

“WHY ART?” WAYS OF RESPONDING TO THE WORLD AROUND US

A Dissertation  
by  
MEL S. FALCK

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APPROVED BY:

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Dr. Greg McClure  
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

---

Dr. Alecia Youngblood-Jackson  
Member, Dissertation Committee

---

Dr. Lee Ball  
Member, Dissertation Committee

---

Dr. Vachel Miller  
Director, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

---

Marie Hoepfl, Ed.D.  
Interim Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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## **Abstract**

“WHY ART?” WAYS OF RESPONDING TO THE WORLD AROUND US

Mel S. Falck

B.S., West Liberty State University

M.A., Appalachian State University

Ed.D., Appalachian State University

Dissertation Committee Chairperson: Greg McClure

This study represents an exploration of how the Expressive Arts and Arts Based Research can be introduced in a seminar class in a rural university in the southeastern United States. It reflects an opportunity to present a curricular format much different from the market driven structural design associated with an increasingly corporate consumed culture that saturates most aspects of our society, even our educational system (Behrent, 2016). This study represents a form of education that defies the structure inherent in not only the sterile features that define our current predicament around education as usual, with its obsession around data driven models, evaluative measures, and accountability policing; but also offers up a form of research that levels the playing field of all involved, researcher and participant alike.

In the world of the Expressive Arts and Arts Based Research, it is not so much that the instructor or the researcher is a keeper of “the knowledge,” but more like a fellow journeyer who has experience in integrating and facilitating expressive encounters that build

relationships with ourselves, one another, and the more than human others that characterize our planetary home of Earth. The Expressive Arts and Arts Based Research methodologies are needed in the field of education in such a time as that they can assist in the shaping of a counter-narrative to the neo-liberalized, anthropocentric, and results driven model we have inherited. This study served as practice to this spirit, by engaging in an Arts Based Research endeavor in a college classroom with the intent of not only re-storying the place of the arts into the curriculum and as a viable research tool, but also as a means of reigniting and inspiring a love for aesthetic responsibility and community to and with the world that we inhabit and become with.

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## **Foreword**

The research detailed in this dissertation reflects an aesthetic and expressive analysis rooted in creativity and the arts and seeks to expand commonly held notions and assumptions about what teaching, learning, and research are. It is an attempt to open our worlds to the possibility of something more in our educative encounters. As such, this dissertation does not follow a traditional format, rather lending itself to a non-model of teaching, research, and writing. It is my belief that this openness allows for the organic emergence of the beautiful possibilities and potentialities that frequently occur when a community of artist/learners come together and create, without rules or limitations, making space for something lovely and wholly new to develop, like the butterfly emerging from its chrysalis to experience the world through an entirely new and more expansive frame.

## Chapter 1



*My gift to you is lack of control. My gift to you is here, now. My gift to you is passing away.*

*Mixed Media Collage, by Mel Falck*

### **Prologue**

The blank canvas or page simultaneously holds possibility and uncertainty. I feel both as I sit here, confronted by the stark reality of the blank pages before me and the enormously overwhelming task of exploring two semesters worth of work generated for this study. It is a

feeling of contraction, of pregnant possibility. Audette (1993) suggests that for the artist and writer there is frequently a private and torturous affliction of beastly proportions, the inner critic, who oftentimes thwarts meaningful progress on our creative endeavors. Both myself and the student-participants associated with this study have been confronted by this beast, this inner critic, throughout our work with this project and as I would encourage my students, the best way to overcome the glaring bareness of a blank paper, canvas, or in my case, digital screen, is simply to roll up one's sleeves, get to work, and make some marks on the page. This study represents just that, an ongoing process of leaning into the work, making our marks in spite of our uncertainties and trepidation, honoring the periods of affective, embodied, and mental contraction, while celebrating the times of growth and expansion, both individually and collectively as a community of artist/researchers.

Framing my identity within this study, I am a fellow a/r/tographer, like the student-participants associated with the class and study. I, like them, seek to understand through the expressive arts (EXA) and arts based research (ABR). I owe them the most profound gratitude for offering their work. They are co-collaborators with me in sharing a perspective, a story of our individual and collective journeys of exploration through the artistic and creative process. As I write, I seek to tell my story and theirs, as we worked alone and yet together, the lines between our respective individual projects and points of view coalescing into a whole, greater than any individual work or perspective. Alone, we have experienced periods of contraction, sinking into our individual mental, emotional, and embodied worlds of self-doubt, fear, and confusion. One student-participant, discussing her painting process wrote, "Something I often noticed about my own body language during painting was that I would often feel stress when beginning a new piece. I would let fear of mistakes overcome

me and hinder my ability to truly express myself.” Another student shares, “My art is a way to document my life even though, oftentimes, I do not feel good enough or equipped enough to create art in the way some of my peers create their art.” I, like the student-participants, have encountered my own internal critic throughout this study’s process, simultaneously struggling to maintain my authentic voice and experience, while at times holding the tension(s) of “not good enough,” and the ever so slight feelings of imposter syndrome.

A feeling of internal contraction has characterized various phases of the study’s development, both in thought and creation. This sentiment seemingly permeates much of the work of others in the study. Yet I’ve welcomed and continue to hold this nebulousness as an inherent part of the ABR process, an epistemology of ambiguity birthed from the postmodern turn in research, welcoming multiplicitous, at times contradictory, temporary, shifting, flowing, and even incomplete meanings (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018). It would seem that contraction is an inherent part of the ABR and a/r/tographical process. I honor it. I hold it in my head and heart. And like the student-participants with whom I’ve had the pleasure of working with, I drive on in the hopes of expansion.

The image found above represents art making as intimately woven into the fabric of the research, inquiry, and learning process of this study. This mixed media self-portrait/collage was created as an artistic response to one of the student-participants of this study’s work. This piece speaks to the chaos associated with the interpretation process involved in the evolution of the study, the numerous tensions and ambiguities that have existed in its growth, to include the uncertainties and shifting nature of and value placed on meaning itself. I found meaning to be a slippery conundrum throughout the research process and considering its highlighted import as exhibited in its inclusion as one of my research

questions, I remain puzzled by its implications. I began the research process with the intent that the art produced would help to expand meaning for both myself and the consumers of this dissertation, however, the more I reviewed the art and writing of the students and reflected upon the experiences we shared together in the class, the less clear it became that meaning is truly even a central feature of EXA and ABR based encounters. Meaning no doubt matters for us humans, for it gives us a sense of grounding and purpose in our thoughts and actions, however, as I hope the proceeding writing indicates, meaning as it pertains to this study has evolved and has presented as a curious character in the research process, a problem of sorts that I suspect will remain with me following completion of this particular work.

The art found throughout these pages represents an attempt to visually express that affective experience of chaotic and poietic ambiguity so frequently associated with the artistic process. This experience of self-doubt and nebulous tension was shared by both myself and the student-participants, but as one student-participant notes in their arts based research (ABR) project reflection, “Overtime, through practice, I was able to separate my feelings of fear and set them aside, and trust that my body and mind would come up with whatever I truly wanted to create. The most compelling aspect of being able to set aside fear and judgment during the creation of art, is the growth I’ve seen in my own artistic ability.” In setting aside fear for the sake of growth, I offer to you, the reader, this humble attempt at introducing you to this class and study “Why Art? - Ways of Responding to the World Around Us,” which sought to place the arts at the forefront of the teaching, learning, writing, and research processes, for both myself and the students engaged with this class and work.

## Introduction

In many ways “Why Art?” is the culmination of years of experience and work in the arts, education, and therapy. The arts, therapy, and education have always played a role in my life and will continue to do so even after I meet the requirements for this degree. I am an expressive artist and as such, I consistently seek to incorporate the arts into the work I do personally, professionally, and academically. In short, I’m a believer in the arts. I’m a believer in the creative and poietic process to help us learn, understand, and engage with ourselves, one another, and the worlds within and around us. I’m a believer in the EXA as a pedagogical tool to help offer a glimpse and experience into the realities of our at times contracted selves, while also granting us the means to encounter expansiveness and growth, both alone as individuals, and together within communities.

This dissertation is my exploration of how the EXA and ABR can be introduced in a seminar class in a rural university in the southeastern United States. It is also an opportunity to present a curricular format much different from the market driven structural design associated with an increasingly corporate consumed culture that saturates most aspects of our society, even our educational system (Behrent, 2016). This corporate culture, as it is purposefully woven into the very fabric of every relational and psychic aspect of the educational experience, from Pre-K through Higher Ed, is characterized by an escalation and proliferation of evaluative measures for all involved, students, teachers, and administrators. It is a format for conducting education and research that trades free expression, creativity, collaboration, collegiality, and relationality for strict procedure and evaluative measures (Behrent, 2016). It is largely an experience of contraction, a shrinking from our full humanity. Surrendering our free and expressive natures to bureaucratic systems that seek to

control for chaos, establishing order and surety, but at the expense of artful and soulful expression that honors our unique individuality(ies).

Throughout this study and the class, students note the internal fears and anxieties that come to light through the ABR process, confronting their own inner critics, perfectionism surfacing as one of the primary themes associated with the work. I don't believe that this commonality of experience regarding fear of failure for both myself and the students is irrelevant. It is my contention that this pent up frustration, this fear and constriction to be freely and courageously expressive is a trained response to and direct result of the neo-liberal impact on our educational heritage. Speaking to this point, of the connection between neoliberalist educational practices and anxiety de Lissovoy (2018) writes, "The fear that characterizes neoliberal landscapes of competition is praised as a spur to initiative and innovation" and that, " In education, the topography of anxieties connected to these themes is associated with processes of competition and accountability" (p. 191).

The rise in clinical anxiety of our students, as I see with my students in the class I teach and through this study, can arguably be traced to the rise in strict accountability measures in our educational institutions that thwart more meaningful and heartfelt activities of soulful expression. De Lissovoy (2018) contends that teaching that fails to confront this problematic of anxiety in our students and ourselves "will have little chance of reorganizing possibilities for students in an emancipatory frame" (p. 191). A recent study conducted by the American Psychological Association reports that teens are more stressed than adults and things like high stakes testing, early school start times, and homework overload contribute to their anxiety (Walker, 2016). Similarly, a study from the Pew Research Center reveals that



61% of those surveyed shared that they feel an immense amount of pressure around obtaining good grades (Menasce Horowitz & Graf, 2019).

The more we feed the myth of endless progress, achievement, and advancement in our educational encounters, the more we will fail to see the forest for the trees in our lives as beautiful mystery and life itself as a sacred song, dance, or poem, an ever shifting and changing fluidity of being. The more heavily we rely upon strict achievement-oriented measures in our teaching and learning, the more we will fail to see that we have the ability to live aesthetically sensitive and responsive lives that are not marked by our academic and professional progress within a competitive economic system, but that we have value simply because the beauty of life flows through us here, now. In our quest for more knowledge, more money, more credentials we are increasingly failing to realize the wisdom in that there is no race to be won, no final finish line to cross (saving death), where happiness will finally be obtained if only we get that next degree, grade, position, or pay raise. In our ever present race to the top, I fear that we deny the preciousness of each breath we breathe and succumb to the illusion that if only we achieve x, y, and/or z, we will have finally made it. The race to the top, in reality, becomes the carrot at the end of the stick, the donkey never reaches its tasty treat, nor does the hamster running on the wheel, exerting much effort, ever succeed at making it to its final arrival point.

Yet the EXA and ABR are here to teach us differently. Learning, research, education itself, dare I say, can be fun, playful, evocative, exciting, healing, and on and on! Why do we commit to burdening ourselves with chains to a method of curriculum development and pedagogical execution that fails to excite passion, touch the deepest parts of ourselves, and suck the very marrow from our soulful, creative, sensual bones?! It's madness! This study

represents a form of education that defies the structure inherent in not only the sterile features that define our current predicament around education as usual, with its obsession around data driven models, evaluative measures, and accountability policing; but also it offers up a form of research that levels the playing field of all involved, researcher and participant alike. In the world of EXA and ABR, it is not so much that the instructor or the researcher is a keeper of “the knowledge,” but more like a fellow journeyer who has experience in integrating and facilitating expressive encounters that build relationships with ourselves, one another, and the more than human others that characterize our planetary home of Earth.

I’m using ABR and the EXA because they are research and pedagogical tools that have an inherent way of serving as liberatory forces of free expression and emotive and intellectual expansion. They are the opposite of the controlling, hegemonic, and contractive features that define the rise in neoliberalism influenced education. Some of the ideas associated with both ABR and the EXA which have facilitated this movement of learning towards liberatory practice and creative expansion include poiesis (knowing through making), education as a therapeutic and healing practice, liminality (the in between and transitional nature of coming to know through artistic engagement;), community/collaboration (the power of engaging in creative encounters with others), embodiment (the body as a source of knowing, beyond sheer intellect), and aesthetic responsibility (responding to the learning and research processes with a sense of beauty in heart and mind). These concepts serve as a counter to the neoliberalist onslaught in education which seeks to “install relations of competition as a way of increasing productivity, accountability and control” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 326). This study represents a response to the hegemonic, controlling, and contractive forces that are an inherent aspect of

neoliberalist educational objectives. Part of that response involves the incorporation of these tools to help facilitate encounters within a classroom community in higher education to grow experiences of authenticity, feeling, connection, community, and a more attuned sense towards the aesthetic quality of life.

### **The Problem, as I See It...**

A formalized education, maintained by and held within institutional structures, situated as gateways to social and economic position advancement, serve as places of contradictory inter/intra-actions and tensions. There exists a certain schizophrenic nature to the educational landscape, whereby we simultaneously engage with the work of critique and resistance against status-quo methods of pedagogy and curriculum, yet while operating within the same institutional structures and assemblages of oppression that require our complicity. Standardization and assessment, as exhibited in such tests and assessment tools as EdTPA, Praxis Core, Praxis II and NES, all assume the universality of teaching and learning, and have subsequently reduced the educational experience to a set of rote procedures, depleting its capacity for creativity, beauty, and, I would argue, healing, to be infused into our work as educators, researchers, and administrators. Saltman (2011) suggests that such standardization practices reflect a corporate logic, whereby performance and authoritarian hierarchy replace curiosity, critical thought, and teacher autonomy. In a pedagogy of regulatory enforcement, there is little room for, acceptance of, or value seen in difference.

The battle against the calculated and at times unconscious onslaught of neo-liberalization in education has been lost; privatization and corporatized objectives have seeped into every facet of our individual and collective psyches, evidenced by the ever

increasing demand for “more” no matter the cost to sustainable, life affirming, and aesthetic encounters with ourselves and one another. Wilkins (2018) defines neoliberalism as an ideology driven by economic and political agendas that favor public-private partnerships that contribute to the diminishment of collective bargaining and an increase in private sector takeover of public sector administration. De Lissovoy and Cedillo (2016) characterize neoliberalism as an alteration of educational policy by moving decision making over public educational institutions from teachers and local administrators to business and political elites. They argue that control is achieved through the reorganization of schools around standardized curriculum for the purposes of increasing student achievement via streamlined management initiatives in order to achieve efficiency and accountability (de Lissovoy & Cedillo, 2016). Not unlike the fast paced, high powered, culture of corporate America, the Academy is one of hurried and frantic movement from one egoic accomplishment to the next, in a never ending litany of achievement, production, and self-justification. There seems little time to be still and allow for quiet contemplation of our relationship to ourselves, other humans, and the more than human world we inhabit, the others that include our local biomes, the plants, animals, forests, lakes, and rivers that provide our life sustaining systems. To make matters worse, disciplines like the EXA, arts education, and ABR, which possess the innate capacity to foster creative, contemplative, visionary, and affective educative experiences have largely become marginalized within our institutional and curricular evolution (Verner Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013).

Education has clearly failed to counter neo-liberalist oriented agendas and instead has succumbed to its enticements, offering a model of education that follows strict procedures for teaching and learning, disconnecting us from a more creative and profound experience and

engagement with the world. An educational culture steeped in these cultural realities rejects arts based means of engaging with education, considering these pedagogical approaches as fringe. Though arts based education is given superficial lip-service (like adding the “A” for Arts to the STEM acronym), it is neglected in being purposefully woven into the fabric of educational objectives, as evidenced by the lack of attention, funding, and acknowledgement provided to creative arts related disciplines.

### **Why This Study?**

Arts based established practices and disciplines like the Expressive Arts (EXA) and Arts Based Research (ABR) methods offer a counter-narrative and antidote to the unacknowledged neo-liberal conscious and unconscious agenda within the field of education (Atkins & Snyder, 2017; Ostertag, 2018). The purpose of this study was to utilize the EXA and ABR as a means to de-privilege and challenge the assumptions associated with education as practiced under a neo-liberalist logic. This study will also serve as a political statement in the promotion of the EXA and ABR as legitimate tools for “doing education” in their own right, considering that arts based pedagogical and research practices exist on the fringes of the Academy and educational institutions, due not only to their misunderstood and underappreciated nature in a corporatized culture, but also because of their fundamental focus on process over product, affect and experience over reason and rationality, wisdom over knowledge, community over hierarchy, the sacred over the mundane and profane, the metaphysical over the physical. Unlike other disciplines and approaches to institutional organization, the EXA and ABR possess an innate comfortability with ambiguity, tension, and mystery, the not knowing and “isness” of experience (Atkins & Williams, 2007; Gerber et al., 2012).

EXA and ABR methodologies are needed in the field of education in such a time as that they can assist in the shaping of a counter-narrative to the neo-liberalized, anthropocentric, and results driven model we have inherited. In discussing a nature based approach to the EXA, Atkins and Snyder (2017) affirm the anthropocentrism that permeates much of our culture and offer a definition of the EXA as an integrable and interdisciplinary way towards life enhancement; one that returns us to a more archaic appreciation for engagement with the arts, honoring their capacity to produce affect and build our empathy for and sensitivities towards ourselves, Earth, and others, both human and more than human alike. This study served as practice to this spirit, by engaging in an ABR research endeavor in a college classroom with the intent of not only re-storying the place of the arts into the curriculum and as a viable research tool, but also as a means of reigniting and inspiring a love for aesthetic responsibility and community to and with the world that we inhabit and become with. This research project was, therefore, ultimately an aim in reimagining, through which the student-participants were introduced to the potential of the arts to instill a sense of enchantment for the living world (Atkins & Williams, 2007).

The class I taught, “Why Art? Ways of Responding to the World Around Us,” serves as one example of pushing back against the current business bias in education. It is an example of art and creativity for art’s sake and recognizes the value of incorporating art making practices into the curriculum and one’s daily life, not for the sake of productivity or for the market economy, but instead as a means to become more fully human. This study assumes, as Atkins and Snyder (2017) indicate, that “we are most well when we are connected with the natural world and our creative selves” (p. 26). Likewise, a recent review of arts based interventions delivered to children in nature and outdoor spaces support the

notion that engagement with the arts, combined with exposure to the natural world promotes physical, social, emotional, and linguistic development (Moula et al., 2022). This work in the EXA conjectures that creating, painting, drawing, moving, singing, dancing, the poetic experience, all are integral aspects of what makes us human and has value because engaging in creative practice(s) brings us joy, helps us to express our grief and sorrow, connects us more deeply with ourselves and others, and speaks to the deep mystery of our individual and collective existence(s). As neo-liberalism continues its political, economic, cultural, and psychic onslaught, penetrating seemingly every aspect of our world(s) and dictating our educational and relational encounters, this study lifts up the arts as a counter to business and education as usual, making space for a more full range of human emotion, expression, creation, and experience.

In this arts based qualitative study I observed a class I taught, “Why Art? Ways of Responding to the World Around Us” over the course of two semesters at a rural university in the southeast in order to understand the impact of EXA and ABR based interventions in doing education differently through the exploration of the art making processes of both the student/participants and myself as a/r/tographer of the study. The following three research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What is the relationship between EXA, ABR, therapy, and education?
2. How does the EXA concept of embodiment shape and inform educational encounters?
3. How does ABR inform the meaning making process?

“Why Art?” and this research was purposefully designed to facilitate a counter-narrative to reductionist and standardized practices situated within the educational climate of our day,

acknowledging the neo-liberalist and positivist influences and monopolization of research and knowledge creation. Through both the course and the study, I, the a/r/tographer, sought to centralize artistic creation as a means of conducting inquiry unto itself. It was framed as openly as possible, to allow for the organic and natural emergence of its outcomes. As such, the study has grown, shifted, and changed since its inception, unfolding and enfolding, contracting and expanding, in its evolution. I will discuss the course design itself, the research methodology, methods, and framework that informs the study in depth in chapter 3 of the writing, but let me first give a brief introduction to the work that served as the foundation for the arts based exploratory process. The artwork produced during our in class experiences, the individual student ABR projects, and my own artistic responses to the student work served as the central forms of sense making that shaped the study. Other forms that I explored as part of the study included student ABR final reflection papers, student ABR in person and videographic presentations, students' and my own visual journals, online discussion forums and posts from the course, artwork produced during in class experiences, my own classroom observation audio recordings and notes, and the personal reflection memos I wrote following my review of student work, all helped to shed light on the experiences had by myself and the students of two separate classes over two distinct terms.

