

# Puppets Know Best

## An Arts-Based Exploration of Scholarly Identity, Liminality and Soulful Research

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### Article abstract

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# PUPPETS KNOW BEST: AN ARTS-BASED EXPLORATION OF SCHOLARLY IDENTITY, LIMINALITY, AND SOULFUL RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the struggle of crafting a recognized professional scholarly identity, and reflects on the significance of puppets to interrupt this struggle, assert one's voice, and creatively occupy one's space. Our interdisciplinary contribution aims to extend conversations on the realities of academic life that are often muted or diluted such as anxiety, self-doubt, weariness and failure, with implications for creative research practices. We engage the aforementioned realities through a mix of creative and whimsical writing styles (e.g., human-puppet dialogues; poetry; reflection), leveraging insights from the Jungian psychological approach to archetypal symbol and the imagination as well as transformative arts-based approaches involving storytelling, voice, and liminal space. After exploring our own experiences carving out space as creative and reflective scholar-practitioners, we discuss two examples where puppets disrupted the status quo of particular academic settings and provided opportunities for different, more spontaneous forms of engagement with the self and with others.

**Keywords:** imagination; Jungian psychology; liminality; soulful scholarship; voice

## Introduction

In this article, we address the struggle of crafting and honing a recognized professional scholarly identity, and contemplate the significance of puppets in helping break this struggle, assert one's voice, and creatively occupy one's space. Our approach builds upon the Jungian psychological approach to archetypal symbol and the imagination (Chodorow, 1997; Johnson, 1989; Jung, 1954/1968; Rozuel, 2012; 2016; 2020) as well as transformative arts-based approaches involving storytelling (Mehl-Madrona, 2010), music (Lederach, 2020), peace (Lederach, 2005) and liminal space (Gildersleeve & Guyotte, 2020; Koro et al., 2020).

Our interdisciplinary contribution aims to extend reflections on the realities of academic life that are too often muted or diluted, to the detriment of both scholars and the broader university community (Horton, 2020a; 2020b). These realities include the negative impact of gender disparity in assessing research outputs and value (e.g., Barcan, 2019; Larochelle et al., 2020) and the decontextualized judgements on what constitutes normal research productivity across an academic career (e.g., Kenyon, 2020). These experiences are symptomatic of broader stories, advancing the idea that reflection on our own mindsets (Shields, 2018) and embracing qualities such as kindness as a fundamental aspect of our work (Dorling, 2019) can help to shift dynamics within academic spaces.

We position ourselves alongside many other emerging and established academics, across a range of disciplines, who have stepped into these conversations, such as Caves (2014), Gabriel (2014; 2018), and more recently Dedotsi and Panić (2020), Hoben et al. (2019), and Sjøvoll et al. (2020). More specifically, we contextualize our paper within conversations denouncing the pervasiveness of “the neoliberal university [which] requires high productivity in compressed time frames” (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1236) and the perpetuation (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019), if not aggravation, of a devastating “fear of failure” along with the emotional burden of “shame, anxiety, and frustration” (see Davies et al., 2021).

We refer to conversations (for recent examples, see Tourish, 2020a; 2020b) which have alluded to academics suffering from imposter syndrome and fearing to be called intellectual phonies who respond to this fear with “intellectual exhibitionism in an attempt to establish and maintain [their] academic legitimacy” (Empson, 2020, p. 227). We ask here: Who decides what is academically legitimate and what is not? How do they know? These are important, critical questions; yet, they are uncomfortable, time-consuming, disruptive. Questioning the social and ethical responsibility of universities to

support uncomfortable, difficult, sensitive or terrifying questions (e.g., Who am I in all of this? What if this research doesn't make a difference? What if it does the exact opposite? What if it fails completely? How do I stay with the troubling questions that arise? What if I am unknowingly complicit in perpetuating unjust systems of knowledge production and dissemination?) is often perceived as an idle rather than significant enterprise (Gannon, 2018; Sandlin et al., 2018). It may appear that these questions are to be reserved for after the important work is done, that is, after the production of a sufficient quantity of outputs in the so-called right kind of journals. The nature of critical and reflexive scholarship, however, implies that there are always more questions to ask and more material to explore, and several of these questions call upon the very nature and boundaries of the field(s) in which we work.

Within our disciplinary boundaries, we offer a critical reflexive space (Hilevaara & Orley, 2018) whereby we examine the challenges of crafting a professional scholarly identity in a pressurized context through the interventions of puppets. The puppets represent powerful artefacts which not only act as mirrors for hidden parts of the self (Gross, 2011; Purcell-Gates & Smith, 2020), they also demystify the pretentiousness of academia by speaking a different, uncensored voice. In what follows, we discuss this demystification by reflecting upon our own story of crafting a professional self, as well as by reporting on puppet-laden presentations at two academic conferences.

