not always succeed in seeing our contradictory identities, yet we are able to occasionally capture glimpses of our shifting selves.



EXPLORING THE TEXTUAL AND TACTILE WEAVE OF ACADEMIC SUBJECTIVITIES: SELF-PORTRAITS, INTIMACY AND DISTANCE

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Abstract: Within the neoliberal university, academics become positioned around market-driven managerialist ideologies and the techniques enacting those principles. Audit cultures actively and continuously measure and shape academic subjectivities defined by a specific kind of success. The market-driven individualistic model can conflict with ethical ideals and longings for self-expression, while the mismatch between institutional goals and personal values creates an academic self that is pulled in conflicting directions. We become subjects of the discourse but we can limit our subjectivity and develop authentic insight. In this paper, we engage in a process of embodied making. We create textual and tactile self-portraits as a way of pushing back at neoliberal subjectivities, and to make visible our multiple selves. Although we recognize that we are always a part of what we resist, we use making as a way to create micro-resistances for our own renewal. Our self-portrait assemblages and stories are ambiguous and fluid but capture a view of selves hidden beneath the professional self. We are reminded that we are creative beings, and that there is room within neoliberalism to open intentional spaces. We may not always succeed in seeing our contradictory identities, yet we are able to occasionally capture glimpses of our shifting selves.

Keywords: academic identities; reflexive practices; self-portraits; arts-based methods; subjectivities

Entangled Neoliberal Subjects

Within the neoliberal university, academics become positioned in particular ways. This positioning revolves around market-driven managerialist ideologies and values, and the everyday practices and techniques that enact those principles (Teelken, 2011). Audit cultures focus on outputs, efficiency, quality, and effectiveness, and actively shape academic subjectivities. Competition, the never-ending surveillance, and continuous measurement of individuals create subjectivities defined by a specific kind of success (Hartman & Darab 2012; Teelken 2011). What is valued is structurally determined externally by administrative imperatives and informed by broader budget constraint narratives but, at the same time, performed individually. Under these conditions, workload expectations move beyond practical do-able logistics. Instead, compressed time constraints increase anxiety, stress, and the possibility of burn-out. Working under these conditions erodes trust and connection, and decreasing resources create environments where faculty always seem to be underachieving and are forever falling short of the perceived mark (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019). These top-down demands construct an ideal academic (Lund, 2020) that is mostly unattainable.

At the individual level, many academics pursue their work because they perceive personal goals of engaging with deep scholarship, value-driven research, and satisfying teaching shaped by educational ambitions. The recurrent mismatch between institutional goals and personal values creates an academic self that is pulled in conflicting directions, resulting in “tremendous dislocation within the academic subject” (Coin, 2017, p. 712). The market-driven individualistic competitive model often conflicts with ethical ideals and longings for self-expression: “subjectivity is caught in a double-bind, expected to live up to high standards of competition and at the same time unable to fulfill them” (Coin, 2017, p. 711).

Yet, even as we critique this neoliberal subject, we are always entangled in this subjectivity whether we aim to be or not. While we may rail against the machinery that produces us, we are always a creative part of the assemblage: “we are investing in the very hierarchies and binaries we simultaneously work to resist. We cannot exist outside this logic” (Brooks, Franklin-Phipps, & Rath, 2018, p. 142). Davies (2000) uses the symbol of “textual weave.” We weave ourselves into the fabric while at the same time are woven into the fabric. Sometimes the weaving goes with the grain, sometimes against.

If we are so integrally woven into the material, how do we make space to see the threads, the patterns and the texture? How can we develop strategies for self-preservation or resistance? Are there spaces for renewal, for imagination, or for the unexpected flights of fantasy that are necessary to counter the productivity machine? Is there room for creative “micro resistance strategies” (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019, p. 11)? Can creative arts-based reflexivity become a form of resistance to these subjectivities? In this paper, we turn to embodied making as a way of negotiating our multiples selves within the current university environment.

