An Early Childhood Educator's Learning Story in the Time of COVID

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Abstract

While it began with a variety of narrative representations of writing personal experiences, since Ellis (2004; Bochner & Ellis, 2016), evocative, performative, and creative nonfiction forms of storying have coalesced to form contemporary autoethnography. For over a decade, Canadian arts education researchers have blazed trails to employ those forms of autoethnography as "learning stories" (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012) to study teaching and learning practices in a variety of school and community educational contexts. Learning stories enable educators to reveal teaching and learning experiences that cannot be represented by, or communicated through, other research forms. The present inquiry, which begins with the story of an early childhood educator, is rooted in the fusion of evocative autoethnography and learning stories with arts-based research, particularly a/r/tography.

Prelude

In early 2020, I (Frances) was preparing to write a thesis that examined arts-based practices and aesthetic experiences in the early childhood classroom. Eagerly anticipating the third term with my pre-kindergarten class, I wondered about the epiphanies/epiphonies (Gouzouasis, 2013) that would present themselves and transform my understandings around the relationships that can be developed between young children and the arts. I knew that I would be swimming in the "unknown," but at that time I didn't understand how rapidly my life as a teacher would change. As my advisor and I were reworking the final details of our behavioral review application, we found ourselves encapsulated by a looming cloud of uncertainty. How would we be able to take photographs of us and the children in movement and music activities? How could we take photos of their creative schoolwork? Where would we create a documentation wall of our upcoming classroom project? Will the review board question the very essence of creative, nonfiction infused autoethnography as research? With each passing day, the world became increasingly dark until I could no longer see. Mired in defeat, we accepted a reality that I would no longer be able to write a thesis as planned. It was simply not possible to teach in my classroom or bear witness to the children's artmaking processes. Thanks to a supportive writing climate and encouraging creative process, I did not abandon my studies. Rather than begin with a formal research proposal outline, I was encouraged to write stories of everything I was experiencing—even if the plots strayed from the paths I'd planned in our initial conversations and thesis proposal drafts. Using autoethnography as a form of living inquiry in a/r/tography (Gouzouasis & Lee, 2002; de Cosson, 2003), and inspired by the a/r/tographic notion of (s)p(l)ace, the following story is how I began to write my teaching experiences in the pandemic storm called COVID-19.

Manic Monday Musings: A Fragment of Teaching From an Apartment Dwelling

"What's the time, Matt?"

I'm uncertain whether or not he heard me, so I deliver a piercing holler this time.

"Matt," I holler from the bedroom, "what time is it?"

"Just wait a second, France."

My throat feels raw now, as if it has been scoured with sandpaper.

"It's 8:04."

"Are you serious? Oh my God," I shriek.

"Um…yeah," Matt replies sarcastically, "aren't you supposed to be on camera at 8:30?"

I regret looking in the mirror this morning. My wrinkly dress, mismatched socks, and wiry mane of hair are artifacts of the frenzy that inhabits me and never leaves. I have every good reason to evict this tenant that continues to dwell in me for forgetting to pay rent. But I fear that it has infiltrated my system like a parasite.

Frenzied Frances.

Frenetic Frances.

Frantic Frances.

The alliterations seem to roll off the tongue. I really don't have time for playful word games. Forget changing my dress.

The way Matt says "on camera" makes it sound as if I'm about to be interviewed on a talk show, and a team of stylists are about to primp me with hair curlers and fake lashes. I could sip on soda water with lemon. But instead, being "on camera" is pretty well the new normal. It's the only way to see other humans beyond the walls of this cramped apartment. The only way to socialize with friends and to have meetings with colleagues. I never imagined myself in a situation in which it was the only way to teach.

"Frances, what are you doing? Don't you need to get going?" Matt calls. His face appears genuinely perplexed, accompanied with raised eyebrows and a slight grin.

"Yeah, I know," I snap defensively. "It's just that," my head begins to hang like a limp noodle, "I kind of lost track of time."