The rationale for co-composing this piece with puppets is twofold. First, it is inspired by Jung's invitation to explore and make sense of our unconscious tensions through imaginative means so as to give a legitimate voice to what we would otherwise censor or distort (Jung, 2009; Ulanov & Ulanov, 2008). The puppets enable the externalized representation of intrapersonal complexes (Jacobi, 1959) and facilitate a richer dialogue whose symbolic value transcends purely conscious expectations. Through this semi-conscious projection (von Franz, 1980), the object becomes subject, and this new subject (part self and part other) engages us from a necessarily different standpoint than what we are used to (Hillman, 1994). This movement from object to subject and back again reflects what Gross (2011) refers to as a puppet's "uncanny life" (p. 35), existing in a realm of presence and absence, life and death. Of this uncanny life, Gross writes:

Even the most carefully formed puppets will be partial or imperfect, reduced or fragmented versions of a human creature; the puppet is itself, but it also supplements an absence. That is part of its gift. With puppets, one is always conscious of their closeness to made things, with their joints, stitches, hinges, and solid, insentient substance. Yet these creatures take-up this made-ness in a

way that goes against the grain. They are dead things that belong to a different kind of life. (pp. 27-28)

Echoing these ideas, Posner et al. (2014, p. 2) suggest that working with puppets brings to the fore our relationships with the “inanimate world” and how these relationships provide “concrete means of playing with new embodiments of humanity.” Living their uncanny life of in-between, puppets in particular can “chart and reveal new expressions of ourselves” (Posner et al., 2014, p. 2). In these ways, puppets can take us beyond the conscious self by tapping into unconscious representations of ourselves. They can carry our fears, our dreams or our doubts, our shadows or our heroic, poetic, irreverent, uncompromising characteristics. This, notes Erickson (2020, p. 112), lies at the core of Hillman’s radical imaginal psychology whereby “the act of personifying enlivens the image and engenders a creative process of unfolding of meanings. The world becomes richer.”

Second, the externalization of what could be an internal dialogue into an actual written exchange is also informed by practices in art therapy that note how “the art production coupled with storytelling can allow [us] to break through [our] well-honed defenses and provide the emotional release toward a mature adaptation. It is to this end that the art experience offers its invaluable service” (Moschini, 2019, p. 115). In other words, co-writing this piece as an arts-based exercise with puppets enables us to not simply talk about our scholarly identity struggles and paradoxes, but to “get into them and feel them” (Moschini, 2019, p. 115) in such a way that we eventually transform our relationship with these struggles and paradoxes as we write. Writing as play brings healing.

In parallel, the idea of co-writing with puppets draws on descriptions of puppetry as a capacity to tap “into our imagination and creative urges” (Torley, 2020, p. 150). For Torley, this capacity results in an internal opening into which imagination and creativity can be externalized through one’s engagement with puppets and/or performing objects (e.g., a teapot becoming a granny, etc.) (pp. 150-151). She writes: “The more you see, touch, feel and experience, the more life you can inject into your puppet” (p. 151). Breathing life into a performing object or puppet, according to Torley, begins with two activities: play and finding the “natural connection and life of the object from within yourself” (p. 149). Resonating with Torley’s description, Gross (2011, p. 52) suggests that the relationship between the puppeteer’s hand and their puppet is one characterized by an “ensouling.” Through our hands, we enter into a “co-presencing” (Piris, 2014) with a puppet, giving them life, a soul – or maybe merely awakening the dormant soul that already lies there. Gross (2011) explains:

In its interactions with the puppet, the operator's hand is like a dancer who takes the object as a partner, responding to its weight or flexibility, its momentum, its quirks of motion, its inhuman scale or shape (a body the size of an egg or a bird, the shape of an elephant or a skull). (p. 56)

In order to capture some of this co-presencing and ensouling, we engage with the idea of "art-making as a way of knowing," particularly as an "intersubjective" or relational way of knowing (Chilton & Leavy, 2020, p. 601). Speaking of imagination and creativity in the context of arts-based research, Camargo-Borges (2018) emphasizes that one of their key roles is to push beyond conventions and seek out new "combinations of meanings" (p. 92). These new combinations support research with the goal of working toward new possible futures using a range of arts-based processes (e.g., images, film, stories, poetry, etc.). An imaginative and creative approach to research, as she argues, involves a shift on the part of the researcher from "discovery to generativity" (p. 98), or moving away from the idea that research is just about ascertaining what already exists (e.g., knowledge, facts, etc.). A focus on generativity suggests that, through the arts, we are working with new possibilities.

In the context of this paper, by allowing the puppets to share perspectives from their uncanny lives, we bring to the fore our own ambiguities and enter a process "that matters much more than lines on a curriculum vitae or lists of publications, it is humanizing and healing, and often, it brings us together, rather than setting us at odds with each other in a mad scramble for prestige" (Hoben et al., 2019, p. 465). In other words, the uncensored whimsicality of our dialogue with these not-quite-other selves enables us to return to what we love the most in our scholarship: the unexpected, yet deeply rewarding learning moments that occur when we explore what it means to be a human being.