Creative Arts Reflexivity

How do we claim a self that is intangible and elusive? Arts-based reflexivity is possibly a way through this dilemma (de Freitas, 2008). Reflexivity is a complex concept to engage in as a research practice. It “is both an epistemological statement about the connected nature of knowledge and a political statement about the noninnocence of research” (de Freitas, 2008, p. 470). There is always a danger in reflexivity in that, by evoking an essence of immediacy and accessing a present self, we may assume that this self is unfettered, uncomplicated, and obviously accessible. Inner introspection can create a false perception of transparency and a tendency to suggest that a unitary self can be represented as well as produced (de Freitas, 2008; Faulkner, et al., 2016). Thomas and Davies (2002) argue that, while resistance to the neoliberal machinery can take the form of behaviours and actions, at its core are identities and subjectivities. In other words, how individuals resist the way in which academic subjectivities are constituted is crucial to not only exploring the entanglement but, perhaps, to weaving it differently. Key to moving in this direction is an understanding of Butler’s (1997) ideas on subjectivity as always fragmented, in process, and comprised of multiple subject positions. Reflexivity helps us to recognise that we too are shaped, constructed, and reproduced by language and discourse practices (Davies, et al., 2004).

Reflexivity is essentially “turning language back on itself to see the work it does in constituting the world” (Davies et al., 2004, p. 361). Reflexivity makes us aware that as discursive subjects, we often cannot see beyond our subject-space, and that we create linear narratives of experience from non-linear rhizomatic events. It helps us to acknowledge that gazing at oneself as the subject and being the object gazed upon is a fictitious fragmented space where there is “no guarantee of authenticity” (Davis, et al., 2004, p. 384). We cannot be authentic about ourselves in the multiplicity of fragile, contradictory, and moving identities. With continued self-reflexivity, however, we can catch glimpses of our own positionings both constructing and constructed as our identities emerge and wane. Through self-reflexivity, we acknowledge the instability of diverse elements constantly interacting. We can begin “seeing what frames our seeing” (Lather, 1993, p. 676).

Reflexivity and Arts-based Methods

Imagination is strongly connected to the dis/assembly and de/construction of selves (Metta, 2011). Through arts-based reflexivity, we can enjoy a subject that emerges through the “semiosis-in-process, a becoming I/we, that may then be full of surprises” (Pollock, 2007, p. 247). In this inventive space, we produce:

...a remembered or imagined identity written “as if” it were real. This “I” enjoys neither the presumption of a foundational ontology nor the convenience of conventional claims to authenticity. It is (only) possibly real. It is made real through the performance of writing. Accordingly, its reality is never fixed or stable. To the very extent that it is written, it is always already about to fly off the page into being and

becoming. Ideally, this self is a mess of errors. She is not so much unruly as superruly, surpassing convention and form on a dare. (p. 247)

Through arts-based practice (making), and in the writing, this self emerges—stable for now. In this way, the self is not produced as a fixed fiction but rather, these selves are born “in the same moment as the texts we write. The texts are thus oneselves, and oneselves are there, embodied in the texts—able to be written and read in multiple ways” (Davies et al, 2004, p. 365).

Method of Inquiry

Our inquiry process resulted from shared academic and artistic interests in reflexive autobiographical inquiry (Badenhorst et al., 2018; Lowery, 2017; McLeod et al., 2018). Haley is a doctoral candidate and Cecile and Heather are university professors. We wanted to make embodied texts—oneselves (Davies et al, 2004)—that we created which could be read in multiple ways. The texts would fix ourselves in the moment of production. Our purpose was to explore constructions of ourselves, and whatever was revealed through making our texts. We wanted to bypass the performances of our public selves, and reveal parts of ourselves we do not often interrogate in academic contexts. Our intention was to recognize our complex social positionings—our textual weave—and to examine our multiple identities which might surface or perhaps even subvert dominant discourses (Choi, 2015).

The texts we chose to engage in were making visual self-portraits and written personal narratives. We allowed ourselves to choose any type of visual representation of the self and to write whatever we wanted to accompany the image. The purpose of the visuals was to access embodied knowledge that might otherwise be impossible to put into words; as well, to engage viewers' sensory experiences about the delicate but precise and meaningful aspects of the selves we fixed in time. The narratives provide detailed glimpses of this embodied moment in our collection of identities and reflect our lived experiences. Following Rojas (2012) the purpose of narratives was not necessarily to explain the images but to provide additional meanings, to reveal our own understandings of our personal stories, and to reveal what we had constructed. Both the self-portraits and the narratives allowed us to ground, grasp, and hold onto parts of ourselves that are sometimes elusive, so as to scrutinize ourselves and our stories at a point in time.