Of qualitative research, Durdella (2019) writes, "As much as research traditions or genres impose a structure, through applications of standard or accepted approaches, and level of sophistication to research projects, they generally do not control for all of the aberrations, anomalies, and exceptions that occur in studies" (p. 10-11). As indicated, the qualitative path to research can and should include many twists and turns in the meaning making process. One of the student-participants of the study pondered this in their own research stating, "Arts



based research for me, is never ending...the more you learn and discover about a topic, the more questions you develop.” As I learned more from the student-participants, my questions began to shift dramatically. The more I viewed and reviewed their work, the more humbled and grateful I became at their openness, honesty, and courage to share their ABR processes. The humans associated with this study and their respective journeys through the arts have become *a*, if not *the* central feature of this study. I hope that my writing and art making adequately honors their thoughtful and heartfelt contributions.

## Chapter 2

### Conceptual Framework

The first class with a new group of students is always the most anxiety producing for me (personal communication, January 15, 2020). Reflections from my observation notes of this initial class indicate that I arrive about 30 minutes early, moving tables to the sides of the room deemed “the Great Hall” and the room does indeed capture a certain aspect of “greatness” in the spaciousness afforded. High ceilings, rich, dark wood paneling and floors, a stage with a piano, large windows that share a view of the forest the building inhabits, it is quite possibly the perfect space for an art studio class. Each class is arranged in the same format consisting of three “areas.” The first area, where we conduct our openings and closings as a group, includes chairs arranged in a circle with art making materials placed in the center to be used as part of our opening activities. The second area is arranged according to the art making experience planned for the day and could include tables and chairs to draw, paint, and create upon or be completely open to facilitate any music and movement activities or presentations that are designated for the class. The third area in the large room involves the staging of various art supplies on tables to be utilized for the class session.

In this initial class for the second term that composed the study, I introduced the students to the syllabus and various course requirements, but not first before sharing an opening prompt, a staple at the beginning of each class. Gathered in a circle, I introduced myself and directed the students' attention to the drawing utensils and paper located in the middle of our chairs. The students are invited to draw how they are feeling in the present

moment along with an intention that they bring for their experience in the class. I introduce them to the concept of the inner critic that often criticizes our art as never good enough and encourage them to create in spite of what self-judgment might arise. After drawing for about 5-10 minutes I then invite the students to speak into the circle offering their drawing and response to the group. I'm surprised at how open this group already is to the process, a number of students sharing their intention to be fully immersed in the art making that the course will introduce them to. A few students speak to their wounding around their creative selves, often occurring in childhood, not feeling "good enough" as an artist to continue in their art making endeavors. A few students speak to the judgment of their parents or teachers of their art, serving to inhibit their creativity. This is a picture of a typical class opening, through which we begin entry into the liminal space of art making, an important aspect of the EXA.

Both the class itself and the corresponding study have been a constant balancing act between providing adequate openness in the research process to allow for the organic and creative emergence of the experience(s) while also providing enough structural frame and foresight to mold and make sense of the encounter(s) associated with both my experience and the student/participant's experience. The development of the conceptual frame serves as one means to facilitate the formulation of important ideas that have emerged thus far. A conceptual framework can be distinguished from a theoretical framework in that a theoretical framework relates to an already existing theory or philosophy. Maxwell (2013) puts forth a similar but different perspective of a conceptual frame, purporting that it is something developed at the beginning of a research proposal to inform the direction of the study. He adds that a conceptual frame consists of an arrangement of the researcher's ideas,

expectations, and beliefs that scaffold and mold the research design and implementation (Maxwell, 2013). It is my contention, too, that a conceptual frame evolves throughout the study, from proposal to final written product in an iterative process that dances amongst and between experience, theory, and scholarship. The conceptual frame, therefore, influences the very first intimations of research design and continues throughout the process of meaning making. It not only influences our initial decisions around the research, but is also derived from an intimate knowledge of and engagement with the artwork and writing produced. The process of developing conceptual frames is an ongoing and iterative process that requires the researcher to move between the emerging concepts, and in the case of this study, the artwork and writing generated as a means of creative exploration (Jabareen, 2009).

In the following section I will discuss how my personal lived experiences, key concepts, and theories associated with the EXA and ABR have informed the study in its evolution and unfolding. These key concepts are by no means exhaustive or static, but are important features in understanding the EXA and ABR process. Some of these concepts include poiesis, embodiment, liminality, expression, imagination, active participation, and aesthetic responsibility; all are critical components of the EXA, ABR, and the conceptual framework that I bring to this study (Atkins & Williams, 2007; Atkins & Snyder, 2017; Expressive Arts Therapy, 2015; Herman, 2016; Levine, 2015, 2019). These ideas were prevalent to my personal lived experience as a student of the EXA and found their expression throughout the continual development of the class I taught and the study as a whole. I will now expound upon these core elements of my conceptual framework, beginning with a discussion of how my lived experience led me to this work and influenced my perceptions as I began this study's development.

## **Personal Lived Experiences**

Discussing the relevance of the researcher's experiential knowledge in concept framework generation Maxwell (2013) contends that, "separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks" (p. 38). He goes on to argue that open acknowledgement and direct expression of the researcher's identity and experience has both theoretical and philosophical support in the research process (2013). Similarly, in discussing the a/r/tographical process of research development and execution, Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) submit that the researcher is not an objective and singular player in the research process, but rather an individual who navigates multiplicitous identities within a community of others that inform the entirety of the research process.

If this is the case, then, to be aware of one's biases, subjectivities, and experiences facilitates the crafting and expression of the story being told. One's subjectivities cannot be escaped, in fact they shape the entirety of the study, from selection of the topic to the writing up of the findings, an individual's subjectivities help to form, inform, and influence the work (Maxwell, 2013). It is in considering the influence of the researcher's subjectivities on the research design and execution, then, that I include my story as part of the unfolding that is this arts based study. It is at this point in the writing that I will explore the identity(ies) and subjectivity(ies) which have shaped and continue to facilitate the growth of this work, including an introduction to some of the concepts that helped to facilitate its becoming.

Like all of us, my identity is flexible, fluid, and multifaceted. I am not only an expressive artist, but also a therapist, an educator, and a researcher, at least professionally and academically speaking. These identities and roles serve as the lenses through which I've

conceptualized, formed, played, and created within this study. As an expressive artist I seek to bring creative and artistic encounters and experiences into the work. Through the expressive arts my intention is to build community connections by means of self-expression, exploring and discovering together the possibilities and magic that frequently unfold when people come together to create in a shared space. As a therapist I place a deep value on the emotive experience of the human and consider the embodied experience of emotion as exceedingly relevant to the educational encounter. As an educator and researcher, I remain curious about the learning process itself and how intellect and affect intersect to inform our knowledge generation and acquisition. These professional and academic identities inform my work in the arts, therapy, and education and are directly tied to the research methodology that is woven into this study in the form of autoethnography, as well as serving as the context for the concepts and ideas that have guided this study from its earliest inception.

Some of my earliest memories revolve around the arts and music. My mother served as an art instructor for my elementary school when I was a child. I can remember feeling such a sense of pride at that fact. I can remember my dad's paints and guitar sitting in our living room and the feeling of wonder and fascination I felt towards these tools of creativity. My grandfather was a singer and had such a beautiful and powerful voice that it chased away any semblance of fear or uncertainty. As I write, pondering the creative capacities of my earliest caregivers, I feel. I feel gratitude for their love, commitment, and courage. I feel sadness, that though my father had a propensity and interest in the arts, and though we likely could have bonded over our respective creative interests, he chose to pursue another life that didn't include my mother and me. I feel hope, in that which has begun in me and the student-participants associated with this study, is coming to fruition.



*“My People,” mixed media collage by Mel Falck*

As a child, the arts and music were an escape for me, a way for me to relish in my internal worlds of imagination and creativity. In my adult life the arts and the EXA in particular, have become a means of expansion, growth, and connection, for myself and the communities of which I am a part. The academic and professional choices I have made thus far converge on this culminating moment of academic performance. While pursuing my minor in art as an undergraduate student, I had the privilege of working with faculty artists and peers who were passionate and dedicated to the visual arts. For these folks, art wasn't complimentary to the curriculum, it *was* the curriculum. I am grateful for people like Bob Villamagna and Paul Padgett, dedicated artists who instilled in their students a passion for the creative process, combined with a playful spirit for art making, and a commitment to the work of art making itself. I can hear Bob now, “Keep painting.”

Following completion of my undergraduate degree I worked in social services for a couple of years, specifically with a local domestic violence prevention agency. It was

important work and I felt honored to be one of only a few men who worked with the agency, but at the time, in my early twenties, I felt a pull to something more, something bold, adventurous, and even foolish. That sentiment of bold adventurousness landed me an enlistment with the U.S. Army. After seven years of service, a couple of promotions, and a combat tour to Iraq, I had become even more convinced of my purpose to pursue a career in the arts and therapy. This led me to Appalachian State University (App State), where after meeting Dr. Sally Atkins, Dr. Keith Davis, and students enrolled in the EXA and counseling master's programs, coupled with the magnetic pull of the Appalachian mountains, I was convinced beyond any doubt that the EXA program at App State was to become my new home and destiny.

I share this with you, the reader, not to bore you with the details of my personal journey, but to make clear that it was only after being thrust into an environment of contraction, one that was the polar opposite of what I believe aesthetic, artistic, and creative communities represent, that I was able to fully recognize my soul's longing for deep and meaningful expression and connection with others through artistic engagement and therapeutic practice. Jung (1964) writes that when a person tries to follow their unconscious, they will often be unable to do what is expected of them socially, but rather they must separate from their known group and other personal connections to discover themselves. The EXA community and curriculum at App State offered me an opportunity to think and feel in ways very different from my work and experience up until that point in my life. It was and continues to be an experience of affective and embodied expansion and it was through the EXA curriculum at App State that I was first introduced to ABR. It is in this same spirit that I strive to teach, that the students in my course may be introduced to new and exciting



concepts around the arts and affective and embodied ways of knowing that contradict standard pedagogical practices of neoliberal education as usual.

To continue my personal journey of “unlearning” through the arts, a course titled “Current Issues in the EXA” exposed me to ways that the arts could be utilized as a means unto itself, to conduct research and inquiry. I took the proverbial ball and ran with it, conducting a multi-modal exploration of my research question through mask making, drumming, poetry, painting, and movement. I felt raw, vulnerable, and exposed through the performance/presentation of my “findings.” The entire process felt cumbersome and unruly. I felt laid bare and simultaneously empowered and emboldened. In many ways it didn’t make linear sense. It was an incredibly aesthetic and affective experience and on an intuitive level, it felt “right” and “valid.” Chilton and Leavy (2014) express this exact sentiment in discussing the validity of ABR, suggesting that validity in ABR is determined by means of an “artful authenticity,” the authenticity and reflexivity of the artist/researcher lending to both the aesthetic quality of the ABR being conducted, as well as the legitimacy of the work being produced. My initial experience with ABR as a master’s level student was incredibly deep, meaningful, and emotionally cathartic. I continue to use it as a touchstone for my current work with ABR and as a point of reference for the students enrolled in the art course that I now facilitate.

Numerous ABR researchers and writers express this sentiment of raw vulnerability in the process of making art for an ABR exploration. Discussing the vulnerability of the artist/researcher/teacher in the ABR process Green (2020) asks, “What happens when an educator reveals their own vulnerability as part of the educational encounter” (p. 1)? Green contends that the movement of the artist/researcher/teacher into the wilderness of wild and

untamed emotive, psychic, creative, and expressive experience is contestable by typical standards of knowledge inquisition. Green asserts that though exploration within these murky waters of ABR can be filled with uncertainty, they are also equally rewarding. This was my initial experience of ABR and continues to hold true in the midst of this study, as I struggle with the complexity of the work generated, while attempting to make sense of it all, and while continually checking in with myself on the level of authenticity I seek to maintain throughout the work.

### **Power of Art to Transform Education**

It was through these personal, raw, and vulnerable experiences with the arts that I have come to learn of the power of creativity, fostered and shared within supportive community(ies), to transform personal experience and educational encounters. These experiences of liberatory expansion, facilitated through engagement with artistic media, ignited in me a new passion for learning, an experience disparate from the neoliberalist reform with its ever increasing obsession with performance and evaluative measures. I hope to ignite that same passion for the arts, creativity, and learning in the students I work with. Regarding the rise in measurement of performativity in education, Ball (2003) writes, “The new performative worker is a promiscuous self, an enterprising self, with a passion for excellence. For some, this is an opportunity to make a success of themselves, for others it portends inner conflicts, inauthenticity and resistance” (p. 215). The EXA and ABR propose a different way for humans to engage with learning, a form of education that trades superficial bureaucratic measures for authentic interaction with materials, self, and community.

One such example of engagement with materials in a poietic and liminal encounter that helps to facilitate non-judgmental and authentic engagement with art making materials includes our class painting activity. This particular class is designed to first, introduce students to embodied expression, through which awareness is raised around art making as a full body, sensory experience and second, help the students and the class community foster a non-critical, open approach to making, viewing, and interpreting art. I open the class with everyone encouraged to grab a paint brush, no paint or paper yet, just a brush. We then space ourselves out to facilitate a movement experience through which students are invited to close their eyes while holding their brushes in front of themselves. With music playing, they are then invited to begin moving, “painting” with their brush, envisioning a canvas in front of them, feeling the music, moving with the music as they feel drawn. The students are completely immersed in the process, following my guidance and moving, “painting” to the music. After this 10 minute, decentering activity, helping to soften our fears and defenses around creative expression, I then invite the students to gather their paint supplies, watercolor paper, paints, and palettes. Once they find an area to paint I encourage them to paint, much like the movement session prior, feeling their way into the work — intuitively, not rationally. Minimal direction is given purposefully. They are simply instructed to paint while bringing awareness and focus from their intellectual experience to their embodied experience, allowing the process and painting to emerge as it will. The music continues as the students ardently paint, minimal conversation, music, movement, painting.

As does frequently occur during any deep art making experience, time is altered and the class passes by much more quickly than expected. With 30 minutes remaining I then encourage the students to hang their paintings around the spacious room on the walls,

informing them of our gallery walk. Specific parameters are shared as part of our interaction with everyone's art. We will only use the following phrases when we comment on our friend's art including "I see...", "I feel...", "I imagine..." This specificity is to help ensure that we, as a community, stray away from judgment of good or bad, right or wrong in our offering, instead steering us to a playful and imaginative interpretation of the work serving to build up each individual artist and leading to more open, free, spontaneous, and fun expression together. Standing together at each piece, each artist is invited to share briefly their experience and process of painting. The class is then invited to comment on their peer's work. One student responds, "I see a pink dolphin." Another shares, "I imagine a springtime day." Someone else answers, "I feel hopeful." We continue to each artist in the class's work, laughing together at some of the responses to work, holding space for others, it becomes evident that a safe space of non-judgment is being fostered and grown, each student being incredibly sensitive and aware of what one another needs in the moment. No one is ridiculed. No one is critiqued. We close the class together, a felt sense of accomplishment and connection present. At the beginning of the class, before our opening activity, students sat in silence, staring blankly at their phones. Upon conclusion of class the energy is palpable. The students are talkative, excited about their ABR projects, and engaged with one another. Many students stay after class to speak with me about their individual ABR project ideas.

It is through experiences like this, both as a student of the arts and now as an instructor and researcher, that my belief in the fundamental value of creativity to help us think, understand, and feel differently, is reinforced. The neoliberalist impact on education has provided us an exceedingly limited view of the role of creativity in learning and as Kalin (2016) explains, "While creativity is desperately needed, it is sorely lacking in schooling.

Education's role in the economy as a generator of creativity and innovation is hard to establish within current structures of public schooling" (p. 40). Similar to the argument associated with this dissertation, Kalin (2016) suggests the need for a "reappropriation of creativity for education that pushes back against the current business bias with expanded meanings and purposes that do not align with creativity for industry alone" (p. 33).

Evaluative measures are sweeping across the educational landscape like an ominous dust storm in the desert. Market-style, competitive-based quantitative and qualitative measures are increasingly replacing more collaborative ways of educational procedure and are dramatically influencing the ways we conduct curricular design and pedagogical interactions (Behrent, 2016). These neo-liberalized epistemological efforts have traditionally excluded the arts from their models, but it is my contention that the infusion of the arts, specifically the utilization of the EXA and ABR practices in curricular development, pedagogical inter/intra-action and research design, serve as an antidotal remedy to the purposeful and detrimental onslaught against vulnerable, sensitive, empathic, and creative educative experience. The current battle is not only for the heart and soul of education, but also for our vulnerable, authentic, soulful, and expressive selves. The arts deserve a place in the curriculum and can help to enrich the overall student experience. For example, Catterall, Dumais, and Hampden-Thompson (2012) describe how students from low socioeconomic communities who are exposed to intensive arts based education reveal more civic engagement, take more interest in current affairs, and generally show more positive outcomes in a variety of areas like college enrollment than their low engaged art peers.

My study represents a specific effort to further the legitimization of "alternative" ways of knowing that add credence to EXA pedagogical encounters, facilitating an agenda

committed to an open curriculum development strategy and arts based practices that honor the agency, autonomy, and individual uniqueness of the students we work with. This work offers an opportunity to explore synergistic ideas and concepts from within the fields of the EXA and ABR that influenced this study, including poiesis, education as healing/liberating, liminality, the power of community/collaboration, embodiment, and aesthetic responsibility, amongst others. Again, these concepts are not exhaustive or static, some served to assist in the initial development of the study, while others emerged through the study, and yet others being strengthened throughout the process. The life experiences just discussed helped to advance the early conceptualization of this work, introducing me to the power of the arts, and serving to launch the initiation of this research process. I believe that each of these concepts, along with the others that developed through the art making process, serve as tools to offer their own unique ways and means to facilitate a more expansive awareness and learning environment within the college classroom and beyond. Before exploring each of these concepts in turn, in the following section I briefly examine the association between the EXA, education, and therapy, in order to further explore the concepts and ideas pertinent to an EXA curriculum and ABR study as disciplines legitimately placed within the field of educational leadership.

I've spent multiple years pondering the relationship and dynamic that exists between the EXA, therapy, and education. There has been a continual ebb and flow for me around this matter, an inner conflict of contraction and expansion, as I seek to understand whether or not education can or should be therapeutic. As a therapist and artist, when I facilitate any type of group encounter, it is difficult to divorce my values around meaningful and aesthetically grounded experience, collaboration, and discussion. Early on in the class and the study, my

perspective was that the arts can't help but facilitate openness, authenticity, dialogue, and vulnerable expression leading to relational connection; however, as I encountered students who seemed resistant to some of these ideas, I began to wonder if it is fair to ask of them to be vulnerable and expressive in the first place. The EXA are tied to a therapeutic lineage and arguably the act of creating itself cultivates a certain amount of therapeutic outcomes. Rogers (n.d.), an early leader in the field of EXA therapy writes, "Part of the psychotherapeutic process is to awaken the creative life-force energy. Thus, creativity and therapy overlap. What is creative is frequently therapeutic. What is therapeutic is frequently a creative process" (Rogers, n.d., para 1). I found this to be particularly true while serving as instructor for this course and researcher for the corresponding study.

There is, therefore, a considerable element of therapeutic awareness framed within the field of the EXA. For the expressive artist, life itself is a creative force of constant motion, becoming and unbecoming, many in the field arguing that we are most well when we embrace this regenerative, life affirming force of creativity. To this end, Levine (n.d.) writes:

Expressive arts therapy is the re-discovery of something we have known throughout history. We are not only determined by outside forces (economic, political, psychological, even neurological), but are capable of responding to what is given and to actualize possibilities that may have lain hidden until now. We are in the service of new life. Let us celebrate it in all that we do. (p. 2)

If we consider this, then, that the arts, creativity, freedom of expression, are fundamental aspects of what it means to be human, contributing to our overall wellness, then why are our educational institutions *not* embracing this fundamental aspect of reality? If education, honoring its Greek etymological roots, is to lead us out, why would we not be led out through

the gates of liberatory and playful expression? And, if in considering the etymological foundations of the word therapy, to make whole, why would we not consider that the worlds of education and therapy combine to serve as a powerful force for learning and mental/emotional health and wellbeing?

For one, I think that it takes a certain amount of courage to be expressive, hence some of the students' resistance to this type of work. After all, what will people think if I paint a picture that's gasp...ugly? ...or move in a way that looks goofy? ...or sing and my voice cracks? ...or any other myriad of fears of exposure revealing our soft humanity in all of its complex and beautiful imperfections. To quote the late Jerry Garcia, "Whistle through your teeth and spit, cause, it's alright." Our educational heritage isn't necessarily in the business of cultivating free expression, nor does it make much space for imperfection, but instead incorporates practices of rote procedure and flawless execution for the sake of efficiency and its penchant for pre-determined excellence. Instead of relying on rote memorization and procedure as part of the curricular design of our classrooms, what if we embraced the EXA and ABR as one means to inform our meaning making processes? One that places the arts alongside other disciplines, realizing its potential to help us come to new understandings and facilitate greater, more meaningful connections within our classroom communities.

This is the magic and power of the EXA, to stand apart from more procedural and intellectualistic pursuits, honoring the mystery of our being, and affective, embodied experience, all while giving voice to our individual uniqueness, that simultaneously speaks to and bridges our universality and commonality. It is here that I will now discuss some of the concepts that influenced the conceptual frame for "Why Arts?" curricular design and the subsequent study's process. As noted above, I believe these concepts help the EXA to stand



apart as a unique contribution to education and educational leadership and should help to further elucidate the connection between the EXA, therapy, and education. Finally, the proceeding ideas demonstrate the inherent aspects of the EXA, extrapolating upon its unconventional position as an educational discipline birthed from the psychotherapeutic fields, making it an uncommon and powerful way to do education differently.