## Prelude

The Whimsical Puppet is sitting quietly on the third shelf, leaning against a book on its right and the metallic bookend on its left. Its head is slightly tilted. Its body is squeezed a little too much. This is not its natural place. This is where it sleeps, where it stays most of the time, where it is stored. Forgotten, some days. Its natural place is out here, in the open. It likes a public. It likes a good conversation. It likes to be seen, although it does not like to be touched or petted as if it were a mere stuffed toy. A silent sigh.

The Whimsical Puppet ponders: “Why do so many humans act in reckless ways and fail to understand that puppets are not toys? They pour so much hope and energy into us, they use us to create so much life, so much laughter, so much bonding, but then they discard us as if we are a mere piece of cloth. Soulless. Well, maybe I do not have a soul like they conceive of it, but I share parts of theirs, simply through the touch of their fingers animating me. If only they knew all that I can feel, all that I know about them...”

Meanwhile, in a nearby office, the Contemplative Puppet is sitting at the very top of the bookshelf. Its wings have been fluffed, as the office human has just rearranged them for comfort. From time to time, the office human stares up at the Puppet. They consider each other. The office human waits and listens. The Puppet isn't sure whether the human really wants to hear what it has to say. “So, what if you sometimes fluff my feathers and make sure I am seated comfortably? Who likes dust on their wings?!”

Sometimes, the office human comes in and closes the door. They look a little frazzled and turn the chair to stare out the window. From its perch, the Contemplative Puppet contemplates the human, contemplating the window. It is better when the office human brings the soft black case with the wooden thing with strings on it. The human sits and plays and, instead of silence, the Contemplative Puppet and the human sing. These sessions take place early in the morning before the halls outside are busy or late in the evening when the other office humans have gone.

## **Chapter 1 – Where Turmoil Begins**

I, the Accidental Scholar, sit here pondering my work, my contributions, my identity, and, dare I say it, my scholarly worth. I sit here trying to find things to say that are worth saying, trying to write words that are deemed worthy of being published and interesting enough to be read – something so important in academia (Pelias, 2019). I break away from the screen and replay my story, those incidents that have led me to this very point today, with a crisis of professional existential proportions which happens to be a recurring ailment.

What I do know is that I could never resolve myself to engage in the “intellectual exhibitionism” that Empson (2020, p. 227) denounces. In my little corner of my scholarly universe, I was driven steadily by an uncompromising need to write with integrity and with meaning. Writing with integrity and meaning signifies being creative in ways that echo what I observe and experience in the world out there, because that world is rather whimsical and paradoxical. So many fascinating paradoxes, and so many possibilities I could explore...



Writing with integrity and meaning also implies being reflexive and critical of easy conclusions, daring to question dogmatic paradigms, and taking the time to read the sources before drawing a conclusion on what is actually being argued. So much to read, and so little time...

Writing with integrity and meaning further demands embodying the essence of a creative critical reflexive scholar who owns her voice with confident humility and reasonable aspirations.

This is already a big task. But there is excitement, there are ideas, there is life. I breathe in and breathe out, return to my keyboard, and start typing a few words, words that pour out of my self, words that come out of my flesh, bruises and caresses alike. I am inspired, entranced, flirting with what Romanyshyn (2021, p. xi) defines as “research with soul in mind.” I am in the midst of:

re-search, a process of re-turning to and re-remembering what has already made its claim upon the researcher through his or her complex relations to the topic. Research as re-search is a searching again for what one has already felt as a call, perhaps long ago and now dimly re-called. ... Re-search with soul in mind, re-search that proceeds in depth and from the depths, is about finding what has been lost, forgotten, neglected, marginalized, or otherwise left behind. (Romanyshyn, 2021, p. xi)

I thrive in that space. I re-turn to what is meaningful from the experience of being a conscious, soulful human being. Soul, for Westoby (2016, p. 24) is “energy that fuels people’s capacity to get involved and stay the course. ... Soul is then imagined ... as an embodied energy, that is also shaped by forces and discourses that people are constantly in relationship with.” Soul is always there, a resource I can always tap into. I rejoice and start enjoying what I do, what I write, what I am. I am “walking-writing ... a process of the body, mind, heart, self, in conversation with life” (Blinne, 2018, p. 82). Hmm, life is a generous interlocutor today!

I take a break to attend to other work duties. An immersion into the institution that employs me. I do my best to be useful. Meetings. Emails. Mundanities. And here and there, subtle as they may be, reminders that I am still expected to prove my worth because none of what I have already written, published, composed, enacted is deemed good enough, or sufficient, or even acknowledged at all. I freeze. I remember that, despite my well-intended motives and committed values, I work in an environment that

seeks results, that demands results. In other words, the rallying call is more brutally stated as a demand to be a [creative, critical, reflexive, or whatever] Productive Scholar. I freeze some more. Mountz et al. (2015, p. 1245) are correct in denouncing how “the effects of the neoliberal university are written on the body.” They are also, even more worryingly, damaging to the soul. We care (for the work, for the stories, for the issues, for the living beings), so we commit. And, as we commit, our body and our soul become exposed to an intrusive, abusive and, at times, dangerously careless scrutiny.