Since this was a collaborative project, we also engaged in collective reflexivity. After making the visual self-portraits and the narratives, we viewed/read them collectively several times. Our analytical process privileged inquiry, ambiguity, and fluidity, rather than stringency or resoluteness (Eisner, 2008). We used dialogue to look for what we could not see in our own creative pieces. Our self-portraits and narratives are presented next.

Haley's Self-portrait: Temporality and Transition in an Un-still Life

When I first thought of creating a self-portrait with objects, my mind envisioned a traditional vanitas painting where intentionally placed objects, such as skulls, clocks, and fruit, have spiritual and allegorical meanings (Clarke, 2010). These still life paintings focus on the transitory nature of human life or serve as warnings against earthly pleasures. I had not created a still life in years. As I painted the objects, I was reminded of a drawing class in high school where still life objects were elegantly placed in the middle of the room and students decided on the composition based on these objects. I remember the freedom of focusing exclusively on colour, line, composition, and shading. The experience felt like a mental refuge away from my teenage concerns.

Similar to Eriksson & Erikson's (1998) developmental task of seeking a sense of identity and meaning during my teenage years, I was confused about what objects could represent my identity. I began to look for objects around my home that may shed light on who I am, thinking that the objects that I own and use may sufficiently symbolize my identity. When searching my apartment in Calgary, I didn't find many things that reflect me. Most of the items that I am emotionally attached to had been sent back to Ontario, as I would be returning to my birthplace to have a baby in a few months. I have been constantly in flux for the past ten years of my life, moving between eight different cities: Montreal to Gaborone to Ottawa to Montreal to Squamish to Edmonton to Mongolia to St. John's to Edmonton to Calgary, and soon back to Ottawa. My homes were continuously stripped of the indulgent objects that I love during these moves. Those that were left behind were easily transportable, practical, and minimal.

Figure 1
An un-still life and occupied body (Toll, 2020)



I thus resorted to buying fresh fruit and flowers to represent life, growth, and abundance. These objects have lived, and, although they have finite lives, will nourish my body. Being seven months pregnant with my first child, my mind constantly returned to my body and focused on nourishment. All of the objects in the still life—the round shapes of a woven basket, the floppy red tulips, the decomposing mango, a transparent vessel (the perfume bottle), the bright pink lipstick—represent elements and experiences of the body. At first, I was very uncomfortable with the imagery and wanted to start a new composition. Yet, looking deeper at this self portrait of objects, I am reminded that it does indeed reflect how I feel about myself right now: like a cluttered assemblage of things that do not quite fit. My body no longer reflects how I see myself, and there is tension, anxiety, and fear about the future. My body is constantly changing and surprising me. It regularly constrains me with pain, discomfort, internal kicks, a slow and drifting mind, cravings, and nausea (among other less desirable things).

Consequently, this portrait truly reflects a self in transition. Although motherhood or pregnancy cannot define the constellation of identities that we take on as women (I am also an academic and artist), my body is currently occupied with another body growing inside of me. My mind is preoccupied with these changes. It is being shared and my identity is enmeshed. This temporary and transient experience is reflected in the ultrasound image in the middle of the painting. According to Descartes' Cartesian mind-body dualism, the mind and body are ideally seen as separate and distinct. The mind, as a non-physical site of intelligence, should overcome the limitations of the physical body (Hart, 1996). I do not think, however, that my mind can transcend this tacit embodied experience, as I come to know the world and my selves through this temporal body.

In the memento mori tradition in vanitas paintings, the temporality of objects, such as wilting flowers and fruit, can represent the fragility of life and inevitability of death (Tate, n. d.). Comparably, I may see this painting as a small death of an identity. Similar to identity transitions and changes in adolescence, I will need to re-envision who I want to be in the next stage of my life.

Cecile's Self-portrait: Making

Figure 2

Making (Badenhorst, 2020)



Figure 2b
Making (Badenhorst, 2020)



This assemblage self-portrait is titled Making. I altered an empty match-box by painting the inside box and outside cover with gesso, then I covered the front, back and edges with an African-themed napkin. On the front cover, I added African patterns and pulled out the black and gold highlights. The art-tile Still life I made from cereal box cardboard, a spider stamp and dimensional glue. On the inside, the box is painted with black gesso, with red and gold highlights. In the box, I glued a pink clam shell and a plastic hamerkop bird. I glued the cover on the sides and bottom of the matchbox and cut the one side to create a door.