### **Poiesis**

The arts, creativity, and expression are arguably an integral aspect of what it means not only to be human, but an aspect of being itself. The ever present flowing moment is always before us, within us, around us, twisting, turning, expanding, contracting, and growing in both expected and unexpected relationships of co-becomings and un-becomings. Life itself can be seen as the creative force within and around us, the Tao, Chi, or Prana that the artist taps into, making themselves available to the flow of that which seeks to emerge through their openness to the creative process. Levine (2015) introduces us to this reality through the EXA concept of poiesis writing, “In EXA, poiesis is conceived of as a process that can only be beneficial if the client and therapist both let go of knowing and willing, and instead ‘let it be’” (p. 15). He continues, “The concept of poiesis in EXA is like that of wu-wei in Taoism – a ‘non-action’ which nevertheless brings benefits to the one who engages in it and to others. The therapist is like the Taoist sage who leads by non-doing” (p. 15). At the heart of the EXA, at the center of the mandala, is the notion that creating, making with our hands, singing with our voices, moving consciously with our whole body and being, facilitates a form of learning different from sheer intellect. To the expressive artist, this form of knowing is referred to as poiesis, or poetic knowing, to be contrasted against theoria, or knowing through observing, and praxis, knowing through doing or acting, and as we see in Levine’s writing, this intuitive sense is just that, an inclination, an intimation, a resonation,

that in many ways defy logic, at times complimenting the rational, while at others resisting and ridiculing it (Knill, Levine, & Levine, 2005).

One example of how poiesis is illuminated through “Why Art?” includes our class on mask making. In this class I introduce the students to the notion of masks as representing different aspects of ourselves, inviting them to explore who they are, different sides of themselves that they may present to different people and through different situations. I posit that our masks can help protect us and defend us from any perceived or real threats or serve as playful, childlike aspects of ourselves, or can represent any number of identities and personas we manifest. In this exercise the students are able to explore their identity(ies) through artistic and poietic means. They are introduced to the art making materials that include paper mache and I provide a demonstration to help get them started. It’s an incredibly messy, chaotic, and fun experience as students scatter, small groups gathered together around tables that hold large bowls of paper mache paste, talking and laughing with one another. The students dive into the process, molding their foil armatures to their faces, serving as the frame to paper mache upon. Masks range from collaged renditions that speak to student conceptions of body image and beauty or painted creations with plants and flowers alluding to student identity connected to Earth and nature. One student connects her mask back to her sense of spirituality as intermingled with nature. Another student discusses her unique experience as biracial and some of the social tensions she experiences. Through activities like this, the communal experience of making art together serves to break down barriers between us, each student using the art making process and final product, in this case, their masks, to acknowledge different parts of themselves and to share those parts in the classroom community. Following this experience some students commented on how the activity helped

them to realize the importance of not taking themselves too seriously, loosening up, having fun, and approaching the arts from a spirit of non-judgementalism.

Poiesis is an EXA based concept that operates under the assumption that knowledge can be ascertained and generated through the very act of creativity. Through poiesis, we resist notions of certainty and claims to absolute truth, instead opening learning spaces to spontaneity and play as integral to discovery and experience. It is quite simply knowledge generation and facilitation through creative engagement with artistic materials. In practice, this works through experiences like mask making, painting, drawing, music and movement, eco-art, visual journaling, any creative activity that engages the senses and surrenders to the flow of imaginative play. It occurs through a decentering process from literal reality, entering the realm of play and imagination, “where new images and symbols can emerge and paint the way to previously undiscovered possibilities” (Levine, 2015, p. 22). It is a willingness to explore whatever may come, relishing in the process, the not knowing of experience, opening to the infinite through imaginative play and spontaneous action. Levine (2015) explains:

The artistic process does involve conscious shaping on the part of the artist, as the work of the therapist involves not only receptive listening but also intervening to help the client find his way. However, this shaping is more of a guiding than an imposing, part of the “aesthetic responsibility” of the companion, whether therapist, educator or coach. It does not require artistic expertise in a particular medium but rather the capacity of “low skill/high sensitivity,” that is, being sensitive to what is emerging and ready to follow it wherever it goes. If there is skill involved, it is in the mastery of the guiding process. (p. 20)

It is in this excerpt we see a clear and distinct split from standard pedagogical practices in that the EXA facilitator is just that, a facilitator of a process that in many ways, is unknown to the facilitator themselves, as to what will transpire. In these spaces of affective and embodied expression, the ultimate goal is to assist students in feeling comfortable enough to express themselves in whatever means necessary and which is conducive to their unique experience, understanding, and process. It is a practice whereby the EXA facilitator seeks to create spaces of expansion through which the community has enough trust in the facilitator and community they are working within to bring and give expression to their full selves. I believe this to be a specific strength of the EXA, one which draws connections to its therapeutic lineage, and distinguishes it from standard educational practices. In the worlds of therapeutic integration, there are no right or wrong feelings, thoughts, ideas, understandings, or experiences. Every student, is seen as a unique individual with a broad range of thoughts, ideas, and feelings, none of which are “right” or “wrong,” but all shaping the student in profound and complex ways.

Through poiesis, a community of artists traverse unknown territories of expressive, embodied, and affective experience together, the EXA facilitator/educator guiding the process, yet remaining open enough, trustful enough of the group, that what needs to emerge, will do so. In order to open to these possibilities of poietic knowing, the students of “Why Art?” and I engaged in an ongoing process of decentering. This is simply a process whereby the facilitator helps the group or individual move from the realm of “the real ” to the realm of the imaginative and can involve a myriad of activities and artistic mediums to accomplish such (Levine, 2015). Discussing the role of the poietic experience in EXA principles and practice, Knill, Levine, and Levine (2005) explain, “The play of imagination must be placed

at the center of the human capacity for shaping if we are to understand this power in its own right” (p. 11). This is the power and speciality of the EXA in its unique contribution to education, to open individuals and classroom spaces to imaginative possibilities not otherwise accessed through standard educational practices.

One example of “Why Art?” that captures the decentering process includes our class introduction to drawing. As already noted, “Why Art?” consists of students from a diverse background of majors. Every classroom experience is opened with some form of movement, that the students may become aware that all art making, any art making endeavor represents a full embodied experience. We draw, we paint, we sing, we sculpt, we dance with our bodies and the opening experiences serve to bring us back to the fullness of our embodied experience, helping us to open to its wisdom, relinquishing the hold of our intellect. In our introductory drawing class I first opened with some Qigong exercises, a Chinese practice of coordinated body movements that are meant to bring together body, breath, and mind. After leading the class through a series of these movements I then direct them to the still life that I have set up towards the center of the room, some of the students expressing their misgivings at engaging in a drawing activity for fear that, “they aren’t good artists.” I encourage them that it’s not about good or bad, right or wrong, and explain that the exercise is more about the process of “seeing” deeply and trusting the unfolding of the process than it is of presenting a beautiful product, though an intriguing and aesthetically pleasing product may result.

I explain the activity of blind contour drawing, the visually appealing still life setup before us. A large cow skull, deer antlers, cups and goblets, varied bulbous shaped vases, flowing drapery, a nearby lamp with focused and bright lighting to accentuate the contours, lines, and contrast of the objects are all positioned on the stage of the room, giving clear view

for all of the artists seated in a semicircle around the objects. They are instructed to look deeply at the still life and without removing their pen or pencil from the drawing surface or without removing their gaze from the objects they are rendering, to draw without concern for the outcome or the final product. As they have done with every other activity I've guided them in, they set to task, quietly, purposefully, fully immersed in the experience. After 10 minutes of drawing, we go another round, and another, increasing our time spent looking deeply into the piece with each iteration. We then transition to blind contour self portraits. After the portraits we spend another 30 or so minutes focusing solely on the still life. If I wouldn't have known better, I would have guessed that this was a classroom of art majors, much of the work produced presenting as incredibly visually appealing.

In this particular process of decentering, students were introduced to drawing, a foundational skill for any visual artist, but only after first warming up to the art making experience through the Qigong movement based exercises. These initial movement and mindfulness based openings helped to move us from the realm of the everyday with its stressors and expectations to the realm of the liminal and poetic, imaginative, spontaneous, and playful. Through the blind contour exercise students were able to release to the artistic process, getting over notions of right and wrong, good or bad, to let go to the flow of the moment, allowing each piece to emerge as it will. One student reflected on their process of blind contour drawing writing, "To be honest, I was very confused as to how it was possible to draw something even remotely good without looking at the paper. Though my drawings didn't turn out the best, I learned as I attempted the third drawing that it is important to take your time and not get rushed through the process." In this reflection we see that the student

initially expresses the idea that art must be “good” in order to be relevant, but that she also learned that slowing down was a key element in her artistic process.

In the preceding writing I have shown how movement and mindfulness based activities are utilized at the opening of class to help serve as a decentering strategy, guiding students into the poietic process of engagement with artistic materials. In the section to follow I will introduce one student’s work, Jane, who utilized her ABR project, which incorporated painting and visual journaling as a means to explore the following research questions:

1. Can artists step out of the idea of “perfection” to simply create art?
2. Who and why are these influences set and constructed ideas of perfectionism?
3. Should the art world expect “perfectionism” in the works created by artists?
4. Do these expectations hinder or help an individual?
5. Where do you go after you reach ‘perfection’?

Jane’s ABR project is a great exploration through poiesis of the inner critic. In her videographic presentation and through her final ABR reflection paper she discusses the "war in her mind" that belabors the point that what she creates is not good enough. In her work she demonstrates her commitment to the art making process in spite of the inner critic, pressing on because the act of creating itself seems to have a calming effect, fighting the feeling of "not good enough." Through her ABR project Jane recognizes how harshly she judges herself and others.



*Picture of Jane with her ABR painting*

Through Jane’s project, she explored how perfectionism affected her art making practice and her life at large. I introduce Jane’s work as a means to further illustrate how the concept of poiesis assists in opening us to artistic and imaginative play, a form of experiential learning in its own right. If poiesis is the creative and imaginative means by which we playfully and spontaneously respond to artistic media, then Jane’s struggle with perfectionism is arguably one of the first hurdles that a student of the EXA must overcome. Through Jane’s work and reflections on her inner critic, she gives voice to the burden of perfection and its impact on the artistic and experiential process. In Jane’s final paper that discusses her ABR project she writes, “My expectations of perfection from myself stem from my desire to make other people happy, proud of me, and avoid criticism and disappointment from anyone. Those feelings, inevitably, hurt my ability to create art because I am working towards satisfying other people and not myself in the works I make.” Jane goes on to share how she relied on the use of her visual journal to help her reflect on some of the roots of her



perfectionism, while also attempting to silence her inner critic. She continues, “Throughout this project, I learned that if I step out of my constructed ideas of perfection I am able to create artwork in ways I previously was unable to.”

Jane then goes on to discuss a point pertinent to the poietic process, the importance of letting go in order to make space for the imaginative. She writes, “I, too, discovered I had to release my expectations of my art and impulsively create my works, letting go, something I resisted, has ended up bringing me great rewards.” Here Jane organically comes to the realization that it is only by getting out of the way that poiesis occurs, offering a deep and abiding sense of our value as individuals, not based in achievement, but in the aestheticism inherent in our imperfect humanity. On this important aspect of poiesis Knill, Levine, and Levine (2010) write that the artist must first, “be willing to be subject to a chaotic experience which he or she can neither comprehend in advance nor control” (p. 41). How different from our current educational expectations where strict procedure and control are held in the highest esteem, that any chaos may be accounted for and controlled? They continue this important distinction from other forms of knowing, “In order for this to happen, he or she must be willing to give up the position of the ego, the knowing subject who is master of the world. An element of resistance usually arrives at this point; the fear of letting go of control stands in the way of immersion in the process” (Knill, Levine, & Levine, p. 41, 2010). So again, we see the importance in the poietic process of not only giving oneself over to the chaos frequently associated with any creative endeavor, but also, surrendering one’s egoic sense, to become fully immersed in the moment and the artistry as it seeks to emerge, almost of its own will. Knill, Levine, and Levine (2010) belabor this sentiment of artistic work emerging of its own volition, if only we surrender to the process writing, “Poiesis happens

not in accordance with intellect and will but through the experience of surrender to a process which I can neither understand nor control in advance. Once the work arrives, then I need to exercise my knowledge and capacity in helping it to find its appropriate shape” (p. 41).

In *The Tao of Poiesis: Expressive Arts Therapy and Taoist Philosophy*, Levine (2015) suggests that poiesis is separate from philosophia, positing that poiesis moves from logos (the word), stepping into the realm of the imaginal, an openness to what may come, surprise, surrender. Levine shares, “There is a certain tyranny implicit in the formation of concepts that aim to comprehend the wealth of experience by abstraction, a process that can only impoverish our lives. How much more pleasant, Chuang Tzu might say, to wander in the cloud of unknowing and to rest in the boundless.” (p. 19). So on the one hand, for the purposes of meeting certain requirements for this dissertation, I am required to submit to the tyranny in the formation of abstract concepts, yet on the other, I endeavor to open myself and my students up to something different, something more, something surprising, chaotic, alive, vibrant, and playful. This is the EXA. This is ABR, an affective and non-linear open-heartedness to a playful and at times chaotic encounter with self, others, and materials, in an effort to know through making, co-making, co-encountering, co-becoming with ourselves, Earth, the arts, and one another, human and more than human alike.

### **Liminality**

This next concept, liminality, can be traced back to two 20th century anthropologists including Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner (Atkinson & Robson, 2012). Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1974; 1982) used the concept of liminality to describe the in-between states associated with ritualistic encounters of pre-literate societies, leading to spiritual and social transformation. Liminality was later adopted by arts based practitioners who sought to

explain the amorphous and transformative states entered during any meaningful and conscious encounter with the arts as therapeutic intervention. It is, quite simply put, a realization of an altered sense of space/time one encounters while engaging in creative activities outside of common everyday experience(s). Atkinson and Robson (2012) characterize liminality as “ a ritualised withdrawal from the habits and routines of the everyday social order and the dissolution of existing structures of thought, action and identity” (p. 1350). It involves “an effective separation from the everyday routines and entry into an alternative social encounter in which different rules, different values and different relations apply” (Atkinson & Robson, 2012, p. 1350). Similarly, Herman (2005) suggests that through entrance into liminal interiority, “We move to understandings that are outside the margins of our personal and cultural experience and include a symbolic realm shared by humanity: a way of thinking that is nonlinear and creative, transpersonal and transcultural” (p. 471).

Liminality is what occurs, if we're lucky, when we engage in poiesis. If poiesis is the act of letting go, getting out of the way, then liminality is that space we enter once we get out of our own way and in many ways, our comfort zones. Liminality, represents the breaking through of intellectual constriction, moving into a flow state, whereby new perceptions and understandings can be encountered beyond the rational, categorizing mind, once on the other side of an artistic encounter with materials. If an education rooted in aesthetic experience helps us to, “break through the ‘cotton wool’ of dailyness and passivity and boredom and come awake to the colored, sounding, problematic world,” as curricular theorist Maxine Greene (2001) purports, then liminality represents that process of breaking through into something new, creative, imaginative, and different (p. 7).

There is a ritualistic quality and sense of the sacred that frequently accompanies liminality. The process can't be forced and identifying it can be elusive, but there is a felt sense of connection and flow that is palpably different from our everyday experience of reality. McNiff (1992) suggests that this ritualistic essence is the role of the art therapist in facilitating communal encounters with the arts writing, "Art therapy can take us into the primary sources of sacred and psychological experience if we allow the shamans and spirits to emerge once again from images and imagination" (p. 19). McNiff (1992) contends that when a culture, such as ours, rejects the role of the metaphysical in our daily lives various maladaptive patterns and behaviors emerge, due primarily to a strained relationship with soul. He writes, "The soul cannot be lost in a literal sense because it is always present with us. However, we do lose contact with its movements within our daily lives, and this loss of relationship results in bodily and mental illness, rigidification, the absence of passion, and the estrangement from nature" (p. 21).

It should serve as no surprise that conversations of the metaphysical that address concepts such as soul have largely been excluded from our educational institutions. This would require more of a focus on the interiority of experience, however, there is little room for deep, internal, self-reflexivity in a neoliberalized culture. Discussing the role of capitalism's impact on the value of interiority and soul in education Morris (2016) writes, "The United States is a culture that is mostly about business and making money. This is the culture of fast food and fast money. Fast food and fast money have little to do with soul" (p. 63). Morris (2016) criticizes the scripted and procedural climate of our public education system sharing:

And, too, even in college, the readings that students are assigned are to be memorized for answers on tests. This is hardly helpful in the cultivation of the inner life. Children should be reading and studying meaningful things, not memorizing junk for a multiple choice test. (p. 63)

One example of entering liminality and a sense of the ritualistic sacred that often accompanies it, is reflected in our class experiences on eco-art. Through this experience students are introduced to the landscape art of Andy Goldsworthy who makes elaborate sculptures from earth based materials including rocks, sticks, ice, and leaves. During this experience, to help facilitate a sense for the sacred, we enter the woods near our class in silence. We communicate poetically, tuning into the subtle vibrations of nature all around us, playing with our natural surroundings. Some students place leaves in varied and intricate patterns on the forest floor. Others stack rocks elegantly along the creek side. In my observation notes from this class I write, “Great class! Really felt the pull of liminality! The students worked thoughtfully throughout the experience, later commenting how attuned they felt to their surroundings as they worked in silence” (personal communication, September 18, 2019). One student, reflected later on their experience, “I began a conversation with the tree that I was decorating with sticks and leaves. I felt a sense of calm and peace as I worked and spoke with the tree. It felt like a meaningful interaction.”

This is where the EXA in education offers a counter to standardized educational curriculum and practices. Through engaging with artistic materials in an open curricular format the stage is set for an experience of the liminal and arguably soulful expression. Soul will not, however, manifest by charge, order, or decree, in fact, it resists the very nature of regulation and containment. McNiff (1992) explains, “It is the nature of soul to be lost to that

aspect of mind that strives to control it. Mind has to dissolve, to let go of its control, in order to experience what is not itself. Soul is a constant yet ephemeral motion that passes through us without containment” (p. 21). The EXA, therefore, serve as one means through which soulful expressions and encounters can occur in a classroom setting through the experience of entering liminal space. Liminality possesses the potential to cultivate an encounter with soul, those unexplained aspects of self typically hidden from our everyday awareness. And as one student shared as part of his ABR project, touching on this notion of liminality, “Good art is that which dissolves the boundaries of the ordinary.” Just like the students of “Why Art?” who consistently showed up to express their creative soulful selves through both our in class experiences and their final ABR projects as outlined in chapter 4, let us, therefore, courageously lean into those educative and artful encounters of liminality, to better understand the movement of soul in our lives, classrooms, and communities, allowing these artful processes to dissolve the boundaries of the ordinary in our lives and our classrooms.

### **Community/Collaboration**

This study would not have been successful if it were not for the community and collaborative support of the students who registered for the class and agreed to participate in the work. So far, in discussing the conceptual frame, we have looked at two extremely relevant concepts to the EXA experience: poiesis and liminality. Whereas these concepts are obscure for most outside of EXA and ABR circles, the next idea that is equally important to the EXA and ABR is the value placed on community and collaboration to help facilitate these experiences of poiesis and liminality. In fact, the Appalachian school of EXA outwardly acknowledges the value of community in the creative process. Atkins and Williams (2007) promote the importance of community collaboration in the artistic process writing, “in

expressive arts there is, at some point, a coming together, to name, to share and to witness. And in that coming together, there is a sharing of the differing gifts that make for a whole that is much larger than its separate parts” (p. 6).

Without the helping hands of a supportive community of fellow artists, the potential for magic, wonder, enchantment, and deep connection to occur would be severely diminished. One example of supportive community and deep connection occurring within “Why Art?” involved the sharing of one particular student’s ABR project. For the sake of anonymity, I can’t necessarily go into explicit details; however, this student shared a deep, personal experience of grief, loss, and trauma with us as a class. This student seemed to initially struggle with the class, even alluding to resistance around anything that felt “therapeutic;” however, at the conclusion of the course, during their final project presentation, they felt comfortable enough with the community that we had established to share in detail around their recent trauma through their ABR project. The class held space for this student in silence following her presentation, some even approaching her after class thanking her for her courage to be so vulnerable. I think that experiences like this reveal the power of art making in community to help us process some of the most tender aspects of ourselves, helping us to build trust in ourselves and others, while providing a vehicle for us to be witnessed in our full, raw, unmasked, and soft humanity.

In any number of in class experiences, from the mask making activity, to our course on drawing, or soul collage, painting, music, movement, and eco-art, all helped to cultivate connection and relationship with one another as we entered the liminal space through engagement with poiesis, returning from our individual/collective journeys of poietic encounter to share our work and ourselves with one another. One student draws our attention

to the importance that community brought to our process, contrasting our in class experiences against COVID-19's isolating qualities that served to disconnect our communal and poietic flow from one another. She writes, "Returning home and continuing my research process in a new environment proved the biggest difficulty for my project." Pondering this notion of the helpfulness of community and collaboration early on in my exploratory process, I wrote after reviewing Jane's work as part of my memo response, "The power of the communal experience, the movement of the creative energy, facilitate liminality and poiesis. It's more difficult alone. The magic doesn't quite happen like it does in community" (personal communication, October 7, 2020).