Blank screen and mind in turmoil. Dark insecurities that undermine my remembering of the pieces of soul I was so joyfully and carefully laying down on the page. Who am I? What am I doing? My eyes gaze over to the puppet sitting on my shelf. A rather whimsical puppet. A sloth – how ironic and appropriate. A large hand-puppet nicely made.

Puppet: an artefact; an instrument; a toy; a proxy; a metaphor; a game (Astell-Burt, 2017; Gross, 2011; Posner et al., 2014; Purcell-Gates & Smith, 2020; Torley, 2020).

A channel to the spirit of play, of silliness, of breaking rules.

An emotional crutch to help me face and process what appears too demanding, too taxing in that moment.

A way to retreat into the piece of childhood I carry, to face the insurmountable monsters and to help build relationship in return.

A bridge.

A symbol for my creative critical reflexive self.

A mirror to my imaginative explorations of the stuff that really matters.

So what matters, here and now?

I turn to the central figure who has given me words to analyze those raw experiences of life: C.G. Jung. I turn to Jung’s own critical and creative writings at the height of his own existential crisis, words poured into his *Red Book*, composed by letting his unconscious speak and draw freely. I read his words as he contemplates the “second night [when] I called out to my soul” (Jung, 2009):

Dreams pave the way for life, and they determine you without you understanding their language. One would like to learn this language, but who can teach and learn it? Scholarliness alone is not enough; there is a knowledge of the heart that gives deeper insight. The knowledge of the heart is in no book and is not to be found in the mouth of any teacher, but grows out of you like the green seed from the dark earth. Scholarliness belongs to the spirit of this time, but this spirit

in no way grasps the dream, since the soul is everywhere that scholarly knowledge is not. (p. 233)

I stop and listen to the space these words have carved in my body. A release of tension, a sense of being seen and understood. In this world, in this academic institution, the soul is nowhere to be seen for scholarly knowledge has claimed the land and cleared the ground. This does not feel right. My body refuses to be silenced. It gasps for air, for soul. I listen some more. I ask, just like Jung (2009, p. 233): “But how can I attain the knowledge of the heart?” And Jung provides me with a response, courtesy of his own depths:

You can attain this knowledge only by living your life to the full. You live your life fully if you also live what you have never yet lived, but have left for others to live or to think. You will say: ‘But I cannot live or think everything that others live or think.’ But you should say: ‘The life that I could still live, I should live, and the thoughts that I could still think, I should think.’ (p. 233)

“Aha!” I utter, for lack of better words. Living life to the full. Living what I could still live and thinking what I could still think. And writing what I could still write. Believing that there is a whole life un-lived which vibrates even through scholarly knowledge, and far beyond it too. So, there is a way, there is a path, there is a bridge – or maybe multiple bridges. They are not nothing or worthless because some authority said so. They carry life and soul for me, and they resonate with others I meet. These are the stories I must share, the stories I must help bring to life so that I have a chance at attaining the knowledge of the heart. Indeed, as Jung (1939/1968, paras. 497-498) notes: “The thought we shall think, the deed we shall do, even the fate we shall lament tomorrow, all lie unconscious in our today. ... Hence we must always reckon with the presence of things not yet discovered.”

From my accidental yet passionate scholarly standpoint, committed to re-searching with soul in mind, my professional identity is, therefore, a reality in potential, with many not-yet-discovered pieces. It is a space of paradoxes, where one finds more questions than answers. A space where I unpack more stuff than what I can declutter – be they thoughts or emotions or working papers. A space central to the quality of engaged scholarship for meaningful social change and conscious transformation (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018), because it is infused by life lived to the full, by myself and by those with whom I am somehow connected. This is not about me, but about a shared experience of selfhood and otherness (Brown et al., 2016).

I thrive for several more days, and it feels good, until another distraction, another demand lands on my desk. Oh dear, not again! I call on Jung once more, hoping he still has some wisdom for me, and he luckily responds (2009):

It appears as though you want to flee from your self so as not to have to live what remains unlive until now. But you cannot flee from yourself. It is with you all the time and demands fulfillment. If you pretend to be blind and dumb to this demand, you feign being blind and deaf to yourself. This way, you will never reach the knowledge of the heart. The knowledge of your heart is how your heart is. (p. 234)

*I hear a soft laughter as I type these words. I look around, and I notice the puppet. "What now?" I ask. SLOTH smiles at me. Really, it does! It moves its head, invites me to approach, dares me to engage with it. I pick it up, connect with its soft fur, examine its demeanour, hold it closer to my chest. I feel the smile transferring from its lips to mine.*