My friend Sonja and I are combing through tables at a charity store in Johannesburg, South Africa. I'm visiting during the Canadian summer/Johannesburg winter. I promised her when I emigrated that I would come back as often as I could. When I do, we arrange a whole day of visiting thrift stores and charity shops looking for items to use in our art and crafts. In places where poverty is rife, everything is sold, even packaging. For me, a crafter who loves assemblage and recycling, these shops are a treasure trove. In the charity shop, everything is unorganised and you have to dig through boxes and piles of stuff on the floor. Sonja, who is the master-finder, discovers the hamerkop bird. She has constructed a collection of these white plastic animals and birds which were incentive gifts in instant coffee tins. We're not sure of the date but possibly the 1970s and 1980s. Over the years, she has collected fifteen of them. At the end of my stay in South Africa, she gives the whole collection to me: "You'll use them more than I will."

Hamerkops—hammer-head is the translation from Afrikaans— is a common, medium-sized bird found in South Africa. Dull-looking but elegant, they like to live around water where they perch for hours, still and statue-like alongside their favourite pool. My father was a pond fanatic and he often built elaborate ones that included several pools and water running between them. He filled the ponds with goldfish which involved much excitement among us children as we carefully carried home the water-filled plastic bags from the pet shop. One year, a hamerkop took up residence at our fishpond and, one by one, ate all the goldfish. My father was delighted to have a hamerkop visit his garden and just bought more goldfish. We spend many hours watching that hamerkop wading in the pond, dipping its head to spear a fish and then standing immobile for hours as it digested the meal. When I see a hamerkop, I'm also reminded of the many holidays in the African bush with our family, watching animals, birds, and insects living their lives at their own pace. We would be scouting animals from sunrise to sunset. The spectacular sunsets—pinks turning to dark reds tinged with gold and black—are etched firmly in my mind. Family holidays are something I still treasure, and the pink clam shell was collected from a beach my partner, my two boys, and I returned to annually for five years. It reminds me of the boys' turbulent teenage years and how life can toss you up and roll you over, as this shell has no doubt experienced. I like the fragile appearance even though I know it is rock-strong. It's a habit of mine to collect small things to include in my art-craft projects. Sometimes I keep these items for many years before I use them. Such is the case in this instance; I made this art-tile at least seven years ago. The glossy dimensional finish invites you to run your finger over it to feel the smoothness, and emphasizes the tactile and textured joy crafting brings me. There's a narrative in this assemblage: a bird fishing at a pond while the African sun sets, but it is also a poetic theatre of the curious worlds I dream of, and a repository of memories of the worlds I have inhabited.

Heather's Self-portrait: Long-ago, Lost and Found Mysteries

My self-portrait is an assemblage of several objects I value and love—things I've inherited, made, found, or purchased. These include an antique Indian table, a wee slightly chipped clay pitcher, a string of 1930's ruby-coloured beads, a miniature vase or medicine bottle, and a small painting of my hand holding an old-style key. On the brass table-top, the beads cascade from the pitcher down the side of the painting as if falling towards the vase. Completing the cyclic design, the hand offers the key upwards towards the pitcher.

Figure 3

Long ago, lost and found mysteries (McLeod, 2020)



The table, the pitcher and the vase are all connected to my childhood home in Alert Bay, an isolated island village off Canada's west coast. They're aesthetic material culture pieces, around which some of my early family relationships were forged.

When they were first married, my parents bought the round, collapsible table with carved black wooden legs second-hand in Victoria, the provincial capital. Part of our living room furniture, to my child's eye it gave the room a worldly air, yet it was also mysterious since we had no idea what the incised lettering on the brass meant. At first, my father painstakingly picked out remnants of red paint from the indented shapes, and every once in a while Mom cleaned the top with hot water and Brasso. When my siblings and I got older, we too learned to vigorously polish it to a high gleam, and, as adults, when we returned to visit, it was a chore we'd offer to complete. Perhaps because of these kinesthetic memories, the table still strongly connects me to my beginnings and to my family of origin.

The pitcher came about because my mom decided early on that I had an artistic streak which should be nurtured. One morning she directed me to go to my classmate's house after school, so, somewhat mystified, I followed Michael, who I only knew as my competitor for top student of our primary class. I was intrigued to find his mom, a potter, had prepared a long table so that a handful of children could take ceramics lessons. Over a few sessions we worked in front of a picture window with a view of trees and ocean. I created my own tea set imprinted with a tool and covered in heavy glaze, of which the little milk pitcher is all that's left.