Knill, Levine, and Levine (2005) share this perspective of the interdynamics that exist within community informing the poietic and liminal experience pondering Turner's conceptualization of liminality as it relates to art making writing, "In the liminal phase of the ritual process, all the identifying marks of the participants which make up their social identities are stripped away and replaced by the experience of sharing a common fate" (p. 43). They continue, "The initiates feel their shared humanity; they have, as Turner says, an experience of 'human kind-ness', of solidarity and comradeship which binds them together." (p. 43-44). Knill, Levine, and Levine (2005) make a direct connection amongst and between the community of participants engaged in an art making/poietic process and the occurrence of liminality itself. They identify Turner's term for the camaraderie that occurs during this process as "communitas" writing, "Those who share a liminal experience feel themselves bound in a communitas that is distinguished from the separation that social structure and role normally entail" (p. 44). It is here I wonder, if education as usual, in a neoliberalized society, characterized by estrangement, distrust, and separation, further promoting disconnection



from ourselves and our experience of *communitas* with both the human and more than human world, are the EXA not needed now more than ever in our classrooms? In “Why Art?” students shared vulnerably, expressively, boldly on issues ranging from personal struggles with depression and anxiety, to their profound concerns for the climate crisis, to raising awareness around issues pertinent to marginalized communities that simultaneously speak to their own personal struggles. These vulnerable expressions from the students’ ABR projects and varied in class activities served to build trust and support, which will be discussed in depth in chapters 4 on the vignettes and 6 that addresses the research questions.

### **Embodiment**



*Movement-based Artistic Response performed during Analysis Process*

Embodiment, in its simplest form, is the recognition that we are not our thoughts alone, but instead composed of complex interactions between our minds, bodies, emotions, and natural surroundings we are embedded within, all in a dynamic state of flux with other bodies, networking, coalescing, coming together, expanding, contracting, in a constant state

of movement. Describing the role of embodiment in therapeutic practice Kossak (2015) writes, “‘embodiment’ really refers to a process that produces a network, woven through the fabric of our body functions and cognitions and our behavior, connecting us to the physical environment and synchronizing us with the cognitions and behaviors of other people” (p. 1). Embodiment, then, becomes more than just one individual body/mind moving in space, but rather, a complex and synergistic arrangement of multiple body/minds coming together to form a dynamic whole. So here, too, we see that many of these concepts connect to and mutually enhance one another. If, as suggested above, embodiment represents multiplicitous bodies coming together to form a dynamic whole, then embodiment, community, and collaboration are concepts that are interrelated and interdependent, along with the other concepts discussed including poiesis and liminality. All concepts working together to inform the individual and collective experience(s) of those affiliated with the work.

At its core, the EXA represents an experiential encounter with an embodied sensibility. Atkins and Williams (2007) communicate the propensity for the EXA to foster embodied understanding and for the aptitude of the body to communicate and foster learning and knowledge production. They write, “In expressive arts therapy, body knowledge, intuitive wisdom, subjective experience and emotions are expressed and honored as valid ways of knowing, in and of themselves. Rational analysis is not required to validate these ways of knowing” (p. 7). Leavy (2015) presents an understanding of the body as a holistic encounter, through which the mind/body are interconnected in a system of “enfleshed” knowledge, supporting methodological approach(es) of engaging in dance and/or movement, that the researcher might interact with and give birth to new understandings. Of the power in embodied knowing, Snowber (2012) writes:

We are bodies, we do not just have bodies. They are a place of deep learning, and both bodily knowledge and bodily wisdom are always available to us. The body continues to speak; if we slow down enough to listen, or inhabit them, descending into the belly, palms, chest, necks, as if they are the greatest love. (p. 119)

The problem is, however, that education as usual largely tames, imprisons, and disciplines the body, seeing it as secondary to the development of the mind. John Dewey (1944), educational theorist and philosopher, actively warned against the Cartesian, dualistic philosophical tradition which inculcates a doctrine of mind/body split, arguing that such a modus operandi to education frequently creates a classroom climate by which the teacher is prone to spend the majority of their time disciplining the bodies of their young students, which according to this dualistic model of self, require regulation so that the mind may be able to attend to intellectual matters. Dewey (1944) posited, “In part bodily activity becomes an intruder. Having nothing, so it is thought, to do with mental activity, it becomes a distraction, an evil to be contended with. For the pupil has a body, and brings it to school along with his mind. And the body is, of necessity, a wellspring of energy; it has to do something” (p. 105). What a much more liberating concept, however, to consider that the mind and body are so intricately connected, that the teacher should not seek to dissuade the innate energy of physical engagement of their students, but instead should seek pedagogical methods through which the body and mind can become equally engaged in the learning activity. This is precisely what the EXA and ABR attempts to do through concepts like embodiment, engaging the whole student in the teaching, learning, and research process, including their minds and bodies.

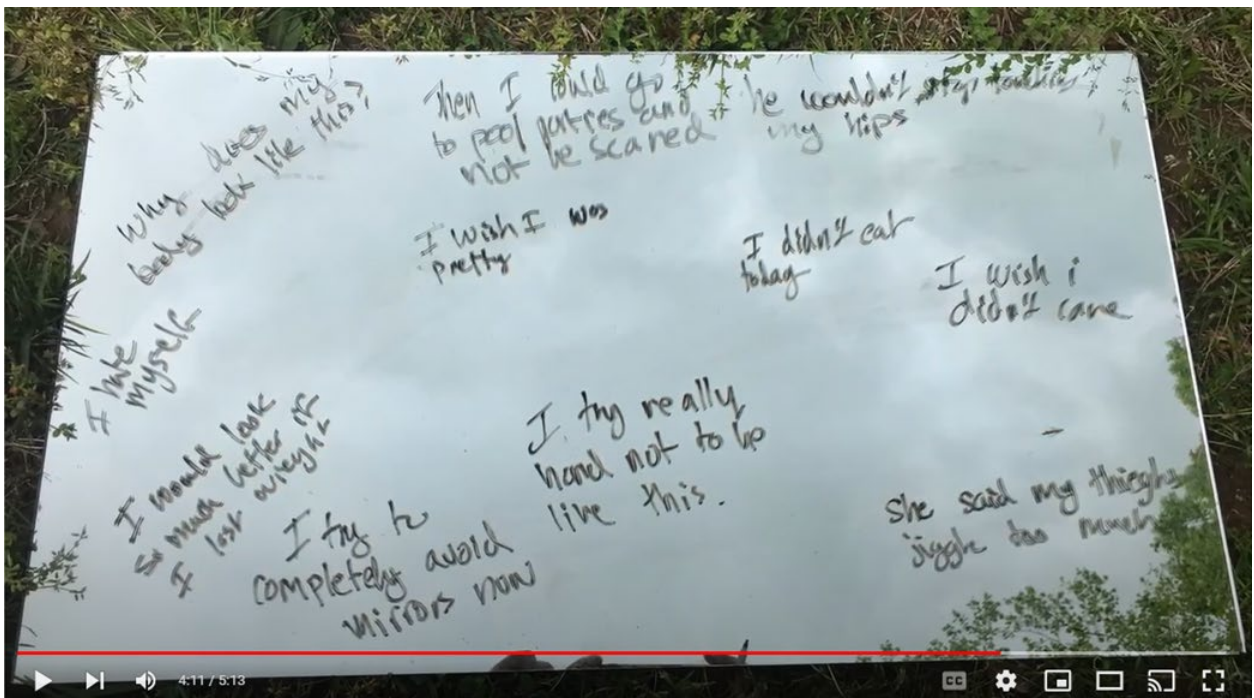
Multiple students engaged this question of embodiment in their ABR projects. For example, Bill sought to understand through his project how technology and media lead to fragmentation of self and society, contrasting his experience with tech against an ongoing art making practice through visual journaling, sketching, and painting. He writes, “I feel it necessary to address a specific problem with Cartesian thought, a philosophical viewpoint that continues to inform modern discourses. It tends to view bodies simply as chambers that house the human mind.” Bill then goes on to offer a critique of our humanist legacy around bodily perfection and beauty, suggesting that such perspectives, combined with access to social media and capitalist marketing systems further perpetuate fragmentation against ourselves and our bodies, he writes, “The ancient Greeks had an equal, if not greater respect for youthful appearance. Therefore, society’s tendency to create narrow beauty norms is not new. It is just that technology has given us the ability to perpetuate them and make a profit.” Bill concludes his work and writing with the realization that through art making we are more able to access our embodied senses writing, “These ‘senses’ are what unify all of the seemingly disparate aspects of my life, and furthermore provide me with a sense of identity. And so, the art that I created for this project led me one step closer to freeing myself from the confines of modern technology, and living a more meaningful life.” So for Bill, it would seem, that through an ongoing art making practice, he was able to tune into his embodied awareness through his senses, beyond the fabrication and fragmentation of popular technological culture as expressed through social media. Bill also touches on a theme common throughout our collective experience in the study, the notion of perfection and its constant impact on our internal and external processes as we lean into our ABR work. More

on this important topic later, but next let me introduce you to yet another student's work around embodiment, Emma.

Emma, another student and research participant, approaches embodiment through a similar but different angle to Bill, using her ABR project as a means to explore her negative self image around her embodied experience. She writes, "My research question was how can different art practices related to art therapy have a positive change to my relationship with my body? Negative body image has probably been the most consistent issue I have had and has seeped into nearly every other aspect of my life." Like Bill and others, Emma relied on visual journaling, painting, and drawing to explore her ABR topic, her topic being specifically related to negative body image. Emma also engaged in a powerful performance piece to help her process her experience of negative body image through the collection of her old journals, writing words and phrases on a mirror pulled from her journals which express her negative perceptions and personal experiences of body image. Emma then smashed the mirror with a hammer as therapeutic practice of new beginnings towards forming a more positive relationship with her body. She writes of her experience, "I noticed a shift in my mood every time I would journal, and the entire mirror portion felt so good. I came into this project knowing there was not going to be a definite change or sudden flip in how I see myself, but pushing myself to make sure to be thinking about my body and being mindful of how I think about it was as impactful as it was hard."

Emma concludes her reflection on her ABR process with the realization that, much like our educational institutions, through focusing on her mind alone and intrusive thoughts around negative self image, she was inadvertently denying her bodily self in all of its fullness and beauty. She explains, "I realized that in all my years of trying to figure out a way to

change the relationship between me and my body, it has been focused on ignoring not just the intrusive thoughts and therefore the resulting behaviors, but ignoring my entire body. Just like a relationship with another person works, I will never be able to build a positive relationship with my body if all I do is attempt to pretend it does not exist. I have to let myself exist.” Yet another powerful example of how the EXA and ABR can help us come to a deeper understanding of that which we seek in the research and inquiry process. The added perk of such a process is becoming more whole, more fully human, more able to relate to ourselves with compassionate awareness, spilling over into compassionate awareness for others and their respective struggles and sufferings, both for other human beings and the other beings that we share our lives with. So here I answer one of my questions associated with this study, if education should be therapeutic, considering the benefits of therapeutic processes leading to more mental and emotional health and wholeness, as we see with Emma and her project, to say otherwise, that learning should not be therapeutic, would represent a cruel perspective indeed.





*Emma's ABR Performative Piece Exploring Negative Body Image*

The body, embodiment, was brought into the student and my experience continually throughout this process and helped to frame the early conceptualization of the class and

corresponding study from the beginning. We are, after all, more than minds, we are bodies in motion, receiving through our sensual, fragile selves, taking all in from our external surroundings and offering feedback and output as we move through the world in tandem with our fleshy selves, providing output, hopefully, in ever creative, artful, and fulfilling ways unique to our soulful, embodied, complex, and whole selves. Considering the power that embodied awareness brings to the educational encounter then, it is imperative that we break out from the Cartesian dualisms of mind/body split, and like the butterfly struggling from its cocoon, liberate ourselves from the humanist illusion of fragmented selves, in order to embrace a more expressive and soulful ontology, a conception of ourselves, the world, and our relation with it that regards all that is as a constant flow of re/generative force, ever expanding, growing, and changing, yet immeasurably interrelated and interdependent (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 36). To acknowledge ourselves as sensual, embodied, imperfect selves, as Emma and others did in their ABR projects, this has the potential to dramatically shift our educational encounters, away from sterile intellectualism, ever chasing the carrot of intellectual perfection at the end of the stick, and towards raw, real, authentic, meaningful, poetic, and deeply reflexive experience. To deny the arts in the curriculum, is to deny our sensual humanity, as Emma indicates in her ABR process, we will never be able to have a positive relationship with ourselves and one another if we keep ignoring our fleshy, imperfect, embodied selves.

### **Intermodality**

Intermodality is a trademark of the EXA, making it unique to its other creative arts therapy kindred. Unlike disciplines in the arts based educational and therapeutic fields that rely exclusively on one type of modality, like music therapy, art therapy, drama therapy, etc.,



the EXA welcome an intermodal and integrative approach to all forms of creative expression, not limiting itself to one particular artistic disciplinary modality. In fact, the expressive artist seeks to expand notions of the aesthetic beyond conventional ideas of what actually constitutes art at all, but more on this in the next section. I will first briefly discuss the early origins of intermodality as a unique contribution to the field of the creative arts therapies, then drawing connections between the power of intermodality in the arts to build upon and enhance community and collaboration amongst a group of artist practitioners.

Intermodality as a concept began development in the 1970s amongst an emerging community of arts based practitioners/scholars and was first conceptualized in *The Arts and Psychotherapy*, by Shaun McNiff (1981). Atkins, Davis, and Atkins (2011) explain the potential of such an integrative approach to utilizing the arts in a therapeutic context writing, “This interdisciplinary approach emphasized the intermodal nature of the arts, acknowledging that working in any art form necessarily involves other forms and that purposeful integration of more than one artistic form can offer a wide array of therapeutic possibilities.” (p. 206). Atkins and Williams (2007) similarly explain, “In this time of separation, expressive arts therapy calls for the reintegration of all the arts into therapeutic practice and into daily life” (p. 2). The EXA operates from the theory that the arts, as integrated with one another, offer a more holistic and effective means of engaging with clients and students. McNiff (1992), a visual artist and art therapist by trade, even goes as far to argue that to separate the arts from one another can be contra therapeutic. He writes, “All of the arts emerged naturally in my early creative arts therapy work with adults and children. Every art form is a dramatic enactment” (p. 22). McNiff (1992) suggests that remaining open

to the multiplicitousness of the creative experience can serve to magnify and enhance the communal process of engagement writing:

Experience with art materials helped us to see how the flourishing imagination embraces diverse faculties. We learned how to follow expression in its varied movements. We similarly discovered how the affirmation of a group's diversity furthered the vitality of individual expression. Creativity is a contagious force. (p. 22)

It is here we see intimations of a thread of commonality or reverberations that exist between intermodality and community/collaboration. When I designed this class and sought to shape the corresponding study, my intent was to introduce students to an intermodal approach to the arts that honored the EXA in its integrative approach, but also the unique talents, interests, and gifts of the individual students themselves. Not everyone will resonate with painting or drawing, but may be more drawn to other forms of artistic expression and inquiry. It is here that the EXA offer yet another expansive and liberating opportunity for aesthetic expression and inquiry, one that honors the unique aptitude and talents of all individuals present. Each student in the class is given the latitude to respond in whatever aesthetic modality or manner they deem relevant to their interests, experience, and passions. Many students of "Why Art?" incorporated multimodality into their individual projects incorporating a range of artistry into their work. For example, Millie, a research participant that you will hear more about in chapter 4 of the vignettes utilized collage, music, visual journaling, creative writing, and videography to understand how the arts can help to process emotions. Tara, another participant, incorporated meditation, visual journaling, and videography into her project to help her understand intersections between individual creativity and the climate crisis. Another student explored make-up as art combined with

videography to raise awareness around drag culture and its impact on LGBTQ rights. The students were as diverse in their project choices as they are themselves, each demonstrating the power of intermodal arts in presenting unique and exciting experiences of the arts in action.

### **Aesthetic Responsibility**

Aesthetic responsibility follows the premise that human beings possess the innate ability to interact with their environment and shape it in ways that simultaneously open us to our suffering, while expressing the inherent beauty in the process of expression (Knill, Levine, and Levine, 2005). Aesthetic responsibility reflects a commitment to the artistic process in whatever may arise for the client or student. Moon (2002) suggests that through aesthetic responsibility, “The arts therapist works not only in service to the client’s conscious intentions for the work, but also in service to the intentions of the work itself as it emerges” (p. 151). It is through a sense of aesthetic responsibility that the EXA facilitator/educator becomes a participant in the art making encounter with students or clients, in turn, serving as a non-judgemental model for the emergence of the work, in spite of preconceived notions of right or wrong, ugliness or beauty (Moon, 2002).

Through aesthetic responsibility we trust the artistic process itself, attempting to quiet our inner critics, unconcerned with outcomes, leaning into the spontaneous moment of play, much like poiesis, getting out of the way, to allow that which needs to be expressed to do so. The role and responsibility falls on the facilitator to introduce clients and students of the EXA to this spirit of non-judgemental awareness. It is only through our intuitive sense and importance of the emergence of the aesthetic that authentic expression can appear, oftentimes in the most surprising ways. It is these surprises of aesthetic encounters that reveal the magic

in the process of coming together in supportive community, holding space for one another, simply allowing for the individual and communal expressions, without explanation, interpretation, or judgment. Much like the gallery walk that concludes the class activity on painting, in “Why Art?” we see, feel, and imagine in a spirit of acceptance for the work and the artist who produced it or like the student who threw her visual journal, then herself into the middle of our class circle, expressing her sense and frustration of her inner critic as aesthetic response. Aesthetic responsibility allows for a creative work to simply be, like the beautiful flower in the field or a breathtaking sunrise, through the lens of aesthetic responsibility we seek not so much to understand with our minds, but rather allow our artistic works to move our hearts.

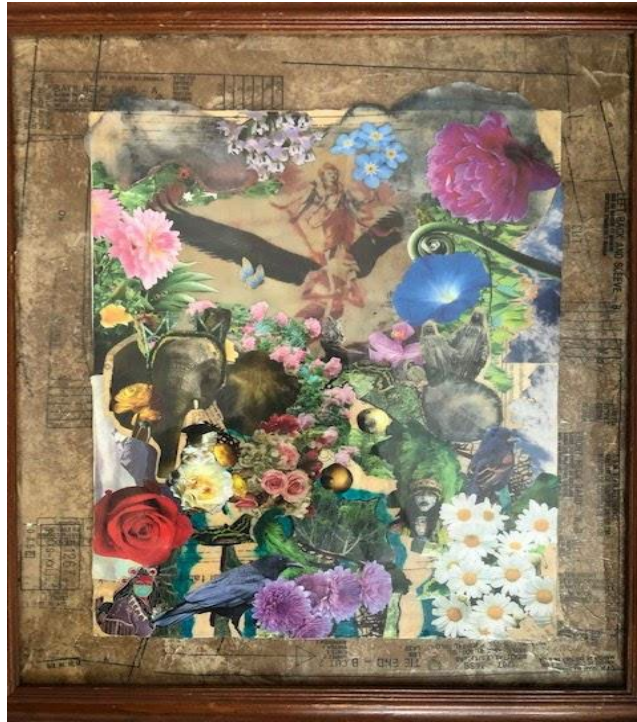
### **Conceptual Framework Conclusion**

In the preceding section I consider how my personal lived experiences, key concepts, and theories associated with the EXA and ABR have informed the study in its development. I first outlined how these key concepts are by no means exhaustive, yet remain important ideas to the EXA and ABR process. Some of the concepts discussed included poiesis, liminality, embodiment, intermodality, community/collaboration, and aesthetic responsibility, noting that all are critical components of the EXA, ABR, and the conceptual framework that I bring to this study (Atkins & Snyder, 2017; Atkins & Williams, 2007; Expressive Arts Therapy, 2015; Herman, 2016; Levine, 2015, 2019). I discussed how these ideas were prevalent to my personal lived experience as a student of the EXA and also how they found their expression throughout the growth of the class I taught and the study as a whole. I will now turn my attention to what exactly occurred through this study, explaining the methodology, context

and setting, curricular design, and pedagogical strategies of the class that compose the class and study, “Why Art? Ways of Responding to the World Around Us”

## Chapter 3

### Art as a Way of Knowing



*Untitled Mixed Media Collage, by Mel Falck*

““Why Art?” Ways of Responding to the World Around Us” was an arts based qualitative study and class I taught over the course of two semesters at a rural university in the southeast in order to understand the impact of EXA and ABR based interventions in doing education differently through the exploration of the art making processes of both the student/participants and myself as a/r/tographer of the study. The course was primarily exploratory and experiential, meaning that we engage in expressive arts making practices every class together, with the expectation that students also make art individually, outside of class, through the use of their visual journals and their individual ABR projects. My ultimate

goal for the course and the study was to help students think about learning and education differently. As an expressive artist, it is important to me that the arts be introduced to students in a non-threatening way that helps them to open to their own creative potential and to help them see that the arts can be a viable mode of conducting teaching and learning differently and in opposition to more formulaic and traditional approaches to education and research. The purpose of this study was to utilize the EXA and ABR as a means to de-privilege and challenge the assumptions associated with education as practiced under a neo-liberalist logic. This study also serves as a political statement in the promotion of the EXA and ABR as legitimate tools for doing education in their own right. The research questions explored in this study were:

1. What is the relationship between EXA, ABR, therapy, and education?
2. How does the EXA concept of embodiment shape and inform educational encounters?
3. How does ABR inform the meaning making process?