My lips tremble. I really did lose track of time. I spent the past hour organizing my essential oil collection. This is a perfect example of how I experience time strangely. Often a single moment feels as though it's dragging on for eternities. My boredom feels so laborsome that my joints ache. Then there are the times when hours glide by as if they are minutes and I realize that I am struggling to remember the events of the past hour. It's as if moments of my life are waiting for me in a mysterious vortex. I yearn to open that capsule of moments full of times that I was too dazed to truly experience.

Matt widens his eyes and claps his hands swiftly, as if he is shooing away a flock of seagulls.

"Well get a move on, then," he exclaims.

I have no idea where I left the phonics book that I need for my lesson. Darting hurriedly around the living room is not accomplishing anything more than making me look like a panicked mouse. The rug is littered with a flurry of paper clips, hole punch confetti, and receipts I'd been meaning to submit for reimbursement. Finally, I spy the corner of that blasted phonics book. It's hard to miss with its flamboyant red, blue, and yellow colors. Nothing cries "school" louder than a garish arrangement of complementary colors. "The ghastly trio" as I like to call it. I suppose it's in vogue these days for teachers to revolt against the conventional image of "elementary education" as we tend to go for the "natural" look in favor of the notorious apple motif that seemed to dominate my own kindergarten days. Strangely enough, the hokey phonics book has outlived my purge of kitschy bulletin borders.

I always teach phonics on Mondays, ushering in a fresh week with a new letter to learn. This week it is "W." A typical Monday morning would be spent at the carpet with 16 sets of eager little eyes ready to be introduced to a letter as if they were meeting a new friend. But this is not a typical Monday morning.

"Dammit," I mutter under my breath.

I realize that the ever-important phonics CD is probably still in the CD player at school. Here I am, a frazzled teacher starting her workday in her own chaotic apartment. My heart desperately longs for my classroom. It's also a hectic space at times, but a chaos that just feels more… right.

In contrast to my apartment, I envisage my classroom in its ghostly form. It's dark there. The lights are off and it's absolutely silent. Typically, it would be brimming with life, echoing with the sounds of hysterical giggles, squeaky shoes shuffling, and boxes of pencil crayons being dropped. Even so, little traces of life remain: unfinished art projects, paint stains on the floor, and rock collections sitting in now vacant cubbies. It is a snapshot of stillness. A moment frozen in time. My apartment is not my classroom but I'm doing my best to make it work. I don't have the CD I need, but I don't even have a CD player to begin with. YouTube it is. If I can find the darn TV remote.

"Matt," I anxiously shout, "What is the time now?"

He walks over to the kitchen and glances at the oven. I could have easily done that myself. What is becoming of me? He looks at me softly and pauses.

"It's 8:11 now."

His voice is steady and calm, such a far cry from how I'm feeling right now. My body is carrying the weight of all the words I cannot seem to articulate, the ones that remain frozen at the tip of my tongue. I close my eyes and line up my palms and fingers as if I am praying.

"Thank you."

My vision is blurred as I open my eyes. The tears that I'd been holding back are beginning to crawl out of hiding. A single tear flows down my cheek, landing on my wrinkled dress. With a deep exhale, my eyes are fully open and my vision is clear. Matt and I are gazing at each other. In fact, I presume that he's had his eye fixed on me for a few seconds at least.

"Well," I begin to chuckle, "8:11 isn't that bad."

Matt's gaze hasn't yet broken.

"You've got this," he mouths to me.

"I've got this," I think to myself.

This pandemic virus cannot steal my love of teaching and my commitment to these children. Suddenly, my facial muscles relax as I find myself untensing my shoulders. For the first time this morning, I crack a smile. All will be well, and I know it. I know it because I'm excited to see the children this morning.

And I can see the remote control sandwiched between the sofa cushions.

Exegesis

Teaching and Learning in the Age of COVID-19

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a handful of Canadian scholars and educators (e.g., Whitley et al., 2021; EdCan NETWORK, 2023) have published works that speak to the intersectional impact of this trauma, including the intricacies that teachers continue to live with as they adapt their teaching practices through this precarious *kairós*.[1]

As the global threat of COVID-19 intensified, educators transitioned to distance-oriented models of teaching as they endeavored to continue engaging their students in learning (Allen et al., 2020). Along with adapting the delivery of curricular content, given the fear and uncertainty many of them experienced and continue to live with, responding to the social and emotional needs of the children and their families became an especially tremendous responsibility. As schools closed their facilities, families experienced significant disruptions as they found themselves making swift transitions in their work arrangements. All the while, they took on uniquely active roles in their child's education.