Around the same time, while gardening, Mom and I unearthed a miniature porcelain vase—or might it be a Chinese medicine bottle?¹ With a flower decoration on one side, it wasn't broken, so we wondered why it had been buried. When I grew up we kept track of both the vase and the pitcher. They travelled back and forth between our separate homes, a recognition of our mutual appreciation of humble art making and aesthetics. A few days before Mom's death she asked about them. I think she meant that these tiny things, although worthless to anyone else, were treasured mementos of our shared experience and represented our early mother-daughter relationship. They are fragile and could easily shatter, so now, for me, they also serve as a sort of memento mori function—a reminder of death for the living.

A couple of years ago, while in New Zealand, I bought the vintage necklace, which is comprised of small to mid-size translucent casein² beads connected with brass links. It was both a souvenir of my trip and, in some way, a joyful replacement for a green 30s necklace I'd inherited and then recently lost. I don't have a personal history with the beads as I do with the other objects but, because they've had a previous owner(s), like the table and the vase, they have stories I can never know—I'm intrigued by a sense of mystery.

My fingers in the 8" x 8" high contrast acrylic portrait hold a black key—the lilac, violet, and peach hand is set against a green background. Keys are powerful metaphors that imply opening, and perhaps solving mysteries.

I chose the objects in my self-portrait because I find them attractive, intriguing, or generative. One common thread is a quirky and homespun aesthetic. My things tell of long-ago, lost and found mysteries. Stories vanish, childhoods end, and people pass away, yet creativity and new human relationships flourish, and beauty is found in the oddest of humble places. While working through conundrums remains a satisfying theme in my life, so too is living with certain enigmas.

Textual Weaving

For each of our contributions, we asked: How are our identities and subjectivities located in these self-portraits? In what way have we trapped a meaning-filled identity-moment? How are we to understand what we created given that it is so difficult to see “what frames our seeing” (Lather, 1993, p. 676)? Through relational and attuned discussions, we co-created common themes, and noted patterns of similarity and diversity in our self-portraits (Gerber et al., 2018).

For Heather and Cecile, looking to the past and memories dominated; for Haley, looking forward and her changing body took centre stage. There were many references to memento mori (the reminder of death in life), to transitions, and to objects that represent treasured relationships. All of our self-portraits link to family and to place. Haley’s portrait reflects a lack of place, but place is still prominent, as is the presence of mobility. Objects in our portraits link to larger systems of connectivity (relationships with others who previously owned the objects we displayed). Our portraits also reflect where we are in our bodies and in life: Heather and Cecile are settled, have a sense of certainty, and are beginning to look to the past more often than the future, while Haley portrayed transitions in her body, in her home, and in her wariness of the future. The portraits are uncomfortable to us in many ways because of the emotions they reveal. These emotional selves sit uneasily next to our professional selves.

There is no doubt that creating visually can represent an artist’s current emotional and psychological state, and, therefore, encapsulates pieces of identity (Moon, 2017). Art generally, but self-portraits particularly, reveal information about bodies, identities, and conceptualization of selves. An art piece can infer the artist’s relationship to others, how they see themselves in the world, and what they choose to reveal. Visual imagery encapsulates a multiplicity of meanings—*simultaneity*—where symbols represent different meanings and contrasting information all at once (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017; Weber, 2008). Consequently, artistic symbolic choices may represent multiple meanings at the same time.

In art-therapy, artistic self-portraits are useful introspective tools to express, discover, and re-envision aspects of one’s identity (Barel-Shoshani & Kreidler, 2017; Beaumont, 2018; Hanes, 2007; Muri, 2007; Prunet et al. 2019). So too, in art education, self-portraits are an often-used practice to connect artist, world, materials, and learning (Hickman, 2010; Makemson, 2014). In the fine-arts world, self-portraits have a long and full history, and continue to remain an important artistic endeavour today (Cheney, 2011; Dadvar

et al., 2013). Self-portraits can be a “dialogue with the self” (Muri, 2007, p. 332), sometimes apparent and conscious, and other times implicit and subconscious. They may involve self-discovery through active and embodied engagement in creative activities. The process of creating self-portraits is described by arts-based researchers, Gerber and Myers-Coffmann, as “knowing by making” (2017, p. 591). Muri (2007), who interviewed artists creating self-portraits, noted: “It can be a document of aging, a vehicle for commenting on social and political issues, a confessional, and a means for self-reflection” (p. 338). Self-portraits have proven extremely useful in exploring the grey area between personal and professional (Hickman, 2010; Tharenos et al., 2019). They are a form of negotiation between the inner and sociocultural/outer worlds (Makemson, 2014). Through our analysis process, three themes emerged: (a) choosing assemblage, (b) self-portrait as construction, (c) pleasure in making.