Through this study I sought to honor ways of knowing that differ from traditionally accepted versions of understanding, focusing on the arts and concepts like poiesis to place individual and unique student artistic experience at the forefront of the class and study. With its focus on pluralistic, holistic, and relativist thinking, doing, and being, postmodernist thought set the stage for new and exciting forms of knowledge creation, making space for disciplines like the EXA and research methods like ABR possible (Basque & Britto, n.d.). Through ABR, EXA, a/r/tography, and the postmodern theoretical frame that legitimizes research endeavors such as these, objectivity is not considered a desirable, advantageous, or even helpful practice. In fact, many practicing within a postmodern epistemological

underpinning would question the very nature of objectivity itself, if it is even attainable at all (Diamond & Mullen, 1999). ABR and a/r/tography are most certainly rooted in postmodern epistemologies.

Through the postmodern turn in thought, sense making becomes an intersubjective and polyvocal reality of ever changing flux, no one “thing” in our mind or sensory experience existing as fixed and invariable. A postmodern frame regards such malleability and dynamic fluidity as the quintessential opportunity for open ended exploration into intersubjective experience. To this end, Diamond and Mullen (1999) write,

As postmodernists, we are not empiricists attending to measurable quantities and calculable powers. We are ‘listening instead for a moment to a tuning fork...struck upon a star’. We are dealing with possible soundings of our selves and our practice and with their artistic renderings, ‘a matter as elusive and amorphous as life itself’. (p. 456)

According to Craft (1997), a postmodern context is “characterized by fragmentation, chaos, and a lack of coherence” (Craft, 1997, p. 93). Diamond and Mullen (1999) describe the postmodern context in regards to, “our guiding but never totally coherent selves” that “seek to shape inquiry and development in a holistic way” (p. 19). Speaking to the intersubjective and polyvocal experience of a postmodern epistemology Diamond and Mullen share that artist/teacher/researchers engage with, “re/vision, novelty, and reflexivity” and understand self in relation to the co-participants that form a study and as a way to conduct research (Diamond & Mullen, 1999). Similarly, in discussing an Arts Based Research (ABR) ontology, Chilton and Leavy (2014) propose that, “ An ABR ontology would recognize that artistic, intersubjective realities are emergent and shifting, dialectical,



hard to pin down, and difficult to convey in standard modes” (p. 2). There are then, theoretical commonalities to assumptions about the self, knowledge, research, and being that serve to inform and mutually enhance both postmodern and ABR thought processes. Postmodernism, as an epistemological grounds for understanding, therefore, allows for the intersubjective and polyvocal experiences of the numerous persons that compose this ABR study.

### **A/r/tography as Research Methodology**

#### ***Researcher as Artist, Teacher, and Participant***

A/r/tography is a research methodology of unfolding dynamic fluidity, growth, and change. The self exists as simultaneously isolated and in contiguous relation with others associated and embedded within the study. The self is therefore a complex concept within an a/r/tographical frame existing in contiguous relation to the multiplicitous identities of the researcher(s). To this point, Irwin (2008) writes, “A/r/tographers recognize that no researcher, or artist, or educator exists on their own, nor do they only exist within a community for, in fact, both occur. We are singular plural beings that are part of the whole of being singular plural” (p. 72).

A/r/tography is by no means a singular endeavor, for by its definition and nature, it seeks to expand, not contract, the self under the banner of contiguous co/becomings. Correspondingly, La Jevic and Springgay (2008) discuss the in/between nature of a/r/tography, including the in/between of the multiplicitous identities of an individual self, as well as the in/between of numerous individual selves that compose any given community undertaking art making as research practice. They write, “As a/r/tographers, we can see our students as participants in our lives as artists, researchers, and teachers, yet by engaging them

in a/r/tography, they too become artists, researchers, and teachers, giving them an active role in our queries as well as their own” (La Jevic & Springgay, 2008, p. 72). The researcher is subsequently one node or point, expanding in contiguity with the other artist/teacher/researchers/student/participant selves, existing in at times harmonic and discordant modulations, never fixed, always questioning, shifting, interpreting, and reinterpreting in an evocative dance of intermingled and mixed co/becomings. Researcher as artist, teacher, and participant acknowledges the multiplicitous nature of our identities and helps us to frame the ABR research process as a dynamic system of interconnectedness within our own identity as artist/researcher/teacher while connected to the varied identities of our research participants as co-collaborators in the research process.

### ***Living Inquiry***

Living inquiry, as it relates to a/r/tography, suggests a commitment to the ongoing reflective practice of the a/r/tographer. Through cultivation of living inquiry, the a/r/tographer interprets meaning and being as explicitly linked to artistic and aesthetic discernment. Through an a/r/tographical approach to knowing and being, the arts based researcher acknowledges the complexity of life, recognizing that research, learning, and understanding oftentimes mature and evolve in non-linear ways. Through living inquiry, the a/r/tographer can make room for sense-making to occur beyond the more traditional means of rational inquiry including, "emotional, intuitive, personal, spiritual, and embodied ways of knowing” (Springgay & Irwin, 2004, p. 902).

The practice of living inquiry resists compartmentalization and categorization, instead alluding to the organic co/occurrences and co/becomings of an ABR project (Basque & Britto, n.d.). Living inquiry is an intuitive and simultaneous process, dancing amongst and between

individual participants and collaborators, manifesting both through individual and collective works and expressions within an arts based experiential community. Springay et. al write (2005):

*A/r/tography* is a living practice; a life writing, life creating experience into the personal, political, and professional aspects of one's life. Through attention to memory, identity, autobiography, reflection, meditation, story telling, interpretation, and/or representation, artists/researchers/teachers expose their living practices in evocative ways. (p. 903)

Living inquiry, then, represents not only the multiple and shifting identities that the researcher maintains, but also the organic and disciplined practice(s) that the a/r/tographer engages with in order to understand, create, and interpret meaning making. Living inquiry, in short, is a commitment to lifelong learning, with an understanding that not all things or experiences are meant to be fully grasped intellectually, and that though much of Life resists explanation, through the ongoing practice of art making, an aesthetic understanding can emerge in defiance of calculated logic and intellectualism.

### ***Contiguity***

Contiguity as it relates to the research methodology of a/r/tography, implies that the art work being produced and the artistic process as a whole, the writing (graphy) associated with the research and reflection, as well as the multiple identities of the researcher (artist, teacher, and researcher) all exist in relation with each other. To be contiguous is to share a common border, in geographical thought and perception. The psychological concept of contiguity references the linking of ideas, memories, and experiences whereby a certain

amount of overlap occurs in the mind, connecting seemingly different thoughts, ideas, and experiences together.

In a/r/tography these characteristics of art making, writing, and the multiple co/mutual identities of the artist/teacher/researcher occur simultaneously resisting categorization (Irwin, et. al, 2006). Through a focus on practice, less emphasis is placed on who an artist, researcher, or teacher is or what art, research, or education is, instead exploring when art or research or education is occurring, or when an experience of art, teaching, or research is occurring (Irwin, et. al, 2006). Through contiguous relation between art making and writing, new understanding and exciting insights are facilitated (Basque & Britto, n.d.). The touchstone of contiguity helps the a/r/tographer to not cling to any one identity too tightly and facilitates a synergistic and dynamic relationship between these identities, the writing process, and the art making activities and experiences (Basque & Britto, n.d.).

### ***Openings***

A/r/tography helps to create openings between text and sensual or sensory experience (Basque & Britto, n.d.). According to Basque and Britto (n.d.), “A/r/tography seeks to unravel texts so that meaning can be attended to on the surface and sought out beneath, with re-threading serving as an act of response” (Underlying Epistemology, Philosophical Base and Research Paradigm). Considering this metaphor for a/r/tography as a research methodology that seeks to unravel, pull apart, dis/integrate meaning, for the purpose of re/creating, re/establishing, re/constructing, re/threading meaning or perception is in itself, a creative act. The process of unraveling meaning to re/create something or some thing new is arguably connected to another ABR concept of poiesis or knowing through making. The unfolding and en/folding of text, meaning, thinking or theory, and making, practice, doing,

and creating. Each is inseparable in the a/r/tographical process of coming to know or more simply put, learning.

If, as Basque and Britto (n.d.) point out, a/r/tography pulls apart meaning to facilitate new perceptions and understandings as an act of response, how exactly is this done? As suggested above, it is done contiguously with familiarity of theory (the realm of ideas, as explored through reading of text), writing (the act of conveying ideas and constructing and re/constructing meaning through the written word), and making or creating (the poietic process of knowing through making). This interaction plays out in “Why Art?” through the theory that I have read, the thinking done in the form of observation notes, reflective memos, and journaling, and the poietic process I’ve engaged with through visual journaling and artistic response through collage and movement based experiences. Theoria is obtained through the thinking and writing process, while poiesis took place through embodied interaction with the art making process associated with my visual journal, collage, and movement based practice.

Poiesis is distinct from theoria with its approach to knowledge generation due to its emphasis on mythos versus the logos frequently associated with philosophy. Epistemologically and ontologically, a/r/tography serves as a research methodology that is informed by a postmodern frame. It could even be argued that the postmodern turn helped to legitimize more creative and subjective research methodologies like a/r/tography. Lyotard (1984) distinguishes between two separate epistemological meaning making processes including what he refers to as narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge. Lyotard’s perspective on narrative knowledge opens the meaning-making process up to a storied existence as expressed in myths, figurative language, non-linearity, and even irrationality.

Lyotard (1984) references indigenous cultures and their utilization of stories and myths as an epistemological counter to knowledge derived from science in its literal, rational, factual, and data driven assumptions of the world.

Finally, in considering “openings” and its relation to the a/r/tographical research process, I would be remiss to at least not briefly consider the relationship between openings and closings and the concepts of expansion and contraction as has emerged through art making exploratory process associated with “Why Art?.” Expansion is in fact another way of phrasing openings, and contraction, that which closes. So then, the literature seems to support this organic emergence or “opening” around these concepts. Something cannot open unless it is first closed and contracted. Basque & Britto (n.d.) write, “Openings are created through the process of a/r/tography, revealing spaces in which perceptions and meanings might resonate between sensual and textual ways of knowing.”

Yet in considering this, it spurs more curiosity. What exactly is opening/expanding when we embark upon the a/r/tographical process? I would like to suggest that there are multiple occurrences of openings and closings while engaged in this process. Could it not be that our hearts, minds, bodies, even at times, spirits our opening and closing during this vulnerable mode of conducting research, teaching, and writing? There is no fixed meaning, idea, thought, action. The a/r/tographical research process is a constant dance and rhythm of exploratory resonances of expansion/opening and contraction/closing, both for the individual researcher and those also involved in any community based ABR project. Like flowers on a vine, each individually agential, yet always connected to the vine in a gestalt, moving, inching, growing, dancing, together in the spring and summer sun and rain, only to all at once

to close and contract in the waning days of fall, fully closed and appearingly gone/dead during the cold, dark winter.

Expansion and contraction, opening and closing, then, is not some unique concept to a/r/tography or ABR or postmodern thought. Instead, it is a narrative fact of existence itself. All that opens, closes. All that lives and expands, dies and contracts. I think that this is exactly what Lyotard is getting at with the validity and legitimacy of narrative knowledge. Through poetic, creative, sensual, and sensitive art making practices, story-telling, and writing, we come to realize deep and mysterious truths about not only ourselves, but also the inter-dynamics of the web-of-life that we all reside within and derive our sustenance from.

### ***Dynamic Research Questions***

Irwin et al. (2006) contrast the process of developing research questions within a traditional research frame against an a/r/tographical approach to research question development stating, “traditional research formulates specific questions to be answered, a/r/tographic inquiry emphasizes a process of inquiry, therefore, questions evolve as the shifting relationality found within the project informs the direction of the inquiry.” Irwin (2008) proposes that a/r/tographers are in a constant undertaking of arranging and rearranging foci as the community’s research evolves stating, “This is an essential feature of a/r/tography for a/r/tographic inquiry does not set out to answer introductory research questions but rather to posit questions of inquiry that evolve over time” (p. 77).

This is a key feature of a/r/tography, the recognition and embrace of unpredictability and dynamic and organic growth. Like a plant that grows outward from the fertile forest soil, research questions may be initially proposed, yet with the understanding that as understanding grows and changes, new questions will emerge, while old questions may not

hold the same import they once did. A/r/tography demands a certain willingness to embrace uncertainty, ambiguity, and improvisation in its research process, including the emergence and unfolding of new research questions, but more importantly in relation to the recognition of the continual becoming that is inherent in the transformative process of living inquiry (Irwin, 2008).

### ***Questions Over Answers***

The value placed on the generation of questions over answers connects to the rendering of living inquiry in the a/r/tographical research paradigm. Considering that life and being are enigmatic occurrences oftentimes without clear cut answers and understanding, a/r/tography embraces this fact of existence, making space for the unanswerable and irrational. Through the a/r/tographical research process art, writing, reading, teaching, and learning all coalesce, on both an individual and collective/communal level, offering deeper and vaster explorations of varied and divergent topics. An a/r/tographical study spreads wide and deep in its artistic renderings, reflective writings, and embodied practices. There arguably exists no singular, fundamental, or fixed agenda or expectation in an a/r/tographical research frame, instead the researcher(s) frequently opening space(s) through their art making and self-reflexive practices to generate copious and at times seemingly inexhaustible contemplations.

### **Methods**

The postmodern approach to the relativity of knowledge, combined with the a/r/tographical concepts just discussed, helped to inform my choice in research methods. These ideas helped to inform the arts based methods chosen and give substance to this work, like collage and visual journaling, through which we “see” and experience the world,



ourselves, and one another differently. Through the exploratory process of visual journaling and collage, important concepts emerged, almost out of nowhere, concepts like expansion and contraction, materializing organically through my personal art making exploratory and analysis process, permeating much of the work and thinking found within the study. Our work expands as we make and share creative spaces together, in community, and contracts as we move into our individual art making experiences, largely due to the social distancing requirements associated with COVID-19. Methods associated with the research process of “Why Art?” included some traditional qualitative research methods, but were primarily grounded in arts based methods to help expand our encounters with ourselves and one another through the art making process, while honoring the a/r/tographical concept of living inquiry, as we made space for sensemaking beyond the traditional means of rational inquiry.

The traditional qualitative research methods included class observations, audio recordings of my observations following each class, review of narrative from the student ABR project papers, and memos written by myself as I reviewed the student work. Through my classroom observations I gathered first hand accounts of the experiences and interactions between and amongst students in the classroom (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I then relied on the use of note taking and memoing to help move my analytical process along and develop my thinking (Yin, 2016). The classroom observations, audio recordings, and varied observation notes and memos reflect my interpretation of the experiences of “Why Art?,” while the review of narrative from student ABR projects and papers reflects my analysis process of the students’ interpretations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In addition to these qualitative methods, I also relied heavily on ABR methods in order to expand the experience of the study and foster poietic knowing for both myself and my audience. The arts based

methods affiliated with the study included student visual journals, student ABR project presentations, artwork produced during class by both myself and the participants, my collage-based artistic responses to student work, the mixed media piece that I playfully title the “Wall of Data” (WoD), and my personal recorded movement based artistic responses following each interaction I embarked upon with the WoD. Many of these methods were built into the research design at the beginning of the development of the study, but some, like the WoD and my movement based responses, grew organically as I sought to harmonize the disparate parts and works of the study into a whole.

Visual journaling was a key component to this study and the course it is associated with. Ganim and Fox (1999) explain the power of imagery as expressed in visual journaling as connecting with, “a wisdom that sees beyond the rational mind’s fragmented interpretation of life events into a deeper vision that reveals our inner truth and the purpose inherent in all our experiences” (p. 2). La Jevic and Springgay (2008) contend that through the process of visual journaling, a world beyond the self can be made manifest, the act of visual journaling serving as, “a project of transformation that opens up the possibility and potential for learning” (p. 83). Student/participants were invited to dedicate at least two to three hours to their visual journals a week. The intent was that it was to be used to process the readings, concepts, discussions, and activities of the course. It served as a mode of inquiry itself, whereby we reflected on material from the class and created aesthetic responses accordingly. Words were welcome in the journals, but student/participants were also highly encouraged to create via non-logo visual imagery, including drawing, painting, sketching, and/or collage.

As part of the a/r/tographical methodological process, I also maintained a visual journal throughout the class/study. La Jevic and Spriggay (2008) share, “A/r/tography as

visual journaling emphasizes the unthought, the spaces that are messy, uncomfortable, and complicated” (p. 84). My personal visual journal helped me to work with these evocative places and served at least three other key functions. First, it provided a means and container by which I engaged with my artist identity/self and recorded/processed my artistic experience(s) throughout the study and class. Second, it served as a means of generating a visual representation of my thinking and affect as the study evolved. Third, it assisted in my remaining linked to the creative momentum of the class while assisting in the perpetuation of that momentum. The momentum of visual journaling also saw its expression in the Wall of Data (WoD), the visual expression and culmination of the experience(s) associated with “Why Art?,” which I will discuss in detail in chapter five.



*“Wall of Data” aka the WoD*

### **Context and Setting of Study**

“Why Art?” places arts based practices at the center of the experience for both the class and the study and is an attempt to offer a model for education that is open, creative, expansive, and free. The study had a total number of 14 participants associated with the study, though each class had an enrollment of approximately 48 students. The class serves as

one of the general education requirements associated with the curriculum and as such, the students represent a diverse cross section of the college's and university's population. The class functions as the "Fine Arts Designation" for their general education requirements and being that the students who register for the course come from diverse majors, it could arguably be one of the only art courses taken during their undergraduate work. As such, one of my intentions for the course is to introduce the students to a range of artistic modalities, of which the EXA as a discipline is especially helpful, due to its focus on intermodality in its conceptualization and execution.

Because I am trained in the field of EXA therapy, I subsequently incorporated EXA curricular design into the course itself. The EXA are inherently multi-modal, meaning that all forms of art are accepted and encouraged through EXA practices. Another goal, then, of the class, was to expose students to different artistic modalities and to help them become comfortable with art making, expressive, and creative practices that many have not engaged with since they were children. We also explore the notion of what is considered art itself, pushing back against traditionally held ideas of art in order to embrace the expansiveness of creativity in its vastness and variance. Echoing the sentiment of the EXA, that art is for everyone, not just the elite few, Morris (2016) writes, "Art should be brought down to earth and put back in place with everyday people in everyday experiences. Many curriculum studies scholars are highly critical of the elite mentality of fine arts" (p. 30). She continues, "The question about who decides what is 'fine' versus what is not fine or 'popular' is a political question" (Morris, 2016, p. 30). So, like Morris contends, the EXA is a discipline that recognizes the arts as a universal aspect of being human, not reserved for those with the special skills and abilities to participate, but instead that we are all, "experiencing the

capacity of art making as a way of knowing who we are as human beings in the world and for the healing of both individuals and communities” (Atkins & Williams, 2007, p. 1). This is an important aspect of the study and course, for ultimately the course seeks to utilize education and the arts as a liberatory practice. What, then, is more liberatory than to consider that we all have vast founts of imaginative creativity to draw from, if only we have the courage to pick up some paints or pluck on some strings or move our bodies to music, not seeking perfection in the outcome, but solely to lean into the process, that something of import might emerge. Perhaps even, we discover ever deepening aspects of ourselves through the process.

Considering then that the EXA view the arts as holistically and openly as possible, topics in the course were equally varied, ranging from art as activism, eco-art practices, mask making, music and movement, painting, collage, drawing, and more. A central feature of the class was the ABR project that students are tasked with designing and implementing throughout the term, culminating in collective and individual presentations, as well as a final paper. Students were also expected to maintain a visual journal throughout the semester as a means to process their readings and experiences with the class. The goal of the ABR project was to introduce students to the arts as a viable form of conducting research and inquiry unto itself. Students were given much leeway in their project proposals and the course is designed in such a way to give them enough of a foundation to create and implement their respective research designs. To assist in the conceptualization of ABR for the students, I created a four part model to ABR that is confessedly simplistic, yet seems to capture the essence of ABR in such a way that is comprehensible for the undergraduate students that I instruct. This four part model for ABR includes the following:

1. Research question(s)

2. Artistic modality(ies) engaged with
3. Supporting scholarship
4. Reflection on the process

Being that ABR is a new form of research for most, I have found that some students tend to have difficulty understanding that the art making itself serves as the foundational aspect of the research process. Time and again I must remind them to “always bring it back to the art making process.” Other students, however, leaned into their art making process seemingly without hesitation, trusting that though there may be some ambiguity to reconcile, the thread of consistency that helps us through the murkiness involves the poietic process itself. Again, I am reminded of one of my early art mentors, Bob Villamagna, who always encouraged us to “keep painting,” in spite of our fears and concerns, trusting that the process will lead us to an eventual outcome, perhaps one we are proud of, or maybe even one we are not. All is welcome in the world of EXA and there can even be insights and experience gained from those expressive and creative encounters we might deem “ugly.”