*SLOTH murmurs: "You really are good at complicating your life, aren't you? Life's easy, work's easy. You just have to know how your heart is, as that Jung fellow says. Now, do you know how your heart is?"*

*I stay silent, brushing its fur, not quite daring to look at SLOTH's face. SLOTH continues: "Well, maybe I can help you there. Look at my lips! To quote your Jung (1930/1970, para. 965) – decidedly a smart man, in my opinion: 'Even if your mind and heart are elsewhere, even if you don't understand a joke in a foreign language, you can't help smiling when everybody else smiles.' Your heart need not be so heavy if you look at me and that gorgeous, dashing smile of mine! Come on, pay attention and see if you still want to collapse and flounder like a small fish out of water."*

Tough love, yet SLOTH is right. Its smile lifts my spirits up, curls up my lips, and brings light and lightness into the moment. The challenges remain, not always trivial, but my ability to know how to address them, as well as my awareness of what grounds my integrity, are now unconditionally conscious. Maybe I knew this before, but I needed SLOTH to say it out loud for me to really listen.

SLOTH is a symbol of my own wildness as I search for an anchor when all constantly shifts around me. It is the meaningful alchemical container for the paradoxes and tensions that emerge out of the multifaceted identity I am asked to carry (Rozuel, 2019). In Jungian terms, it calls off the comfort of a so-called professional persona to

force me—no, to enable me—to be sillier, more vulnerable, more exposed, and most importantly, more connected to life as it is: raw, paradoxical, intriguing, simple, easy. In turn, the puppet shifts the gears of a conversation in a way that is always improvised, always other than usual, always transformative. The puppet disrupts the set expectations of interpersonal communication in a whimsical manner, and, in doing so, invites a simpler, more spontaneous, less censored response (Stein, 2006). This breaking down of barriers, unexpected, is a liminal space which, more often than not, speaks of our unconscious depths and emerging potentialities (Jung, 1936/1968). Then, at once, all is clearer and I know that I can embody my paradoxes, and that I *can write with integrity and meaning as a published scholar*.

Life fully lived, knowledge of the heart as my heart is: playful, creative, alive, smiling, and full of possibilities.

## Chapter 2 – Where a Liminal Space Is Created

I often think of my office as a liminal space that holds multiple versions of my professional self (Kawka, 2018). Speaking of liminality, Carlson et al. (2020) write: “Although most scholars contend that it (liminalities) defies explanation, it remains a term that can be described, even embodied” (p. 1056). They go on to discuss the act of “twisting liminalities” that can “open avenues for the unthought, the twisted, and the affected domains of knowledge production” (p. 1058). In the context of the neoliberal university, the act of twisting liminalities can not only acknowledge the potential of a threshold, edge, or brink experience, but also underscore the ways in which these experiences can challenge or co-opt normative discourses and spaces. When my door is open and the fluorescent lights are on, I am twisting myself on the edges of my public persona (or at least what I hope is being portrayed as my public persona): PROFESSOR, QUALIFIED, COMPETENT, ORGANIZED.

When the door is slightly ajar, it is a signal to myself and my puppet-officemates (a large black crow and a narwhal) that cracks are beginning to form in my persona. Maybe today, it is more accurate to say that I embody a professor who is tired, a bit anxious, but TRYING HARD. Echoing Camargo-Borges’ imaginative and creative approach to scholarship, Koro et al. (2020) suggest that: “Liminal spaces offer opportunities to stretch scholarship, play with inquiry and knowledge, and experiment with various forms of research-creations” (p. 1061). With the door slightly ajar, colleagues and students will graciously knock and wait a split second before stepping in. They likely do not know they are entering a liminal space where I am teetering, stretching, and experimenting with my professional persona.

When the door is closed and the lights are off, I am likely staring out the window or rearranging the puppets. I may cringe when I hear someone outside the door because I am just being myself: ANXIOUS, uncertain, weary.

Koro et al. (2020, p. 1062) state: “We seek to discover ways in which experimenting and studying within liminal spaces can generate important insights about complexities of human experiences and continuously becoming and changing lives.” Their work outlines the use of flash mobs in different public places and how these performances can twist the binaries often found in academic research: academia vs. broader public, legitimate research vs. arts interventions, researcher vs. participant (pp. 1063-1067). I wonder whether the insights that emerge from contemplating the expanding neighbourhood outside my office window (Rossini, 2021) or finding the best spot for CROW and NARWHAL amidst my books, would be worthy of experimentation and study.