The Assemblage

From the outset, we allowed ourselves free choice, with no constraints on what we could choose to create in our self-portraits, yet each of us chose to produce an assemblage. Although Haley’s assemblage took shape within a more traditional still life painting, Heather’s piece comprised a collection including a painting and objects, while Cecile’s was a composed assemblage of items. Each assemblage was different but consisted of various bits and pieces of our lives, chosen because they were imbued with meaning. We wonder if these assemblage narratives are a piecing together of fragmented selves under the onslaught of the neoliberal pressures in our daily lives. Is this an embodied moment in time, refracted slivers of a self? At its most basic level, a self-portrait is a statement of existence (Mignone-Ojeda, 2016), so our assemblages may state our need to establish our existence. Must we make ourselves visible in an environment where we increasingly feel like a number or a cash value? The neoliberal subject is a driven one, often presented as monolithic and coherent—a homogenization. Our choice of assemblages implies a recognition of instability, disintegration, and incoherency. As Haley notes: “I began to look for objects around my home that may shed light on who I am, thinking that the objects that I own and use may sufficiently symbolize my identity...I didn’t find many things that reflect me.” Cecile’s assemblage consists of snippets of memories, objects collected randomly, pulled out haphazardly, on a whim. Heather collects together objects drawn from her living space. She moves them into a new space, creating an organization of sorts. The pieces that we pulled together into our assemblages produce a layering like printmaking. The placement, the combinations, and the sensations evoked create an experiential representation, a sensorial experience. Our assemblages provide an alternative to our performed neoliberal selves. Here we are soft, nostalgic, sentimental, yearning, aching. The assemblage is deliberate and recovers the object from wherever it was housed, and, in doing so, the object becomes positioned as significant. Objects authenticate the memory or feeling, making it live as it becomes abstracted, creating the present in the imagined. These self-souvenirs then move on to the page in replicas of embodied stasis and inertia. We’ve captured a nostalgic myth of contact and presence (Stewart, 1984). The process is distancing as well as being intimate, fuelled by a surplus of meaning that even we cannot decipher. The assemblage lies outside

of us now and, although we may feel lingering traces within us, it has become strange because our bodies have moved on. Such is the stillness of the assemblage, a happy triumph as it is desolate. Kay (2016) likens collections of items—*assemblage*—as a way of practicing research: *assemblage* as remixing; a research approach that is practical but eclectic, complex but always aesthetic, not coherent but meaningful. Is this where our self-worlds collide? Are our researcher-selves present in our assemblages, as one of the layers just beyond our visibility?

The Constructed Self-portrait

Haley constructed a portrait of a self; she looks both forward and inward. Her self is in transition, in flux because her body is changing. She wants to nourish and nurture this self even though this self is filled with uncertainty. Cecile constructed a self metaphorically glancing over her shoulder at memories, friends, family and her children when they were younger. It is a nostalgic self, filled with as much loss as joy. Heather constructed a curious self who peers at memories that generate mystery. Tied closely to relationships she values, her self projects forward as well, to explain why she surrounds herself with certain objects and pieces of furniture.

To our surprise, since work dominates our lives, none of our assemblages carried any motifs that represent our professional work as scholars. We made this choice unconsciously and it was only in our collaborative examinations of the self-portraits that we realized we had not represented our professional selves in these creations. Foucault (1988) contends that our sense of identity is developed and then maintained by both ourselves and others around us. We continually observe ourselves in relation to others. By doing so, we force each other into categories and expected roles. We become subjects of the discourse. But we also have the capacity to limit our subjectivity and develop knowledge about ourselves through a complex combination of constraint, choice, and action. Do we construct these selves to limit our subjectivity in academic discourse? Have we developed knowledge about ourselves in a way that helps us resist the categories we are forced into and the roles we feel we have to play? For Foucault (1987), the subject is constructed—not discovered—and in the construction we can begin to see the desires imposed on us. We may not have the ability to verbalize the resistance in our subject constructions immediately but, over time, engaging in these activities provides space for possibilities. As Gorichanaz (2019) notes, “a self-portrait is shown to be a construction, and not just a representation, of oneself. Creating a self-portrait then is a matter of bringing oneself forth over time—constructing oneself, rather than simply depicting oneself” (p. 1).