There was minimal direction purposefully woven into the class ABR project requirement. This seemed maddening for some who were more used to explicit directives in their educational encounters, as one student noted in her ABR paper reflection, “I wish that I had started my journal with more of a focus than pure, paralyzing freedom.” It is my belief, however, that expansive and authentic creativity can only emerge through an open approach to curricular design and execution, quite contrary to neoliberalist educational practices which focus on outcome driven measures around performativity, accountability, and productivity for both students and teachers alike (Ball, 2016). There are no neatly packaged models found within the worlds of EXA and ABR, save the simplistic one I share with my students in order

to give them something of substance to work with, almost out of a sense of empathy for their fear of the internal conflict that will likely arise as they begin the formulation and execution of their projects. The figurative blank canvas that stands before the budding arts based researchers, glaring, almost taunting their resolve is part of the artistic archetypal process and requires courage and commitment to endure. Knill, Levine, and Levine (2005) explain, “The experience of chaos which is a necessary phase of the process of creation is essentially Dionysian; the artist, that is, must become like the god and be willing to be subject to a chaotic experience which he or she can neither comprehend in advance nor control” (p. 41).

It’s not that we create these artistically engaged and open curricular environments just because it's a good idea. We do this because educators are using arts based pedagogies like the EXA and ABR to help us become more fully human and connective, honoring our soulful particularity(ies), while growing a relational aesthetic that “serve to foster and deepen bonds with oneself, others, or the larger community” (Moon, 2002, p. 142). Arts based therapeutic and educational interventions like this study are happening in real spaces the world over, speaking to the aspirations of educators to do education differently in a time that difference is increasingly being extinguished for the sake of a neoliberalist agenda that aligns privatized interests with educational objectives (Santome, 2011). Saltman (2011) contends that the neoliberal reform that has impinged upon the curriculum of our current public educational system reinforces a strict form of authoritarianism which is in direct opposition to true democratic principles, leading to the enforcement of “right kinds of knowledge,” but at the expense of other epistemological and ontological prospects (p. 58). My study serves as a revolutionary counter-reform to the neoliberalist aggression towards the field of education. In many ways, to even make something artistically original is an act of rebellion itself,

considering the mass produced commodities and sterile features that characterize many aspects of our neoliberal society.

Along with the in class activities that help to elucidate the concepts that were discussed as part of the conceptual frame for “Why Art?” the student ABR projects also help to shed light on how the emergent concepts are woven throughout the curriculum, pedagogy, and research design processes. Poiesis, liminality, embodiment, intermodality, community/collaboration, and aesthetic responsibility, are intertwined through our interactions and discussions, both during our time together in the physical space of the classroom environment and through the students and my own art making practices. Some of the assignments and in class activities that helped to illuminate how these EXA ideas inform the artistic and educational encounters included:

1. Student Visual Journals
2. Student ABR Projects
  - a. Individual Presentations
  - b. Individual Papers
  - c. Group skits (only 1st term)
3. Mask Making (in class activity)
4. Soul Collage (in class activity)
5. Art as Activism (class discussion)
6. Sketching/Drawing Activity (in class activity)
  - a. Blind Contour Drawing
  - b. Still Life Drawing
7. Eco-Art Activity (in class activity)



8. Music/Movement Activity(ies)

- a. Drumming/Percussion
- b. Mirror Dancing
- c. Dow Rod Dancing

9. Painting Activity (in class activity)

“Why Art?” became a poietic engagement with the materials and one another as a community of co-collaborators, each of the assignments and activities serving to draw out our expressive nature both individually and collectively as a community of arts based researchers. The art produced, the music made, the dances and movements tended to, all served as playful and exploratory encounters. Dare I say, we had fun throughout the research and meaning making process. This study is an attempt to share a narrative and compose a story of how the EXA and ABR as pedagogical and research methods, were engaged with, explored, and encountered over the course of two academic terms with two different classes. It was a journey within and without, a glimpse into the personal experiences of a community of artists who ventured into the dark forest of the unknown, that they might create something beautiful, alone and together, that we might engage in a dance of contraction and expansion. The players in this story include myself, the artist/researcher/teacher (a/r/tographer) and the student-participants who agreed to share their work and respective ABR projects. This study matters because the players in the study matter. Our personal stories in the academy matter because, as Diamond and Mullen (1999) share, “By ‘going public’ with the personal, we are taken out of ourselves, helped to see ourselves in new ways, and shown that we can become other than what we were” (p. 40). This study, and others like it, matter because creativity, vulnerability, and openness matter and is much needed in our current climate of educational

stasis, bureaucratic coldness, and rote standardization. It is here that I firmly and resolutely declare that our voices, personal experiences, and subjective realities and insights matter and it is here that I invite you, the reader, to share in our story(ies) of the arts as research, while introducing you to some of the beautiful souls who agreed to share their work as part of this study.

### **The Artists and Our Relationships**



*"I Am Not Ashamed,"* by Millie

*"This entry was a lot less time consuming than my other entries, however, I think it really displays who I am as a person. I put the words, 'I am ashamed of nothing, so I will tell you everything' because I am probably one of the most open-book sort of people I know. It's a trait that I like about myself in certain situations, but also deeply dislike sometimes." -*

*Millie*

I was immediately struck by Millie’s proclivity and passion for the arts. During one of our in-class activities on soul collage, I had the privilege of partnering with Millie to share in an aesthetic response to one another’s collages. It was clear to me that Millie carried a certain amount of depth of character, a soulful disposition and nature. Though she tended to be quiet, when she spoke, it carried significance and meaning. She and another female student seemed to be quite close, good friends. They would frequently linger a bit after class, one particular evening telling each other, “Love ya dude,” before going their separate ways. It warmed my heart to see students interacting with each other on a real and heartfelt level and I like to think that our art making together helped to establish and reinforce some of these bonds. Millie attended every class and was the consummate student. She launched into every assignment and activity with enthusiasm for the creative process, her ABR project reflecting her penchant for aesthetic responsibility.



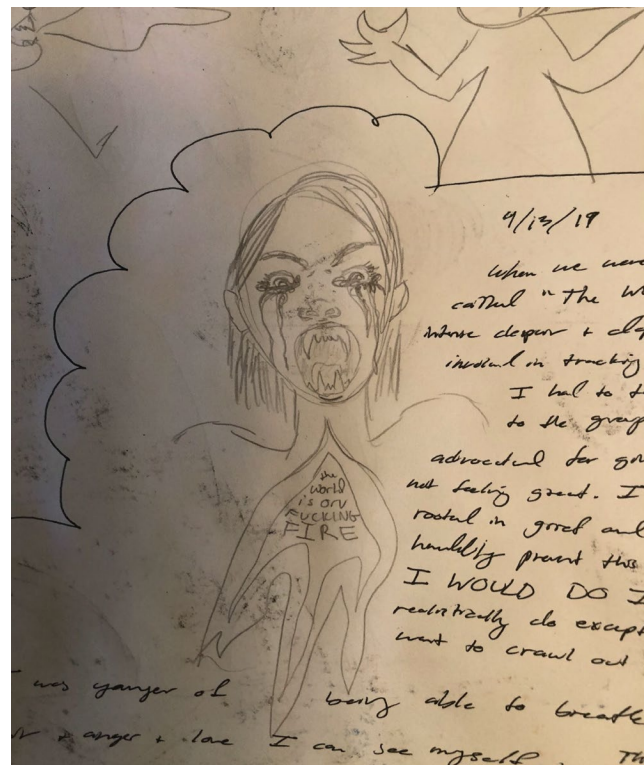
*“From this We Will Grow,” by John*

John and I always seemed to sit next to one another in our class’s opening circle. As such, John would usually be the first person to share after my opening conversational prompts to the class. I typically “pass it to the left” — John more often than not sitting to my left. I always appreciated his quiet confidence and candor. There was no hint of loftiness in his character, exuding a sense of humility, mixed with humor. My sense was that this person had been through some things in their life and had come out the other side better for it. John developed an academic and professional interest in the EXA following his enrollment in “Why Art?,” seeking acceptance into a master’s program at the university where the class and study took place. We consistently stay in touch with one another, sharing recent happenings in our lives and any new art work we have begun. His ABR project served as a powerful reminder to me that the EXA are a compelling means to connect with ourselves, finding healing and strength in the midst of difficult times.



*“Untitled Visual Journal Entry,” by Tara*

Tara was a very quiet student and kept to herself. I could relate because my natural tendency is towards introversion as well. As the familiar adage, “still waters run deep” captures, Tara expressed a knowledge and wisdom beyond her young years. Tara was a science major and had an interest in exploring subjects related to sustainability and environmental awareness through the arts. Through Tara’s ABR project, she demonstrated her capacity and longing for authentic relationality with herself, her family, and her communities, including both the human and more than human alike. She presented as a gentle, loving, and kind person throughout our time in class together and the beauty of her ABR project captures this same sentiment of tenderness and loving kindness. Tara possessed a soft and collected presence that was eloquently expressed in her work both in and out of class. Her art was unambiguously authentic and revealed her heart for Earth, justice, and community.



“The World is Fucking on Fire!” by Mary

I arguably had the most one on one conversations with Mary than any other student associated with the two terms that compose this study. Mary was sharp, quick witted, emotionally intelligent, and as real as they come. There was no second guessing what was on Mary's mind or heart. Though she expressed concerns that the EXA and ABR could help in any substantial and meaningful way to fight social inequality and environmental degradation, she threw herself into the in-class activities and out of class projects and assignments. She was tortured by the eco-destruction of our current climate crisis and longed for viable solutions. Mary was a good student who remained thoughtfully engaged with the class and the materials from start to finish. She was a sensitive and strong soul who took the burdens and suffering of the world upon her own shoulders. We could all learn a great deal from Mary and her courage to face the grief that accompanies looking at the world and its anguish unflinchingly.

The relationships formed with these students and all of the students who have taken "Why Art?" serve as the heart and soul of the class and the study. In essence, the relationships are what the class, the study, and the EXA are all about. Atkins and Williams (2007) speak to this point of relationality as it is expressed within the Appalachian approach to the EXA, writing:

Expressive arts therapy, because of its emphasis on community and ritual, suggests the reclaiming of an ancient vision of art and therapy in society, one that integrates art and healing in the context of community. This vision suggests that art and therapy and life are not separate, and that all are practiced in community, for the healing of both the individual and the community as a whole. (p. 8)

Wilson (2008) outlines relationality as one of the primary points of any research paradigm, writing, “Many things in our world try to force us to be separated, isolated individuals. We separate the secular from the spiritual, research and academia from everyday life” (p. 137). “Why Art?” as a study and a class is my humble effort at pushing back against the separateness so very common to traditional pedagogies and research practices by building upon connectedness and relationality, through expressive encounters with the arts. Community/collaboration and relationality has interlaced every aspect of the work, including the research methodology of a/r/tography that characterizes “Why Art?”

In this chapter I introduced the context of the class and study and explained the justification for ABR methods as viewed through a postmodern theoretical frame. I then provided evidence of the support in the literature for the use of arts based methods like visual journaling and collage through theorists in both the fields of ABR and postmodern thinking. Lastly, I outlined some of the traditional qualitative and arts based methods used to facilitate the meaning making process of the work. I will turn later to a more in depth discussion of my exploratory process of analysis through the use of arts based methods like my artistic responses to student work, the WoD, and personal movement based responses, first shifting to a series of vignettes that help to connect the student work and experience to concepts and themes that grew out of the study.

## Chapter 4

### Vignettes Introduction

Vignettes are a helpful technique utilized by qualitative researchers to enhance the stories, evidences, and features of a given study (Barter & Renold, 1999). Through the vignettes, I hope to share the student experience of the class in the hopes of giving you a glimpse into the world of four students who agreed to participate in the study. In this section I also hope to expound upon some of the themes, concepts, and ideas that emerged from both my own writing and art making practice(s), but more importantly, through the artwork and writing produced by the students.

We will begin the vignettes with a discussion of Millie's work. Millie was one of the most prolific students associated with the class and study. She gravitated towards an intermodal approach to her ABR process incorporating creative writing, music, collage, visual journaling, and video/media production into her work. Millie sought to explore how the arts could help her to get in touch with her emotions. Her project served as an excellent example of how a student can bring disparate artistic modalities together (intermodality) to form a whole or gestalt. Each piece is a beautifully rendered individual work of art, yet all joining together to form an aesthetic whole. Millie presents us a beautiful and artistically rendered exploration of her subjective experience with her personal art making practice(s). I look forward to sharing her experience, along with the others, as seen through my subjective lens. Without further ado, I present to you, Millie.



## Millie



*"Self-discovery over time"*

As part of her visual journal that students kept to process their experiences of the class, Millie shared the collage above writing, "This collage represents the confusion I feel within myself and who I truly am. I have experienced a lot of self-growth within the past year and this collage sort of represents how I still don't know exactly who I am, and that's okay." The ABR project that students embarked on as part of the course is of a purposefully open format. Students have complete artistic freedom in the choosing of their topic, research question(s), and artistic modalities they use to explore their topic(s). The course by no means requires the type of personal self-reflexivity that Millie suggests in her collage, yet without fail, throughout the varied student work associated with the study, meaningful self-reflection

emerges time and again, hence reflection's inclusion as one of the eight primary concepts that emerges through the study. Millie's ABR project and visual journal both capture this storied self in all of its multiplicitous complexity.

Millie's project served as an exploration of how the arts can assist in the processing of emotions. Throughout the semester, Millie's project included exploring the processing of her emotions through music, collage, visual journaling, and creative writing. Her final presentation consisted of a videographic representation of her exploration. The common thread throughout all of Millie's artistic pieces, including her final presentation, reveal not only a proclivity for the visual arts and music, but also a deep commitment to self-expression as a means to understanding. Millie's work, therefore, serves as one example of how the concepts of poiesis (knowing through making) and reflection inform, grow, and deepen our perception and relation to self. It is through poiesis that we come to understand by creating and it is through reflection that we come to understand ourselves. Poiesis takes place in the realm of the imaginative and through which humans enact their capacity to shape the world and themselves in order to reveal the potential for visionary transformation (Levine, 2015).

In her videographic reflection, serving as her ABR project's final presentation, Millie states, "This project has helped me to come to terms with my emotions, to be aware why am I feeling this way." She goes on to say, "I think I found out a lot about myself through this ABR project. It's neat, but also kinda scary because I realize that there are a lot of things that I don't like about myself." The art we make, the creative practices that we engage with, the products rendered through art making practice and play all serve as a mirror of self, reflecting back to us our nature, helping us to discover ourselves while in relation to other(s). Speaking

on the potential for art making to help us reflect on ourselves meaningfully Allen (1995) writes,

Our images reveal that we are holographic creatures, living multiple stories; we often get stuck in one view of self and lose the richness of our multiplicity; there are things we do or don't do based on the story of ourselves that we operate from; yet there are untold other possible stories we might choose from (p. 10).

Butterfly imagery emerges throughout Millie's work including her visual journal, her collages, and the videographic presentation of her final project. If the poietic experience is one of creative imaginative transformation, then the image and metaphor of the butterfly serves as a fitting example of poiesis in action. The images found below reflect some of Millie's thinking and experience of self in relation to transformation, the butterfly serving as the consummate metaphorical guide in the transformative process of becoming something more. As Millie's poem below reflects, we, like the butterfly, undergo many changes in life, yet we may feel that there is a core essence that remains unchanged through all of it. Perhaps even this core essence reflects a deeper unchanging aspect of self, perhaps even our soul. And as Millie's poem "Be Like the Butterfly" imagines, this essence of self does not mind the transitory nature of becoming, welcoming each new phase in the transformative journey. It is arguably through the poietic process of coming to know, like the one Millie embarked upon, that we reflect on the relationship to our deeper, more hidden aspects of self.

***Be Like the Butterfly, by Millie***

Be like the butterfly

A creature so majestic

She wasn't always this way

She's been through many stages  
She didn't mind it though  
Shedding each layer when it was time  
Beginning as one being  
And transforming into another  
Keeping the same identity  
Yet ever changing and evolving  
Until one day she reaches her finest form  
Breaking out of her chrysalis  
To be beautiful and free  
You too can be  
Like the butterfly.





*Visual Journal Entries by Millie*

***The Body as a Source of Knowing/Embodiment***

Throughout Millie’s work there is an acknowledgement and exploration of the embodied experience. Embodiment, body image, the body as a source of knowing — all are primary themes connecting to “the body” that run throughout the study for multiple research participants, including myself. The arts, the EXA, and ABR are no doubt an exercise in sensual awareness and embodied experience. Embodiment is arguably one of the most important and powerful features of ABR and EXA, emphasizing a relational and living exchange between persons in community with one another, art, and text. LaJevic and Springgay (2008), discussing the role of embodiment in the a/r/tographical research process share, “It is a process of invention rather than interpretation, where concepts are marked by social engagements and encounters. Meaning and understanding are no longer revealed or thought to emanate from a point of origin; rather, they are complex, singular, and relational.”

Embodiment, then, occurs on varied planes, first, with the individual researcher engaged in the artistic and poietic process, yet while simultaneously occurring in relation to other body/minds, existing in community with one another, deepening their shared embodied experience(s) individually and collectively through art making practice(s).

There is arguably a certain amount of trust required with artistic, embodied practice that differs substantially from traditional intellectual circles that focus solely on the mind's capacity to reason. Embodiment is sensual, vulnerable, at times beautiful, and at others wracked with constriction and tension. It is a form of knowing unto itself that requires courage to step into our sensual, embodied nature, opening to the mysteries of its expression. Of the relationship between the body/mind and the creative process in coming to know, Millie wrote, "Overtime, through practice, I was able to separate my feelings of fear and set them aside, and trust that my body and mind would come up with whatever I truly wanted to create." The courage to stand in one's own body, claiming its power in spite of our uncertainty, fear, and self-judgment, creating in the midst of fear of judgment from our own internal critic or perceived external judges requires an attitude of emancipatory determination. Embodiment marks a certain authentic rawness that says, "Here I am. A perfectly, imperfect being. Full of hope, aspirations, strengths, fears, and everything in between. I have the courage to be witnessed, by myself, and by others."



*Handstand, from Millie's ABR project presentation, "Exploring the Processing of Emotions through Art Expression"*

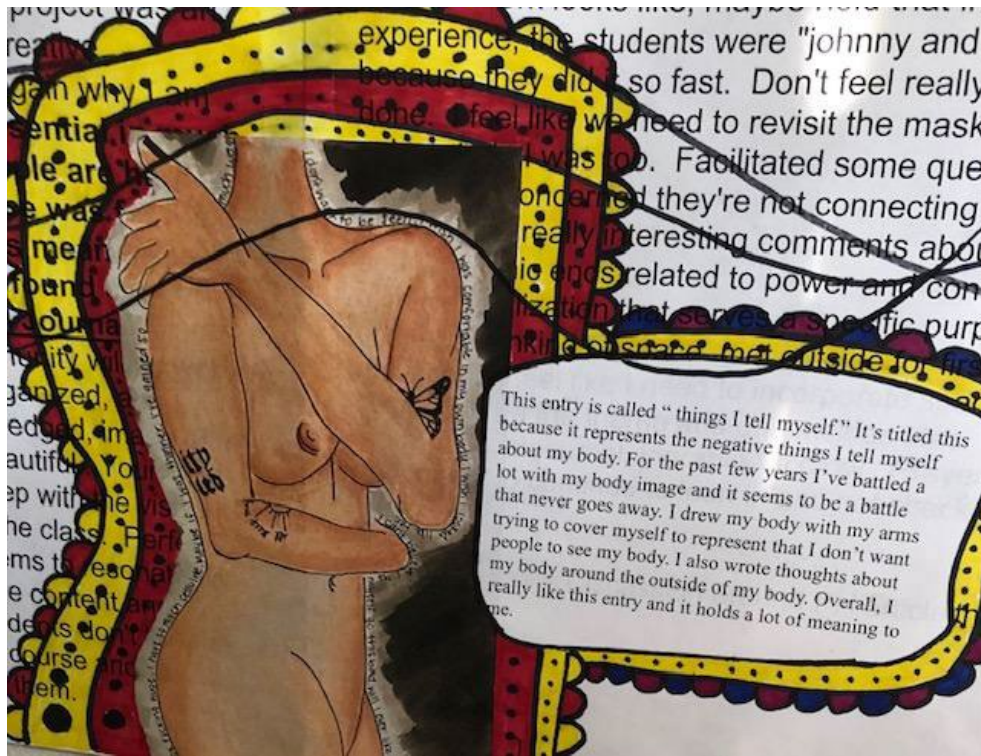
Millie goes on to discuss the relationship between her artistic practice of music making, her mind, and her body stating, "Experiencing and creating music is a sublime interaction between the body and the mind." She elaborated further, "For my arts based research, I chose to play guitar. Through my guitar playing, I've noticed that sometimes it feels like my guitar is speaking. When I bend a string, it's like it's wailing. My guitar truly does function as an extension of myself and allows me to enhance emotion by using another object." Millie relies on an intermodal process throughout her work, acknowledging the mutual relationships that exist between her own body, mind, and emotions, but also through different artistic modalities like movement, visual art, and music. Millie's project is a great example of how a researcher can combine multiplicitous conceptions of self, woven together through an elaborate and beautifully depicted story, told through multiple artistic means including music, drawing, collage, movement, and poetry/creative writing. Millie bravely

and authentically claims her body as a source of knowing unto itself, while at the same time grappling with her own inner demons around body image.