CROW and NARWHAL are reminders of the possibilities that these insights hold for engaging with one’s own scholarly voice(s). The experience of voice can be understood as both metaphorical or imagined AND the “material, sonic experience of voice – learning to gurgle, laugh, scream, speak, sing, and to listen to others doing so” (Weidman, 2015, p. 233; see also Tonelli, 2020). In her chapter on voice in the collection *Keywords in Sound*, Weidman (2015) notes:

How are voices performed in relation to bodies? Just as singers ‘place’ their voices in varying ways inside their bodies and vocal tracts, they also construct an association between the vocal sound they are producing and the image they project, a project that may be more or less self-conscious but it is never simply ‘natural’. (pp. 235-236)

Alongside my multiple professional personas, I have multiple voices: a speaking voice, a singing voice (Levesque, 2019), and a creative voice (Levesque, 2021). These voices are not mutually exclusive. Over the years, however, I have found that to feel comfortable using them—particularly my singing and creative voices—I have to make room for what Liora Bresler calls a “tuned listening” (2019, p. 92). Bresler writes: “Carving our own paths of discovery requires an *internal compass*. The inner voice, often embodied and sensed rather than recognized and verbalized, requires that tuned listening” (p. 92, emphasis in original). Often my speaking voice, whether in a classroom, meeting or conference setting, does not feel natural. It is something I try to place in my body to sound professional. In the aftermath, the physical movement of

closing a door, turning a chair, and facing out a window becomes part of trying to tune in to what is or is not causing the dissonance, the fear that my knees may actually buckle the next time I step into a so-called professional space.

In these moments of tuning in to dissonance and fear over failed performances of professional personas, I pick up John Paul Lederach's book, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (2005). A peacebuilding practitioner, scholar, and poet, Lederach encourages those participating in peacebuilding and constructive social change to "sustain a curiosity about their work, purpose, and learning" (p. 175). Sustaining such curiosity includes finding one's deep inner "voice" and using that voice to locate oneself meaningfully in the world, what Lederach calls finding a "sense of place" (2005, pp. 165-167). Much like Torley's description of connecting to the life of a puppet inside oneself as the beginning of generative play, these movements toward voice and place are inextricably linked with a capacity to listen to oneself and to others ("Animate and inanimate alike!" I hear CROW and NARWHAL cry from the bookshelf. "Yes, yes, animate and inanimate alike. Thanks for the reminder").

Drawing on years of work in situations of protracted conflict, Lederach (2005) underscores that sustaining our curiosity by connecting and listening through the arts and creativity is particularly important when everything feels like it is about to collapse. Acknowledging the challenges of doing so in difficult contexts as well as the limits of his own knowledge, he observes:

I am not sure that I can answer the questions raised in this chapter about the connection of art to the pragmatics of political change in the world. I do know this: Art and finding our way back to our humanity are connected. Politics as usual has not shown itself particularly capable of generating authentic change for the good of the human community. We have to recognize that constructive social change, like art, comes in fits and starts. The greatest movements forward, when you look really closely, often germinated from something that collapsed, fell to the ground, and then sprouted something that moved beyond what was then known. (p. 162)

With these ideas in mind, the puppets on my shelf come to embody a state of not knowing and "unknowing" (Bresler, 2019, pp. 83-85) in the ways in which self, voice, and performance interweave in my work and in daily interactions in the liminal space of my office. They enable a connection, however fleeting, back to the human that breathes between the labels: PROFESSOR, SCHOLAR, RESEARCHER. They also remind me that I am not only connected to broader communities, but that it is my responsibility to

listen to myself and beyond myself (Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2019). Speaking of the difficulties that can arise from attempts to accompany communities in constructive social change, Tomlinson and Lipsitz (2019) write:

Attempting accompaniment will produce mistakes, mistrust, and misunderstandings. Frustration and disillusionment can follow when people discover they do not yet possess the skills, dispositions, and persistence to work effectively across borders and boundaries that fragment society into warring camps. Yet by asking and answering questions important to the increasing numbers of deportable, displaceable, and disposable people in the world, by listening to them, working with them, and seeing our fate as inextricably bound up with them, people all around the world today are forging new social relationships and new social realities that offer a promise of a better future. (pp. 33-34)

In some ways, the puppets accompany me to undo the perception that we all can or wish to compartmentalize our lives efficiently into separate boxes [professional]; [personal]; [creative]; [engaged]; [political]; etc. (Galway & Yerichuk, 2016). The question arises: What happens when you aren't ready to box yourself in?

In their introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Interdisciplinary Research*, Rachel Fensham and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas provide one possible answer to this question: the idea of "movement" as a new paradigm to conceptualize academic thinking (2018, p. 31). Movement: something dynamic, unfolding, emergent, a process. Resonating with Lederach's call to embrace listening to one's inner voice and finding one's place in the world, here the word "movement" points to the embodied ways research is conducted from holding a book, to typing these words, to speaking and being with others, to designing arts interventions with reflection and social change in mind (Bhattacharya, 2018). The word underscores the idea of research as practice – not just concepts and ideas floating aimlessly in the abstract, but grounded in our searches for meaning, acceptance, and belonging in different academic spaces (Bhattacharya, 2019; Sutton, 2020). When confronted by the logic of rigid boundaries and the weight of legitimacy, Lederach's image of collapsing, falling to the ground and then spouting something new flashes before me.