Each individual educator's experience of teaching in the time of COVID-19 has been impacted by a constellation of dynamics influencing their personal and professional lives. Some teachers faced a substantial burden when it came to meeting the needs of their students and families, many suddenly found themselves parenting their own young children on the job, while others carried the accompanying anxiety, or in some cases, the grief of witnessing their own family members contract COVID-19, and posing dangers to health and wellbeing of families and friends. These stressors were amplified further by factors such as overcrowded or unstable housing and limited employment flexibility, largely faced by vulnerable communities (Fisher et al., 2020). In the midst of these chaotic times, educators such as elementary school teacher Elizabeth Watson (2020) reflected on their hardships and accomplishments as they adapted their pedagogical practices to meet the needs of their students. For Watson, this included an illustration of how she strived to meet her students' social and emotional needs as well as the restriction in her power to alleviate the systemic barriers families faced in accessing this new model of education.

The Pedagogical Role of Digital Technology in Early Childhood Education

The transition to virtual teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic required creativity and adaptability from teachers of all grade and age levels. Nevertheless, our experiences led us to believe that tensions around the role of digital technology were especially apparent in early childhood classrooms. The absence of a physical gathering (s)p(l)ace (de Cosson, 2003)[2] in which children can tangibly engage their bodies and senses invited early childhood educators to carefully consider the affordances and constraints of using digital technology in educating such young people.

When it comes to defining the role of technology in ECE practice, the field is far from reaching a consensus. That perspective is manifested in a study by Zabaterio et al. (2018), where they reported a diverse range in beliefs and assumptions among Australian early childhood educators around the pedagogical role of digital technology in their practices. Conversely, in advocating for the possibilities afforded through technology, McClure (2018) writes about the "collaborative space in-between adults and children" (p. 159) that inherently exists within the intergenerational use of digital media. She suggests moving beyond the narrow focus on limiting screen time toward considering the aesthetic potentials and future possibilities in supporting technology as a form of "playscape." For instance, digital playscapes offer prospects that are no longer limited by physicality, inviting novel modes of expression and engagement. Rather than segregating children from the process of culture, McClure further imagines digital technology as a facilitator in which young children can explore, create, and interact as citizens.

The necessity to close school facilities as a result of COVID-19 presented a quandary as to how to emulate a (s)p(l)ace for teachers and students to gather in a virtual sense. While there are obvious differences between cyber and geographic (s)p(l)aces, Nichols and Nixon (2013) argue that virtual spaces are constructed using strategies of representation, manipulated through human actors, and embedded in "other" social spaces. For instance, Han (2015, 2017) discusses the opportunities afforded through using virtual worlds to support educational learning environments, noting how they provide a platform "…in which young people can live, play, create, and learn" (Han, 2015, p. 2). Virtual worlds, which are networked environments visually presented to foster social interaction (Han, 2017), provide an illustration of how digital technologies can be accessed beyond a vessel for delivery toward a dynamic learning space (Han, 2015). Considering such dialogue speaking to the sociology of space and place, "cyberspaces" need not be precisely defined or categorized but instead considered in light of their complexities. In tracing possibilities of rhizomatic connections, de Cosson's (2003) discussion around (s)p(l)ace raises the consideration of how we can exist *in-between* the plasmatic boundaries of spaces, places (also see Gouzouasis & Leggo, 2016; Gouzouasis & Yanko, in press), and the process-oriented, shifting temporality of *kairós*.

A/r/tography and Autoethnography

> At heart is the issue of identity; bound up in the autoethnographic process is the exploration of identity, by asking questions such as: Who am I? Who was I then? What am I about? (Nutbrown, 2011, p. 235)

Through the recollections of our lived experiences engaging with research and teaching during a global pandemic, and drawing from the notion of autoethnography as pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 2000), we strive to ignite a process of reflexivity through writing and rewriting the self (see Gouzouasis, 2020; 2024). We endeavor to capture the teacher's learning, through visual and textual representations, with the intent of fostering an emotionally evocative cultural analysis (Heyward & Fitzpatrick, 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016) that speaks to the practice of an early childhood educator in the midst of a global pandemic.