In the image below from Millie's visual journal, she writes, "This entry is called 'things I tell myself'. It's titled this because it represents the negative things I tell myself about my body. For the past few years I've battled a lot with my body image and it seems to be a battle that never goes away." It is clear that Millie's project unites numerous concepts, themes, and ideas expressed throughout the study and it is through her raw authenticity that her strength is revealed. This is the power of ABR, that researchers can reveal the tender places in their heart and through this revelation a new strength is ascertained for both the individual researcher and the community(ies) they work within. Leavy (2015) expresses the power of embodied knowing that ABR facilitates sharing, "The immediacy of art provides viscerally felt sensorial experience, an embodied knowledge that is effective at communicating emotional aspects of social life" (p. 410). Millie's explorations around the effectiveness of art in expressing emotion and the subsequent artistic renderings around her body as a source of knowing, coupled with her open acknowledgement of her body image struggles, are integrated to demonstrate the raw vulnerability and aestheticism that frames and composes the ABR process. Through Millie's ABR project, she not only exhibits the courage to confront her own internal struggles and insecurities, but also the fearlessness to share openly within the classroom community. It is through this back and forth between internal reflection via art making practice, then shared out within the confines of a supportive, non-judgmental community of artist learners that healing occurs. This leads to yet another theme found throughout numerous student participants' work, including Millie's, and



that is frequently discussed in the literature surrounding ABR: the role of vulnerability in the ABR process.



*Things I Tell Myself*

### ***Vulnerability***



This entry was a lot less time consuming than my other entries, however I think it really displays who I am as a person. I put the words "I am ashamed of nothing, so I will tell you everything" because I am probably one of the most open-book sort of people I know. It's a trait that I like about myself in certain situations, but also deeply dislike sometimes.

*Visual Journal Entry by Millie*

Vulnerability is a theme that weaves and intersects across all of the student/participant work throughout the study, including my own. The importance and influence of vulnerability and the arts cannot be overstated. If there were to be two concepts that accurately rendered the significance of not only this study, but the arts in general, it would arguably be authenticity and vulnerability. Of vulnerability, authenticity, and ABR, Chilton and Leavy write, “Authenticity is strengthened by the explicit reflexivity and transparency inherent in the expressive form of the art products.” Millie’s work captures both this reflexive spirit and transparent artful authenticity through both her visual journal and her ABR project and presentation. In the visual journal entry above, Millie discusses her personal relationship with a life lived authentically. I appreciate the cheerful figure in the foreground of this image, set against the gray and bleak background of a subway car. I imagine the EXA and ABR as the cheerful woman in the foreground, content to express herself in her fullness, while the cold subway car reminds me of the current standard educational climate, frigid and dull.

Millie’s ABR videographic presentation similarly expresses a deep self-reflexivity that she communicates through poetry, song, imagery, and movement. Millie frames her ABR project as an exploration of how the arts can help to process emotions. In the opening of her presentation Millie reflects the following sentiment while playing guitar, “This ongoing search for contentment has grown tiring. I wonder if I will always feel this way. I have for as long as I can remember. It sucks being a prisoner of myself. Also even more ironically being the only one who can set me free.” Millie’s presentation is an excellent example of ABR serving to illuminate perspectives on self through multimodal vulnerable reflexive artistic practice. Millie is bold and prolific in her expression, giving us a snapshot

into her subjective and personal experiences. Millie's project serves as a good example of how a student can engage in artistic practice to explore internal processes, including one's emotive experience. Millie concludes her project sharing that, "I genuinely feel that art has saved my mind. Self-expression through art has proven to be a very powerful tool for me and I can't really see life without it." She goes on to say, "I wish more people could experience this comfort that art provides for me. I truly believe that once someone engages in art practice, not only does life become inherently more beautiful, but so does the self and that's a wonderful feeling that no one should have to live without." Considering then, as Millie indicates, the power of the arts to help shape our perceptions of self and the world at large for the better, does it not make sense that arts based learning should be more widely accepted and actively incorporated into the curricular development and pedagogical practices of our educational systems?

*Song "Stranger to Yourself," by Loving (incorporated into Millie's ABR videographic presentation)*

Are you a stranger to yourself

Do you wonder if your thoughts belong to someone else?

All those times you seemed to change

Formed opinions, or lost your mind in a rage

Was that even really you

Or were you walking in another's shoes?

But in a way you know yourself

Through the questions that you have felt

Stirring slowly inside of you

Like something that you once knew

Yes, you're waiting but for who

The other one, or is it you?

Too many paths you can't decide

So you take the one that lets you hide

You're so naïve to what you need

You question others but not what you believe

Are you a stranger to yourself

Do you wonder if your thoughts belong to someone else?

**John**



*Visual Journal Entries by John*

The images above were created by John and exhibited in his visual journal. John identifies as a trans male and explored an ABR topic relevant to his process of gender transitioning through hormone treatment. Through his ABR study, John asks, “How can music (especially vocal performance) be therapeutic for transgender individuals?” In John’s ABR project, he discusses the process of getting accustomed to his deepening voice through hormonal replacement therapy (HRT). He writes, “For many people who are trans, the voice can be stressful, as the way you sound influences how others perceive you.” I chose the images above to introduce us to John’s work because John does an amazing job of vulnerably and courageously disclosing the depths of depression he suffered (representative of the constrictive image on the left), while emerging from his dark night of the soul, with more calm, contentment, peace, and gratitude (as reflected in the image on the right). Like Millie, John’s ABR project traversed multiple concepts and themes identified within the study and like Millie, John’s bold, committed, and open approach to the ABR process is evident in the topic chosen and authenticity expressed.

### ***The Power of Voice***

Varied experiences of oppression and our current educational climate largely seem to dissuade bold thinking, feeling, and expression. It is my belief that through the arts, voice as a means of expression is fostered and strengthened via creative means and with the help of a supportive and compassionate community. John’s project exhibits the power of voice in an ABR project. Something about the arts made in community with others seemingly makes it easier for students to share their experiences of hope, frustration, trauma, grief, despair, joy, and everything in between. At least that has been my experience in this study and beyond. It's not that the student participants like John didn't have a voice prior to this study, it's that

engaging creatively in community can help us to access our individual and collective voices of free and creative expression, no matter the modality.

Similar to Millie, John uses poiesis (knowing through making) to come to know the self more intimately, engaging with music, song writing, and visual journaling as a means of reflexive practice. Also like Millie, John is quite literally in the process of transformation, akin to the majestic butterfly initially invoked by Millie. It is apparent in John's work that this process of transformation around voice is both a figurative and literal transformation he is undergoing and processing. He writes, "Reflecting on how unsteady my voice was earlier on allowed me to fully appreciate the way it emerged further along in the process." John's process of transformation is certainly unique to his story; however, the in-between states of becoming something more, someone more vibrant, self-accepting, happy, free, and expansive, with the help of an ongoing artistic practice, is not. It is through John's reflexive ABR project that he makes the personal universal, introducing us both to his journey of reflection and healing, while also raising awareness around social issues pertinent to a specific group of marginalized individuals, the trans community.

The caterpillar knows not the beauty that awaits. She exists, being, crawling through the leaf litter of the forest floor, slowly, effortfully, over, under, and through the dead leaves and branches which will one day serve as the humus upon which the Great Trees, whom she crawls under, will dig their roots through the ground, connecting to Earth, Wind, Sky. She knows not the destiny that awaits her as she transforms from a legged, earthbound being into a splendid creature of the air, fluttering above all that in a previous life she had clung to. Where she was grounded, she now flies, viewing the world from a wholly new perspective. A visionary, longview characterizes her new frame.

Liminality can be described as a threshold state or transitional zone that Expressive Artists facilitate entry into through art making practice(s) with their clients and students (Herman, 2016). John's entire project touches this liminality of becoming, both through his discussed personal struggles as exhibited in his dark night of the soul and also through his consistent engagement with his chosen ABR project artistic practices. John embarked upon a journey of song and musical performance to explore his research question that is simultaneously unique to his experience, but also incredibly germane to an entire community of people who have been historically marginalized in our larger society. John elaborates, "Voice is something I feel I've never quite had a good relationship with. As a trans person, my voice is also a point of concern and distress. My sound does not match who I am. As a member of a marginalized group, my voice is silenced, my opinion often discredited." John's journey of HRT converges with his music making practice, giving us a glimpse into this liminal threshold, complimenting and enhancing the in-between state of becoming, as John grows into his new voice, like the caterpillar that grows into its new form.

### ***Education/ABR as Healing***

John doesn't outwardly say, but one can surmise that part of his depression relates to the struggles of being a member of a misunderstood and historically deprecated community. Through song and vocal performance John shares a lyric singing, "At my darkest I was dead. Not my body, but in my head. Eaten up by things unsaid. Secrets I'll take to my deathbed." John introduces us to his contracted emotional state, pulling no punches. We're not talking about a flippant issue here, but of a person experiencing and expressing the depths of their struggles with depression. He goes on, "I tried to end the masquerade. Saw the chaos I had made. When I took my shiny blade. To the water where I wade." According to a recent

national survey on LGBTQ mental health, representing over 40,000 LGBTQ American youth, more than half of the trans and non-binary youth surveyed have seriously contemplated suicide at some point in their lives (The Trevor Project, 2020). John's ABR project reflects this crisis on an individual and intimate level, speaking both to the pain, but also to the capacity for the expressive arts to open spaces that simultaneously raise awareness to important issues like this, while also shining a light on the humanity of the researcher through the art and music rendered.

John's project serves as a striking example of how the arts and ABR can be both educationally rewarding and therapeutically transformative. Throughout this study I've wondered much about the relationship of education to healing. As a therapist, my concern is for my clients' ability to find healing and respite from their internal worlds of fear, anxiety, depression, and self-degradation. As an educator, I remain concerned for the well-being of my students and arguably incorporate therapeutic practices into my pedagogical encounters. As a researcher I am consistently curious about whether or not education can be therapeutic and if it even should be, but when I encounter projects like John's, that capture the sheer rawness of human experience, I'm reminded of the lack of authenticity in our current educational climate, answering my question of whether or not education should be therapeutic with a resounding, yes!

John speaks to his transformation through his ABR project writing, "The process was more than just helpful, it was educational, fulfilling, and incredible. Arguably one of the most impactful things in my life." ABR and the Expressive Arts offer an experience vastly different from education as usual, experiences that are drastically needed in grossly sterilized, sanitized, and white washed educational environments. One only needs to spend the briefest



amount of time in any public school to encounter the demand for conformity and sterility of thought, practice, and behavior, both for students, teachers, and administrators alike. Through ABR and the Expressive Arts the rigor is expressed differently than how it might be conceptualized in traditional academic circles. ABR and the Expressive Arts call for an emotional and spiritual form of rigor, which demands that we remain authentic and true to ourselves, the artistic modality we choose to work with, and the communities we practice within. John expresses this sentiment of the emotional and spiritual rigor of ABR with a powerful discussion on the role of the arts in the research process. He writes, “This project was a reminder about how, while they are essential in much research, numbers are not the only thing that matters when it comes to therapy.” He continues, “People are hard to quantify. Even without distinct measures, I can attest to how powerful this experience was for me.” He concludes, “I find it hard to attach a statistic to my emotional and psychological growth. Does this mean my findings do not matter? Do I need numbers to prove that I feel better?”

The difference between ABR, EXA, and traditional educational climates and forms of research is striking. ABR can be contrasted against education as usual through dynamic art making that expresses our deepest ruminations and resonations, shared out in a community of supportive others, making space for us to voice some of our greatest fears, hope, joy, disappointments, and everything else in between. ABR welcomes the whole human in all of our beautifully diverse complexity. Chilton and Leavy (2014) contrast ABR against other more traditional modes of conducting research, arguing for ABR’s capacity to be emotionally and politically evocative, communicating nuanced emotional aspects of social life, all while promoting empathic and aesthetic connections for people. Should education be healing? I

would contend that considering the high rates of depression and anxiety that faces our population, as indicated in John and numerous others studies, it can't afford not to be.

*Arts Based Methods as Raising Social Awareness*



*Artistic Response to John's Work*

*"I am the Original One,  
Unadulterated, live and in person.  
I am the one who stands,  
Proud in my unique and artistic individuality"*

Education as usual is safe, the path that has already been paved, laid out for us in neatly packaged grading, curricula, pedagogy, and standards of best practices. ABR and EXA, a life lived artistically and differently, express the depth of human experience and take courage to be seen, creating something different in spite of fear, self doubt, and uncertainty. The image above is my artistic response to John's work. The male figure stands proud, certain of his place in the world, reminding me of John's transformative journey. Again,

butterfly imagery emerges, as a tattoo on the young man's stomach, serving as an unplanned synchronistic symbol of transformation that continues to surface throughout the study. It is my belief that the arts can not only assist in the transformative process of individuals, but also institutions and pedagogical practice, offering aesthetic practice as transformative practice, much like John's process of coming into voice through his ABR project.

Education as usual represents Friere's (1970) banking model of education, with students filing languidly into the classroom, feebly spending an entire class or multiple classes without engaging in conversation or interaction with their peers and instructors, contributing further to a felt sense of disconnection and depression, aloneness. Whereas education as usual offers a certain amount of anonymity and separation, arguably by design, or even housed within the psychic and subconscious hidden curriculum, ABR and EXA call forth both our individual and collective uniqueness to be boldly experienced within community and with one another. Verner Chapel and Cahnmann-Taylor (2013) bring light to the disappearing arts in the curriculum and argue for its ability to increase public awareness around their capacity to honor complexity, facilitate emotive expression, and introduce us to new ways of seeing that provide a counter to education as usual. They write, "Just as scientific rationality and a competition-driven economy threaten arts education in schools, so too do they threaten alternative, postmodern empirical approaches that convey qualitative impact" (p. 244). This qualitative impact that Verner Chapel and Cahnmann-Taylor mention is exactly what arts based practices facilitate in the learning space and is evident in all of the participants work, revealing the emotional depth of the participants' individual psychic and emotive processes, while simultaneously touching on issues of import relevant to the

collective experience, like raising social awareness around traditionally silenced voices, such as the trans community.

Like John, Verner Chapel and Cahnmann-Taylor speak to the qualitative and aesthetic impact of the arts, both in the classroom and as a research methodology. Also like John, Verner Chapel and Cahnmann-Taylor address the dynamic means through which the arts can illuminate issues exclusive to minoritized populations. They share:

The arts can become a tool of minoritized school reform that centers its processes in human dilemmas and agency and that speaks from the perspectives of those communities most affected by policies and cultures of oppression.” They argue for the arts apt ability in, “shifting the conversation from apology and justification to validation and value, arts education is more likely to serve its transformative, emancipatory, and aesthetic purposes. (Verner Chapel & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013, p. 247)

Education as usual, with its standardized models and rote procedures offers a constrictive approach to learning and experience. In a standardized model, there’s little room for difference, difference of opinion, difference of thought, difference of experience, difference of race, sexual orientation, culture, etc. Standardization breeds homogeneity, forces structure and constricture, all under the guise of best practice and efficiency. Trust in the individual teacher’s ability as a subject matter expert has eroded, their agency and autonomy bound by variables and policy beyond their control. All are bound to this strictly monitored and enforced system of educational domination, administrators, teachers, and students, all are links in a chain of creative oppression. Originality of curricular and pedagogical content has

been replaced by contractive and mind numbing procedure that fails to explore and honor the vastness of experience we bring as autonomous and unique individuals.

If our educational systems and institutions can't grant room for the unique expression of the individual, how would they even begin to create space for the difference that exists between other groups of people who have been historically excluded from the curriculum? How might we move to more expansiveness in our educational organizations, more inspiration? As Verner Chapel and Cahnmann-Taylor indicate, and as exhibited through John's work, the arts offer us something more, an opportunity to engage in aesthetics as a means to not only understand differently, but also to give the cultural differences of those who make up our classrooms an opportunity to explore, voice, and express their unique contributions.

Greene (2001) speaks of the necessity for educators to learn to perceive more aesthetically and incorporate imaginative play into their curricular design so that our capacity for mystery, wonder, and delight might be expanded, opening in us our empathic abilities and building a more beautiful and diverse social aesthetic. It is at this point in the paper that I will pivot to another student-participant vignette, one that builds off of Greene's assertion for imaginative play to deepen curricular and educational encounters. The next vignette touches on additional themes that developed through the study, including the importance of spontaneity and play, coupled with an attunement to aesthetic response as furthering the learning, transformation, and healing process. Like John, Tara also explores ABR as a viable means of doing research, one that assists us in exploring deep and meaningful topics that are relevant both to our individual lives and collective larger societal issues.

## Tara



*Visual Journal Entries by Tara*

Greene (2001) suggests that if we risk a bit of openness to the unknown through creative and imaginative play in the classroom then:

There will be moments of ‘freedom and presence’ seldom seen in schools; there will be articulate passions that refuse to be domesticated; there will be adversary images to enforced social practices, and such images often release to learn (p. 65).

Tara captures and discusses this same spirit of openness, freedom, and presence that Greene references through her ABR project, seeking to gain understanding about society’s influence on creativity and the climate crisis. The images above were created by Tara in her visual journal, incorporating visual journaling and meditation into her ABR project in order to help her understand the relationships that exist between our capitalist dominated economic system, the human propensity for creative, imaginative play, and our current predicament of

global climate crisis. Like most other participants, Tara engages in an intensive self-reflexive practice through art making and meditation to explore her inquiry, touching on the theme of reflection that permeates the ABR process for most associated with the study. Tara pursues an interesting discussion around capitalism, the climate crisis, and creativity, drawing on root imagery as metaphor, which emerged through her meditation and visual journaling practices. More on the relevance and discussion of this root imagery shortly, but first, let me address two themes thread across multiple student-participants' work that is clearly evident in Tara's ABR process, imaginative play and aesthetic response/ability.

### ***Imaginative Play and Fun as Aesthetic Response/ability***

Similar to John, Tara takes a topic that is deep and personal, but also relevant to larger societal issues, and like the other participants in the study, Tara questions the dominance of quantitative and scientific methods in the research process, but not before an initial struggle with understanding the ambiguous nature of beginning an ABR project for the first time. She writes, "Arts based research is a concept that was extremely difficult for me to wrap my head around, especially as a science major. The scientific method is constantly drilled as the exclusive method to accurate research and discovery." Tara begins her ABR paper with a reflection on the primacy offered to scientific research and forms of knowing, a common struggle for many of the students of the class. Like John, Tara ponders and questions the dominant paradigm of quantitative research as the sole mode of knowledge production writing, "What could be concluded from research without quantitative data or statistical importance? New perspectives and deeper understanding to spark further inquiry are derived." She continues, "The point is not 'capturing and then belling the cat' (Barone, 3) which often fails to provide holistic solutions, but instead to look at problems through

another lens, an artistic and qualitative lens.” It is through this artistic and qualitative lens that important, complex, and emotionally charged topics can be explored creatively, imaginatively, and playfully, in ways that make the subject matter approachable, digestible, and impactful.

It is through Tara’s image making process that an important motif of root and plant imagery began to emerge, imagery that initiates a contemplative discussion for Tara. She writes, “In my art journal, I noticed root and plant imagery reoccurring. I began to bring this root imagery into my concentrative meditation by focusing on what truly roots me.” Tara’s project exhibits how, when approached openly and playfully, the images and creations that surface through the ABR process serve to deepen and broaden our understanding of a topic. I also love that Tara touches on an important aspect of the creative process regarding the development of her imagery, almost by accident, beyond Tara’s conscious decision making process. Much like Millie, and other participants share, the ABR process involves a “getting out of the way” to allow for an organic surfacing of the medium worked with, an attitude much different from education as usual, which demands a full forced egoic assault on the materials sought to be understood.

Tara continues her contemplation upon the root imagery developing through her project writing, “I feel rooted by family, love, the earth, friends, community, learning, and health. I then thought about what society is rooted in. Society is rooted in money.” Like Irwin et al. (2006) discuss, Tara’s ABR process clearly provides both a deepening of understanding and unsettled new perceptions and possibilities as she grapples with the economic realities largely responsible for eco-degradation, but also our relation to ourselves, our loved ones, our creative capacities, and Earth. She continues, “We have the technology and ability to create a



sustainable lifestyle on earth, the reason it has not been implemented is that environmentally detrimental elements such as fossil fuels and single-use plastics are more lucrative. It is difficult to think of a society where money does not root us, but I believe it is necessary if we want to save our planet.” She ponders further, “What if society reflected what truly roots people and helps them grow? What if we stopped assigning a monetary value to how people spend their time? I imagine a society where creativity outside of profit is valued.”

It is at this point in Tara’s work that we get into the notion of a sense of aesthetic response/ability. Tara acknowledges that much of our behavior in the west is determined by the economic realities of late advanced capitalism and imagines a world where free creativity might prevail, an aesthetic response/ability that grows relationships, not destroys them. Of the ability of the arts to foster a sense of aesthetic response/ability in the world, Fuchs-Knill and Knill (2015) write, “in staying with the arts, we learn how something new is created and comes into our world. This fosters an atmosphere in which the unknown can be encountered more as an opportunity than as a threat.” The unknown of our planetary future is arguably one of the most pressing issues of our time and through Tara’s project she begins to imagine a future where humans are rooted in right relation with themselves, one another, Earth, and our own passionate and creative proclivities, an aesthetic response to the times.