*On the shelf, CROW and NARWHAL fall into each other with much dramatic flair. I send them a pointed glare from across the room, though appreciative of their embodied flourishes. They wink as they slowly grow back to life, a steadfast presence amidst piles of books and papers and file folders.*



In my own times of falling to the ground and/or collapse, how can I sustain a curiosity about my work, purpose, and learning, as Lederach suggests? How do I listen and find my place in the academy, even as I cycle through Bresler's (2019) dynamic of not knowing/unknowing?

*A book lands suddenly on the floor of my office. CROW and NARWHAL look away, whistling. "I am guessing an answer to this question lies in this particular book?" "What?" CROW says. "We just thought we would help you along with your writing..."*

The puppets on my shelf emphasize the curiosity, to use Lederach's turn of phrase, that comes with striving to **become** caring, creative, and generative in my workaday life. This is where I try to stand, at least, in my imaginative, interdisciplinary scholarship. And so, as CROW and NARWHAL whistle and knock various books off my shelves, I am reminded of Wergin's statement that: "Individuals change when they experience cognitive dissonance *and* are motivated to follow it" (2017, p. xlv, emphasis in original). Through their uncanny presence, CROW and NARWHAL provide an alternative logic with which I can connect to my research, teaching, and practice. They participate in the registration of my perhaps quiet yet creative, contemplative dissent to prescriptions, formulaic thinking, and unrealistic expectations. They echo Lederach's counsel that: "Art is a form of love. It is finding beauty and connection in what we do" (2005, p. 161).

A life filled with art and love and music and writing and self-doubt and turbulence and surprise: a quite mundane academic life.

### **Chapter 3 – And What Unfolds Thereafter...**

*We are sitting across a large desk, facing each other, a laptop and notepads by our side. Two puppets, SLOTH and CROW, nest at the edge of the desk, almost touching one another, quiet, seemingly asleep but still alert. NARWHAL has declined the invitation.*

The task at hand is to compose a reflection on two related collaborations during which we featured puppets in the summer of 2019. We wish to illustrate how those puppets changed the dynamics within the room for all participants. We hope to share our experience of these instances of movement, of life fully lived and fully filled.

Our collaboration was born a few months earlier out of hushed hallway exchanges about the chaos of our work environment and the challenges it generated on a daily basis. These exchanges became longer and louder, and were relocated from hallway to office, with the puppets soon joining in. The intervention of the puppets, we noticed, subtly changed the tone of our exchanges. Our conversations were still spontaneous and intense, but they were also less despairing and more assertive. By allowing ourselves to play with the help of the puppets (James & Nerantzi, 2019), we could consciously express greater nuances of feelings and emotions: We could be frustrated and saddened and proud and tired and elated and hopeful and despairing and more, without having to commit to either one as such. It is not so much that the puppets were granted a specific role—as if we deliberately used the puppets as proxy for a therapeutic release of unsettled emotions. Rather, the spontaneous playfulness of inviting a third—or fourth—party into our conversations represented a connection with something more profound, more unconscious.

*The puppet is animated; it is full of anima* (Latin), which translates as being full of soul (Jung, 1954/1968, paras. 53ff; see also Gross, 2011). The puppet is more than a conscious projection of feelings or thoughts; when spontaneously invited into a liminal space, the puppet brings with it a piece of soul which helps us re-member what it is we are seeking, dreaming, experiencing (Jung, 1954/1968, para. 53ff). It calls our bluff and shakes our self-imposed boundaries, and points towards the beauty and connection in what we are and what we are not yet (Bell, 2014; Grant, 2020). In this respect, it is uniquely transformative in ways well described by Robert A. Johnson (1989):

No one ‘makes up’ anything in the imagination. The material that appears in the imagination has to originate in the unconscious. Imagination, properly understood, is a channel through which this material flows to the conscious mind. To be even more accurate, *imagination is a transformer that converts the invisible material into images the conscious mind can perceive*. (p. 22, emphasis added)

*SLOTH nods its head, CROW flaps its wings, both stare at us with a slightly condescending “Told you so” air on their faces. We pretend not to notice and continue to type on our keyboards.*

Our first public exploration of working with puppets took the form of a conference paper presented to a crowd of about twenty-five academics in June 2019 (Rozuel & Levesque, 2019a). In response to the thematic call on “Chaos and Interdisciplinarity,” we crafted a presentation exploring our respective stories of chaotic encounters and

achievements at work. We brought puppets with us—a bunch of finger puppets, a mix of animals and human characters. At the start of our presentation, we distributed the finger puppets to the audience members and invited them to familiarize themselves with them as we shared our stories. We then invited everyone to try out a dialogue with their neighbours through the puppets and to take note of how they felt doing so—silly, weird, amused, annoyed, indifferent, and so on. At the end of the panel, as we thanked everyone for their attention and kindly asked for the puppets to be dropped back in their bag, people started sharing how much they had invested in their finger puppets. Several had spontaneously given them a name; some had a full background story for their puppet. Many enjoyed the opportunity to play, even if it remained an awkward moment or one of uncertainty. One person developed such an intimate bond with their puppet that they could not part from it. They asked if they could keep it. We flew home with one less passenger in our suitcases.