It is worthwhile to clarify that while the discussion of pandemic experiences took place in the context of my (Frances's) teaching practice, the experiences were not centered on the learning of individual students.[3] Gouzouasis (2019; 2024) aptly suggests a differentiation between pedagogy, which focuses on the learning of the child, from *enìlikogy*. Enìlikogy derives from the Greek word "enìlikos" meaning *adult*, and in turn focuses on adult learning and teaching processes. Similar to how teaching practices such as pedagogical narration (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015) and learning stories (Carr, 2001) enable us to analyze student processes of learning, storying a teacher's own processes of teaching and learning serves to invite a reflexive inquiry in an *enìlikogical* sense of becoming an artist-researcher-teacher.

Our work is grounded in arts-based educational research, specifically a/r/tography—a hybrid form of action research used by artist-researcher-teachers—and the a/r/tographic rendering of *living inquiry* that is rooted in autoethnography (see de Cosson, 2003; Gouzouasis, 2006).[4] It deviates from more traditional formats of inquiry where researchers propose a specific question with the intention of finding a single, objective answer or truth. Maxine Greene (1994) suggested a paradigmatic shift from extracting a singular truth toward an openness to the "experiential and organic" (p. 504) is afforded through dialogue that expands the notion of what constitutes "culture." With that background in mind, we are inspired to approach our research as inquiry, and we acknowledge that the process itself may generate more questions or unexpected directions (Sinner et al., 2006). We elucidate our integration of features of a/r/tography into this methodology as a practice-based approach to inquiry (Irwin et al., 2006; Leggo et al., 2011; Gouzouasis & Leggo, 2016; Gouzouasis, 2018). Understanding a/r/tography through a hybrid lens, our intention is to weave multiple forms of inquiry, enabling us to embrace interconnected identities of an artist, researcher, and teacher. Moreover, we endeavor to experience and extend the possibility of embodiment and engagement with the world through publicizing our living practices in evocative ways (Springgay et al., 2005; Sinner et al., 2006). Understanding that a/r/tography is not a formulaic-based methodology, our objective is not to report decontextualized knowledge in the form of "results" but instead to express new understandings through aesthetic, embodied encounters (Leggo et al., 2011).

> A/r/tography allows for divergent, transformative artistic knowing to move through our research as a living practice. (de Cosson, 2003, p. xi)

Moreover, aligning our work with a/r/tographic practices means that there is a significant focus on research "process" rather than emphasizing the "product" in isolation (Gouzouasis, 2008). We approached the research process with the assumption that Frances was in a process of "becoming" an artist, teacher, and researcher (Barney, 2019; Gouzouasis et al., 2013), further reflecting Hannigan's (2012) sentiment that art will become a part of oneself when the process of artmaking is consciously situated within the context of place and study of self. As Hofsess (2013) suggests, arts-based research

facilitates and inspires multiplicities of engagement, inviting expansion across a diversity of vantage points. Fittingly, Eisner (2009) asserts that the open-ended prospects of art require the exercise of imagination, and further argues that, "imagination is the source of new possibilities" (p. 9). Furthermore, understanding arts-based research as rhizomatic and relational augments the possibilities for multiple entry points and understandings (Irwin et al. 2006).

Fig. 1: The gift of your wingspan

As we engaged in a/r/tographic practices to support our teaching and research, we revisited and reflexively wrote about the processes of artmaking that took place over a journey of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] The process of writing *The Gift of Your Wingspan* (represented in Figure 1) provides one example of how poetic inquiry nourished and energized Frances through play. She initially became intrigued by the practice of found poetry, from Richardson's (1992a, 1992b) practice of reconfiguring words that she had reaped from sociological interviews and crafting them into poetic prose.[6] When used as a research approach, poetry has the propensity to "express both affect and context, or affect *in* context" (Furman et al., 2007, p. 303), inviting readers to relate to the text on emotional, spiritual, and existential levels.