The Pleasure of the Making

Self-portraits are steeped in material settings and constructed as vignettes for the creator and the viewer. They are embodied constructs. The blending of aesthetics with

emotion and meaning can enable patterns to emerge (Cope et al., 2015). Identities explored through self-portraiture can be transitional, transient, playful, and imaginative particularly during major life events (Carr, 2014; 2015; 2020). The imaginative envisioning of identity and portraiture through active symbols, the compositional bricolage of diverse found objects, takes the symbolic process one step further when there is a lack of a face and physical body. Through composition and choice of objects, the artist actively engages imagery, symbolism, subjectivity, and metaphor to tell a personal story and re-envision symbolic identities (Eastmond, 1999). Selecting personal items, planning a composition, and creating a portrait (through assemblage and painting) lead to an inventive use of metaphor and unconventional constructions of subjectivity. We engaged in two creative processes. The first was the physical making and the second was making sense of the creations through the narrative. We each discussed the pleasure of making both the visual and written pieces. What does making do for us? How does it change us? There is the visual, tactile, and embodied sensory connection that somehow takes us from our heads back into our bodies. We touch objects, we embrace the unknown, we sit with emotion. Then there is the use of symbols and metaphors, sometimes deliberate, other times subconscious, to form a projection which is satisfying at an aesthetic level. There is a plasticity in the making, the birth, and unfolding of an aesthetic voice that is pleasurable—a self so unlike the day-to-day self. The process of making and narrative reflection is tactile, it moves us into a creative zone where we are happy to embrace the unknown. We realise that creating and making is very important to us.

Concluding Thoughts

We acknowledge the transitory nature of self in a self-portrait, but we also recognise how valuable this process was. Our daily selves are accustomed to thinking; we begin projects with a cognitive focus while we conceptualize, we analyze, and we draw conclusions. Nevertheless, in this project, we started with the kinesthetic, sensory, touching. The physical act of creation and sensing was our starting point. Only later did we move on to insight and discovery, seeking to solve the mystery when trying to make sense of our assemblages, both through narrative and relational attunement (Gerber et al., 2018). We started with the kinesthetic/sensory and then moved towards affective, and finally cognitive/symbolic forms of meaning-making and idea creation (Hinz, 2009; Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978; Lusebrink, 1990). This shift out of our usual scholarly approach is useful for us to move out of our taken-for-granted spaces.

We created our self-portraits early in 2020. The world has transformed since then and the three of us have experienced life-changing events in the intervening time. Our self-portraits now would be quite different but the acts of searching, choosing which objects and which memories to include, would remain the same. The physical making would remain important as would the sense of pride in the show-and-tell narratives.

We asked, how might we make space to see the textual weaving of our multiple selves in the discourses around us? How can we develop strategies for self-preservation or

resistance? Are there spaces for renewal and for imagination from which to fashion the micro-resistances necessary to counter the productivity machine? For us, these tactile projects enable us to take flight. Unlike lines on a CV, our products and stories about ourselves are not linear or clear with meaning, or even settled. They are full of ambiguity and fluidity: Is this who I am right now? Every day we perform particular roles. We are always trying to prove our worth. We look outwards and study others. Yet our self-portraits contained quite different performances. Here, we talked about our mothers, our fathers, our babies. We remind ourselves and the world around us that we are not human machines. We are creative beings, and there is room within neoliberalism to open intentional spaces: imaginatively, creatively, intuitively, and artistically. These areas offer “scope for fleeting, transitory, small-scale experiences of utopian possibility, they function more as bolt-holes, breathing spaces, and places of refuge” (Webb, 2018, p. 99). Thus, while we may not always succeed in seeing our multiple, contradictory, and moving identities, we are able to occasionally capture glimpses of our shifting selves (Davies et al, 2004).

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ENDNOTES

¹ In addition to the Indigenous Kwakwaka'wakw people, European settlers and Chinese immigrants had inhabited the island on Canada's remote west coast for about 80 years at that point.

² Casein plastic made from milk was used for small decorative items in the first half of the 20th century.