*SLOTH and CROW suddenly gasp, horrified, and move closer to one another. “Rest assured you two,” we quickly say, “we could never part from you like that. You are quite special for us, you know that.”*

What surprised us in this experience was the fact that in the space of merely twenty minutes, those scholars had developed a significant bond with a simple artefact. They had connected with the puppets, and they had explored a different type of connection with the people who sat next to them—a different form of engagement than what occurs when we are just ourselves, with our name tag, hanging around the atrium during the coffee breaks. This liminal space was not only performative but also intuitive and playful. It enabled different identities to emerge and co-exist. It disrupted the status quo.

*“Phew,” says SLOTH “That is heavy stuff...” CROW adds: “But you did drink coffee, yes? Puppets also like coffee...or tea...with milk, no sugar...”*

*“Hey, can you let us finish this paper without interrupting please? We’re on a tight deadline here!” we object. Neither SLOTH nor CROW deigns to reply, but they purse their lips, looking offended.*

Keen to explore the possibilities of this liminal space carved by puppets, we designed a participatory workshop as part of a conference the following August (Rozuel & Levesque, 2019b). This time, we invited the participants (approximately fifteen people, a mix of scholars, students, and community activists) to design their own puppet out of a brown paper bag and a wide range of craft supplies (pencils, coloured paper,

pieces of felt, glitter, stickers, etc.). During the puppet-making process, we asked the participants to consider what qualities or personality their puppet would have, and to give it a name. The puppet was conceived as “the other in me.”

*“Well, I would not trust a human to give me a sensible name...” murmurs SLOTH. CROW cackles sniggeringly. We sigh and shrug off their diss.*

Afterwards, we asked the participants to spread across the room and to start interacting with one another but only through their puppets. They were encouraged to introduce their puppet-selves by name, ask about the other puppets’ story, and continue to roam around and meet others. What followed was a fascinating and fun-filled exchange where we discovered different facets of the individuals we had observed around the room earlier. Some of the puppets were sad and moved slowly, others were exuberant, yet others were very reserved. They were, for sure, mirroring aspects of the people who had brought them to life, but they were expressing something else too: a more layered identity, a less obvious way to present oneself and to relate to others. They symbolized a stirring of the soul at that moment, something that could only be captured through the imagination in an arts-based form.

Later, participants shared that they had been surprised by what they experienced: talking through a puppet was effectively different than talking as themselves, and the puppet had a clearly distinct voice, one that was not always what they had consciously designed at the beginning of the workshop. The learning moment happened in the liminal space opened by the puppets, a moment of spontaneous expression of unconscious depths and creative possibilities (Burge et al., 2016). Mountz et al. (2015, p. 1247) note that through slow scholarship:

We learn by living. ...Living in the world reveals the institutions and policies we need to change and how. Living with and responding to the needs of others keeps us relevant (and human) in ways that no metric can measure. This caring needs to come out of hiding in private times and spaces.

We believe that, in both examples given, the puppets facilitated greatly this coming out of hiding and supported a different caring attitude. The puppets were something each person learnt to care about because they suddenly were infused with something personal, intimate; in turn, the puppets and the people behind the puppets learnt to care about the stories of others in what appeared to be more genuine ways, with a willingness to be surprised, and without expectations.

*SLOTH and CROW ask in unison: “So what now? Don’t you have to write an ‘astute’ conclusion?” SLOTH: “You mean like simply typing the word ‘astute’?” CROW: “I think I prefer ‘perspicacious.’” SLOTH: “Really?”*

*We look over. “Would you like to write the conclusion, then?” SLOTH and CROW, looking innocent: “WHO, US?”*

*We smile. “Please take the floor.”*

## Epilogue

*SLOTH: After careful consideration of all these elaborate elucubrations, I hereby offer a new definition as way of conclusion.*

### **Puppet (plural: puppets), noun**

- (1) A semi-imaginary interlocutor for the self to enter a liminal space that generates insights on intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics.
- (2) A very healthy way of sorting out a human being’s inner chaos.

*CROW (clears throat): I hereby offer a poem on academic life, as a way of additional conclusion:*

### **#ThisIsAnAnxietything**

“Crazy you?”

“Or crazy, me?”

Are you really that anxious?

I don’t know:

Maybe it is you.

Maybe it is me,

And the prerogative to keep it all TOGETHER.

“So glad this hasn’t become an ‘anxiety thing’.”

“No, no, I am so glad I could help, make it better: for you.”

Besides: Now I have more time to appreciate all of my failures.

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