Butler-Kisber's (2002, 2008) nuanced discussion of collage inquiry also ignited our curiosity around playing with space, shape, and texture to experiment and create a montage. Fusing the inspirational ideas of Butler-Kisber with Richardson's emphasis on word play, we started the a/r/tographic process with a focus on extracting words from existing texts. However, instead of drawing from participant interviews or scholarly literature (see Prendergast, 2006; 2009), I (Frances) selected words from brochures and

magazines scoured from my living space. Gathering and assembling the existing words, instead generating them myself, involved a surprising degree of patience and openness. I observed how the challenging aspects of the incubation period of poetic play can exercise our imaginative thinking and transform the manner in which teachers and learners interact with their surroundings. Cutting, tearing, layering, and gluing assorted materials against the words invigorated my creative sensibilities in how I endeavored to construct a multi-textural expression of feeling and experience through reforming found visual fragments (Butler-Kisber, 2008).

Both visually and textually, we interpret this poem as a love letter to herself (Frances), caringly and lovingly prompting her to walk mindfully and write boldly. As this poetic collage interacts with an audience, we have faith that its participatory nature will invite readers to be inspired in however may be most meaningful for them. In particular, we hope that fellow early childhood educators find strength in their wingspan and grant themselves permission to speak, write, and play with courage.

Not only do we understand poetic inquiry as a means of reducing our experiences and capturing the depth of human existence in a "compressed, consumable form" (Furman, 2006, p. 561, p. 565), we also imagine it as a way of living and being in the world (Leggo, 2005; Wiebe et al., 2016). Leggo (2005) ruminates about what it means to live poetically, as he calls upon educators to enter an existence centered on listening to and with all of their beings: engaging their spirits, hearts, imaginations, emotions, bodies, and minds.

Codetta[7]

While it seems difficult to fully describe, a multifaceted journey during a challenging timespan in virtual and actual (s)p(l)aces within a short story and brief interpretive essay, we hope to inspirit the sense that a/r/tographic research is about process. Those processes do not reflect a linear model of investigation (or writing) seen in more traditional qualitative studies. Because a/r/tographic practices are rhizomatic in nature, a researcher's experiences and inspirations drift through an ebb and flow beyond the realms of chronological time. We interpret that sense of floating timelessness as a form of *kairós*, and may elucidate our experiences akin to that suggested by Irwin et al. (2006):

> Situations may seem to occur chronologically, but they are rhizomatic. Learning/ creating/inquiring in, from, through, and with situations occurs in the in-between spaces— those spaces that make connections that are often unanticipated. As a result, their timing cannot be planned either. Situations are complex, spatial, and temporal processes that reach beyond linear and binary ways of understanding the world. (p. 72)

In embracing a broadly interpreted notion of *kairós*, we are admittedly neither detached nor objective in this research (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015). We elected to use autoethnographically styled living inquiry as a vehicle for conceptualizing and analyzing the experiences (i.e., "empirical evidence") of an early childhood educator.[8] In recognizing our own worldviews, social influences, and biases, we concur with Ellis et al. (2011) that autoethnography opens a wider lens on the world for both the researcher and the readers. Furthermore, autoethnography enables researchers to become increasingly open to living in

the moment and aware of the existential intricacies that live within their practice (Gouzouasis & Yanko, 2018; 2019).

> We need more stories and autoethnographic research in the early years field as one way to provide such stories which not only stand powerfully alone but also resonate with the challenges of policy and practice—voicing realities beyond the reach of other methodologies. (Henderson, 2019, p. 41)

Historically, early childhood school educators have not had sufficient opportunities to share their stories in public spheres. Thus, many tales of their struggles, tensions, wonderings, and triumphs remain untold (Elliot & Gonzales-Mena, 2007). Henceforth, Elliot and Gonzales-Mena fervently advocate for educators to publicize their stories to ignite a culture of dialogue and practitioner research in the field. Moreover, the presence of emotion, dreamwork, and sensory experience in our stories serves to enable discussions around the complexities and embodied nature of ECE practice (Henderson, 2018).

Upholding the belief that human beings lead storied lives, Yanko and Yap (2020) advocate for practices that nurture rather than hinder the *livingness* that resides in one's experiences. As such, we use autoethnography as a means of reflexively storying lived experiences in ways that cultivate their livingness to create an a/r/tographic living inquiry. Although our storied experiences uniquely speak to particular worldviews, experiences, and existences, they also serve to provide a situated commentary that readers can vicariously engage with and relate to their own practices, unraveling what it means for them within a greater cultural context. From that perspective, we align with Denzin's (2014) belief that every life story fits within a multiplicity of other stories that could be told (within the "ethos" or cultural context), as well as the notion that ethos is one's character of being in relation to self and others (Gouzouasis, 2018). We contend that the publicization of these storied experiences offer an opportunity to critically examine the life of an educator and how it intersects with the stories of other early childhood educators who creatively learned and taught during the pandemic.

Notes

1. The concept of *kairós* may be interpreted as related to temporality (i.e., a temporal notion of space-place or (s)p(l)ace, in relation to the fleeting nature of time as concept). Also see Kohan and Weber (2020) for a discussion of the phenomenological experience of time and the relationships of *aion*, *chrónos*, and *kairós*. Weber urges us to consider time in terms of *aion*—an infinite, elusive, non-objective sense of time—rather than *chrónos*—a prescribed, structured, measured sense of time. Another interpretation of *kairós* exists in rhetoric (see Pender, 2003, p. 96) in the discussion of expressive discourse—the personal writing of experiences in *rhetorical situations*. Rhetorical situations are defined as any form of communication used to modify the perspectives of others. For us, all the visual and performing arts provide many rich forms of communication. There are many other applications of *kairós* in philosophy and developmental psychology.

2. The concept of (s)p(l)ace is a hybrid term that implies object, area, and positionality at the same time (de Cosson, 2003), as well as the relational concepts that emerge when we inter*lace* space and place in a metatheoretical relational manner (Overton, 2003; Gouzouasis, 2006, 2007). It is a metonymic word in that one (space) implies the other (place), one cannot exist without the other, and something new emerges from the relative-relativity of conceptual coaction. As Gouzouasis and Leggo (2016) explain, it is akin to how the notion of liminality "relates to (s)p(l)ace that exists at the surface of a lake, the "mist and midst" that is neither lake nor air, but the consubstantiation of both to create something that is holistic and new" (p. 454).

3. In April 2020, Peter was also forced to rapidly pivot and attempt to teach a graduate course in autoethnography via a new, foreign, online course platform at UBC. He too had never taught virtual lectures and directed virtual discussion groups in "chat rooms" and writing activities. Frances enrolled in the course, and perhaps the most positive outcome to emerge from that COVID-inflicted experience was a proto-draft, "Monday Rush Hour," of the story included herein.

4. The "livingness" of *living* inquiry may be achieved through making art (de Cosson, 2003), actively doing research (i.e., a/r/tography as a form of action research; see Gouzouasis et al., 2013), teaching, and writing (i.e., "graphy")—particularly in creative nonfiction stories where multiple voices help a story come alive (i.e., seem lifelike).

5. Peter wrote two chapters for an edited book in 2020, that are discussed in Gouzouasis (2020).

6. Frances was inspired by readings and experimentation time (6 hours) with a variety of forms of poetic inquiry in a course that Peter led in January–early March 2020 (Writing strategies: Forms of inquiry) with guest presentations by Monica Prendergast and Kendrick James, followed by the autoethnography graduate course that Peter led. An early lineage of poetic inquiry can be traced to autoethnography of the 1990s-early 2000s through the many research papers of Rich Furman (e.g., Furman, 2006; Furman et al., 2007) and Laurel Richardson (e.g., 1992a, 1992b, 1993).

7. We intentionally employ the term *codetta* to describe how we reconnect thematic concepts developed in the formative process of writing our creative nonfiction story and exegesis.

8. Ellis (2004) describes autoethnography as the practice of an "artful, poetic and empathic social science" (p. 30) supported by the joining of self (*auto*), culture (*ethno*) and writing (*graphy*). For expanded, etymologically based notions of autoethnography, see Gouzouasis and Ryu (2015), pp. 401–404 and p. 414; and Gouzouasis and Wiebe (2018), pp. 1–4.

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