Tara continues her discussion, “Completing arts based research regarding society and creativity during a global pandemic has provided a unique perspective. COVID-19 has nearly shut down society as we knew it. People are out of work and unable to go out and stimulate the capitalist economy.” Tara concludes her project with an acknowledgement of late advanced capitalism’s deleterious effects on the planet, society, and the individual, questioning the roots of our civilization, and courageously envisioning a different future for

humanity through the arts. She shares, “As the capitalist society crumbles, I have more time to focus on my true roots instead of having to root myself in money. I have meditated and art-journaled significantly more since having free time.” She goes on to acknowledge some of the positive impacts of COVID-19 and the resulting quarantine which proffered her and many in the world more time to pursue creative interests and spend time with loved ones, questioning the work laden and fast paced culture tied to capitalist goals and outcomes. She also acknowledges the benefit to Earth of quarantine and leading a slower, less consumptive life as a global society, “The earth is also benefiting from the shutdown of capitalism. People in Northern India were able to see the Himalayas for the first time in 30 years this April due to the reduction of air pollution. The correlation between the shutdown of capitalism, the increase of people returning to their true roots, and the improvement of the environment is not a coincidence.”

Of the power of imagery in coming to know through art making, Allen (1995) writes:

When I enter my art space, I try to have the clearest intention possible to accept whatever comes to me. I trust that the images I need, the knowledge I need, exists within me and that I can access it through this process...My overall intention is to come to know the source of wisdom and guidance within me. (p. 24)

How different from a quantitative and scientific approach to wisdom and understanding?

Whereas in science we are warned of the dangers of bias and subjectivity in interfering with objective truth, arts based approaches to knowing embrace the fullness and complexity of our humanity playfully, in all of our messy and muddled psychic confusion and chaos. John, Tara, and other student-participants in the study, all allude to science's attempts to offer the promise of clean and neat understanding in the forms of strict methods and procedures. ABR

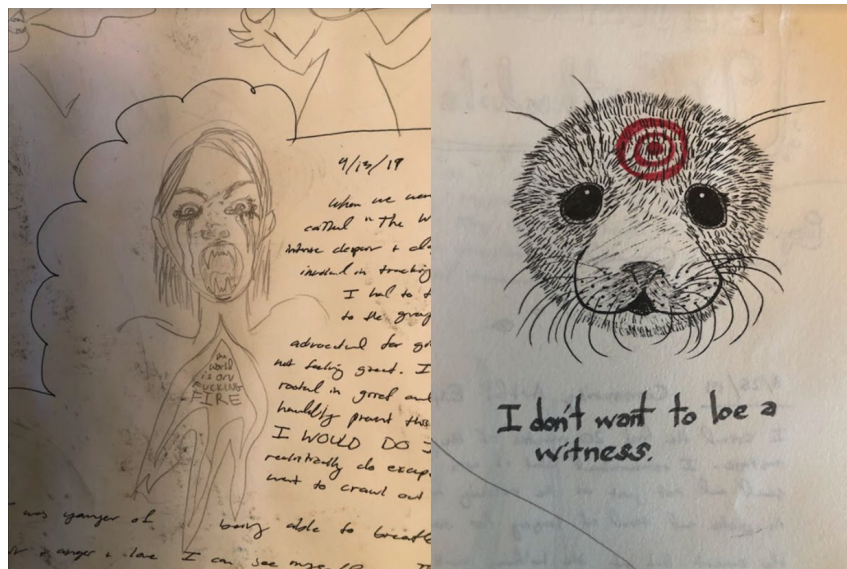
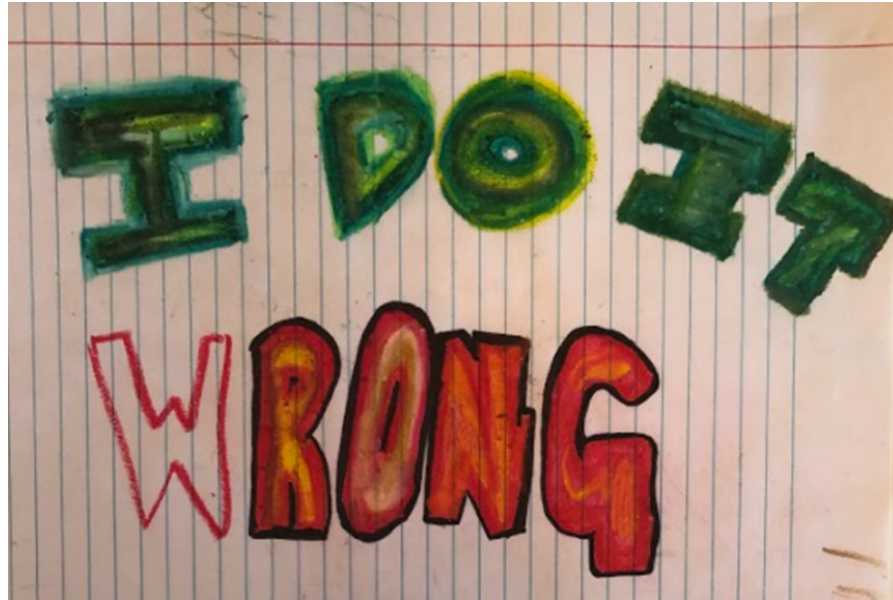
and EXA offer acknowledgement and acceptance for the mystery of human experience and life in its continual, spontaneous, and playful unfolding in the ever present moment of our individual and collective transformative journey(ies). ABR and EXA give an expressive voice to our individual and collective experiences that frequently defy neat and categorical explanations.

It is important to note that these synchronous manifestations, like the organic emergence of powerful imagery, weave threads of interconnection amongst concepts, themes, ideas, dreams, poetry, song, movement, etc., within each individual participants work and across the study as a whole, including my own artistic renderings and writing. All interconnect as sense and meaning making occur in both embodied and intellectual ways of knowing, alone, as individuals, and yet together as a community. This organic, free-flowing, expressive dance of meaning making cannot occur without an openness and receptivity to spontaneity and intuition, as individual arts based researchers, while also existing in community with one another, touching on two important themes identified in the study, collaboration and play. Discussing the interconnectivity of the a/r/tographical process, Irwin et al. (2006) write, “A/r/tography is a living inquiry of unfolding artforms and text that intentionally unsettles perception and complicates understandings through its rhizomatic relationality. In doing so space and time are understood in different ways.” ABR, therefore, offers a form of spontaneous and free living inquiry, art and text connecting, intersecting, deepening, and entangling, like the living forest as it pushes its roots through the dark and rocky ground, without plan or procedure, spontaneously unfolding and entangling in relational response to its surroundings. We, those of us engaged with this study, are like the individual trees of the forest, on the surface standing tall as singular entities, but underneath,

the roots of our understanding entangled in a beautifully complex knotted mass of ever evolving movement and change.

Tara's project exhibits multiple themes strung throughout varied student-participants work, including ABR as self-reflexive process, the communal relations that connect ideas and work across the study, the importance of maintaining an openness and receptivity to spontaneity and playfulness in the ABR process, aesthetic response/ability as a means to allow the new to unfold in one's life, work, and community(ies), and the necessity of slowing down to find stillness and time to pursue worthwhile creative endeavors. Through her ABR project, Tara takes an incredibly complex and pertinent topic, allowing for the creative and spontaneous emergence of imagery that serves as a powerful metaphor for our current eco-degradic predicament. Tara's project offers a thoughtful and artful critique of the economic systems responsible for our environmental ails. She also offers hope for a world through which the roots of our individual and collective being seek the soft earthy goodness of free creativity, love, compassion, and connection, reminding us of our capacity to lead more aesthetically responsible lives together. Tara's work serves as an excellent example of how ABR can foster deeper understanding of a topic through aesthetic response/ability to our own internal navigation systems, offering hope, if only we have the courage to stop, slow down, and gently care for the tender roots of our heart space(s), pondering as Tara did, what truly roots us.

Mary



*Visual Journal Entries by Mary:*

*I DO IT WRONG!*

*The World is on Fucking Fire!*

*I don't want to be a witness.*

*Vulnerability, Embodiment, Feeling, and Affect as Educative Encounter*

We sit in silence following the share. There's a tension, an uncomfortability within the group after the authentic expression. The students were invited to share their drawings and a brief movement that captures their experience after discussing art as a form of activism. One of the few brave souls who participated in the impromptu activity, Mary, throws her journal in the center, in big colored letters, reading "I DO IT WRONG!" Then, after launching the journal itself into the circle, she throws her body into the circle, lying face down, prostrating before us. The energetic shift is palpable. What do we do? What do we say? Nothing. We witness, together, this vulnerable, embodied, and powerful gesture, an expression beyond logos. This work represents a different type of rigor. It takes a different type of courage. The courage to be seen and witnessed in our raw vulnerability, atypical of more common educative climates and experiences. It is work beyond the logos, speaking a different language, a language of the body and heart.

There's a rawness to the human experience that the academy and intellectual circles frequently miss the mark on. As a therapist, I'm interested in the access of and cathartic experience of emotion as expressed in embodied and poietic knowing. I'm no doubt interested in the place of logos in meaning and sense making; it is, of course, a substantial aspect of the human experience, as I hear the faint call of a well known Western philosophical elder, "I think, therefore, I am." Yet, what if we enlarged our capacity for meaning making even further to include, "I feel, therefore, I am." Many of the student-participants in the study pluck this musical string of resonance, expounding in detail through their visual journals, in class art making activities, and ABR project presentations and papers that feeling, emotion, affect, have value in their experience and inform their learning and healing journeys. One student-participant, quoting the philosopher/mystic Alan Watts writes,

“There are no wrong feelings, only wrong actions...We are terrified of our feelings because they take off on their own.”

In arguing for a research methodology of the heart, locating such practices in the body, Pelias (2014) writes of the researcher’s body that it is, “...a body deployed not as narcissistic display but on behalf of others, a body that invites identification and empathic connection, a body that takes as its charge to be fully human.” This bold act of self-expression performed by this student/participant and witnessed by the entire group presents an opportunity for the entire community present. It is simultaneously an opportunity for the enactor to reveal through their body, their unique approach to not only the conceptualization of the material, but also their aesthetic response/ability.

For me, the encounter described above, represents a form of surrender to the learning process, and also a declaration. Lying prostrate before the class community, next to the words “I DO IT WRONG” not only identifies Mary’s frame of mind and internal struggles, but also serves as a declaration that though the inner critic seems to always be present in our work, by declaring its presence in the midst of community support, we surrender to its power publicly, thereby deflating its hold over our creative and communal processes. Mary later goes on to write about her ABR process in her paper, “My refusal to fight my inner critic or push myself to do something meaningful with my time significantly thwarted my enjoyment of the process.” Through providing such a bold aesthetic response to the material as was the case in this particular encounter reveals Mary’s courage to not only confront the difficult and darker sides of ourselves in the form of harsh self-judgmentalism, but also demonstrates an aptitude for embodied, empathic, and affective knowing that is frequently taken for granted in most educational encounters and environments.

Through the act of holding communal space and being witnessed a different type of learning occurs. Dare I say both learning and healing occur for the performer and those witnessing the embodied experience. I cannot speak directly for Mary, but her courage to be bold in her self-expression in this encounter no doubt helped the class as a whole to move from one of constricted and withdrawn participatory engagement to vulnerable calculated risks that brought us together as a community, exposing and strengthening our common humanity. Discussing healing in the EXA process, Herman (2016) argues for the necessity of expression of trauma and that, “From time immemorial, art forms have helped us to hold this stuff and it used to be done together in community.” Similarly, Atkins and Snyder (2017), referencing indigenous traditions and their connections to art making and Earth suggest that art making is an inherent aspect of being human and one that involves the whole community(ies) of which “we” are but a part, including both human and more than human alike. It is through these bold acts of expression, like Mary’s, made while in community with other artist practitioners, that a different type of learning occurs, an embodied learning of the heart that opens space for affective, vulnerable, authentic and powerful expression to occur.

### *The “Art” of Liminality*

Mary, like most of us who formed this study, initially struggled with finding a sense of traction and clarity in her personal ABR process. She writes, “I wish that I had started my journal with more of a focus than pure, paralyzing freedom.” I had the pleasure of walking and talking with Mary after class one dark fall evening. This particular evening, as indicated from my class observation notes, I was contemplating the class and their struggles with the ambiguity that ABR offers. I write, “Still some issues with ambiguity. There's some nervousness around the drama, the group drama. I said keep it open y'all. Keep it open. Keep



it creative. I said, I know, I know the ambiguity is killing ya” (personal communication, October 2, 2019).

During our post-class discussion, as we walked across campus together, Mary acknowledged that I was trying to maintain a level of openness in the curriculum. She said, “You're trying to work with us with much of these ingrained notions of helping us overcome ‘It's right! It's wrong!’, a traditional research mentality.” Later reflecting upon my conversation with Mary I realize that here's the perfectionism, the inner critic that so many of the students in the study address. Here's how the anxiety and depression manifests, and Mary, throwing her book and tearing it to pieces gives voice to this. This is what Lisa Herma discusses as healing occurring through witnessing each other. I realized after this particular class, after this conversation with Mary that liminal space is happening. I record in my observation notes that though initially reluctant, this group of students came around to the expansiveness that the arts can offer. In my notes I wrote, “They're wanting to make more art and there's a felt sense of excitement as they lean into the process, letting go of preconceived notions of what art and learning should be. We're finally connecting, as a community of artists. The class before this was off to the races and hanging with the art making process the whole time. My sense, however, is that the fruit to bear with Mary's class, though they were initially reluctant, is going to be substantial and long standing” (personal communication, October 23, 2019). The class that Mary was a part seemed to struggle with the liminality, the unknowns inherent in an open art making curriculum, but as more students, like Mary, began to take courage to openly and authentically express themselves, many began to follow suit and open up to more expressive encounters. It is a reminder to me that the magic is in the art

and that if we, as expressive arts educators, place our simple faith and trust in that process, the community will be captivated by the magic of expression and creativity.

It should go without saying that not all who have taken my class resonate with the material presented. As already discussed throughout this work, there is a certain amount of openness purposefully designed as part of the class curriculum, particularly when it comes to the students ABR projects. They are given significant latitude in the topics they choose to explore, the questions they ask, and the artistic modalities they engage with. Many appreciate the level of autonomy and agency granted them to traverse the murky and ambiguous waters that can be ABR, but some struggle, craving exact direction, clarity, conciseness, not unlike the exactitude offered through the scientific method. ABR, however, invites us to ponder the mystery of being, bringing us to liminal thresholds which challenge our conventional notions around research. This liminality can be at times both liberating and maddening, contracting and expanding. Of the in-between state of liminality through which the arts can help us touch Herman (2015) writes, “The site of inquiry for embodied, artful, transpersonal inquirers/practitioners is where inside and outside meet. The in-between transpersonal is a space/time that cannot be seen by either the eye or the micro/telescope, heard by the ear, tasted by the tongue, touched by the skin, smelled by the nose.”

Many, including myself, with this very study, struggle with this transpersonal sense of liminality. It’s an elusive feeling that frequently evades description and categorization. Yet I maintain that this is where the magic happens in the learning process of ABR, not through exact specificity, but as the researcher or as in my case, a/r/tographer gropes, at times blindly, through the dark forest of intellect, affect, body, mind, and soul, encountering distant lights that serve as beacons for something more, rewarding the researcher with a glimmer of hope

in the midst of fear, entanglement, confusion, contraction. When a piece, a writing, a dream, a song, a movement, a community encounter, when these artifacts of soulful expression coalesce, there's a tendency for these encounters of art making to evoke a felt sense of presence for the aesthetic expression rendered, it is a palpable sense of completion, oneness, unity, expansion. Yet the researcher must push through the entangled and rooted dark mass of "not knowing," fear, and nebulous tension(s), that some glimmer of clarity, some pearl of wisdom, may be revealed.

### ***The Power of Grief in/as Aesthetic Response***

So many of the students, including Mary, who take this class speak to the capacity of the arts to help us think and more importantly, feel differently. Some student projects, like Millie's, the first vignette discussed, are framed around this entire notion, that the arts help to touch us in ways that are distinctly different from other experiences of being human. The arts demand a certain amount of sensitivity and can evoke powerful emotions, as Mary experienced — giving us insight into our individual and collective experiences. Greene (2001) suggests that this is exactly the role of education, to help us break through the monotony of routine and convention, allowing ourselves to be moved, uncoupling from the lazy seeing of the ordinary to where, "the familiar becomes the unfamiliar."

Mary struggled with art's capacity to evoke change throughout her research process. Mary's project was titled, "Exploring Arts Capacity for Ecological Healing". The question she sought to explore was, "How can art help people heal in the midst of ongoing ecological destruction?" She writes, "I can confidently say I utterly failed to find an answer to that question. I only barely brushed the surface of all art has to offer during the semester, and I'll admit that I actively resisted trying to engage with difficult feelings throughout the process."

Mary pulls no punches in her exploration and critique of ABR. The power of Mary's project lies in her brutal honesty, her raw vulnerability and authenticity. Mary was exceedingly hard on herself throughout her research process, yet, her openness to honoring exactly where she was emotionally is its own sort of aesthetic response. Speaking to the strength of emotion and vulnerability in the classroom and research process Green (2020) writes, "This is contested terrain that leads into tangled wilderness beyond the starkly-lit, neatly-cultivated rows of scientific objectivities. Forging a track into these fecund, organic, subjective backwoods is simultaneously risky and deeply rewarding."

Mary incorporated visual journaling into her process of coming to terms with her grief around ecological degradation. She states, "It's exhausting to worry not just about my future, but about the future of entire species. I don't take pride in my sensitivity because it renders me useless. I'm miserable and guilty every day, with hardly enough energy to keep myself moving, let alone productively address the pain I'm attuned to." Grief is an important emotion that arguably lacks appropriate space to be expressed in our culture of fast paced productivity, no matter the cost. What if we created more spaces in our classrooms and in the curriculum to truly honor the grief and trauma we carry in our hearts? These "dark" emotions, carried not only as individuals, but as a species, and even across species, to include the whole earth and the cosmos. What if we, as Joanna Macy (2007) suggests, and as Mary exhibits, enlarge our capacity for suffering in the world. Not as some sort of masochistic exercise, but as a means to starkly look at the losses we suffer, moving through the grief to a deeper level of emotional intelligence and understanding, building and strengthening the extent to which we can truly empathize with the other, to include the other of our ecological habitats, to the other of Mother Earth. Macy (2007) writes, "The sorrow, grief, and rage you

feel is a measure of your humanity and your evolutionary maturity. As your heart breaks open there will be room for the world to heal.”

The current curriculum, our current educational climate, has little room and space for anything outside of standardized practices of teaching and learning. We must all be so very analytical and “together,” the consummate intellectuals, at times objective, at others cold and detached. Yet this sense of objectivity is arguably part of the problem. In thinking through this point of mutual entanglement with nature further, and its divergence from a positivistic and modernistic mode of being in the world, McKenna (1994) explains, “Nature is not our enemy, to be raped and conquered. Nature is ourselves, to be cherished and explored.” If then, perhaps even through the arts, our capacity for self is expanded to include all of the natural world, to not feel a deep sense of grief, loss, despair seems the more delusional response than to actually feel it and give it expression. Mary addresses this point, that to avoid grief over environmental loss is the most common response writing, “Macy argues that the concept of the self prevents us from engaging in the richness of life in all its complexity. Both the pain of poached elephants and the triumph of seedlings is lost on most human beings because we create an artificial barrier between our experience and the collective experience of all life.” In this passage, then, we see that it is easier to avoid and repress the harsh realities of our time, than to actually have the courage, like Mary, to face them.

I would contend, though, that part of the issue is that heart, soul, and appreciation for the sacred mystery of life, death, and being have largely been sequestered to the realm of therapists, psychologists, and pastors/preachers/religious teachers spaces. We have compartmentalized the times appropriate for authentic and vulnerable expression. What if we, as educators, had the courage to facilitate spaces of open expression where emotions like

grief, rage, sorrow, and every expression in between could be processed and witnessed in community? What if we embraced the realm of the emotive and the sacred? How might our classrooms look then? How might our students respond differently to learning and the suffering of our time? Macy (2014) contends that this is exactly what must occur so that a more expansive self might be identified, a self beyond the single isolated ego, identifying with our planet and across species as interwoven, our mutual identities exactly that, mutual. She writes, “The conventional notion of the self with which we have been raised and to which we have been conditioned by mainstream culture is being undermined...being replaced by wider constructs of identity and self-interest” (Macy, 2014).

Mary captures this felt sense of interspecies connectivity in her work, giving voice to her grief, sorrow, and rage, an aesthetic response to the times. She writes, “I already knew what I was feeling from having lived it long enough, and it wasn’t until recently that I realized that I need to engage with, rather than simply describe, my anguish. The challenge is creating a mental space where I not only allow myself to fail, but move from inward reflection to outward engagement with things that take the wind out of me.” Mary continues her reflection on her grief over the climate crisis and eco-degradation sharing, “When I create, whether it’s cooking or repairing socks or sketching, I can typically put all of my attention on what I’m doing and, for a short while, live outside of myself. I need that.” Here we see that Mary touches on the ability of artistic engagement with materials, helping us to become more grounded in the present moment, enough so that it can provide, even if briefly, respite from that which consumes us. She continues, however, that though art making practice provides at least temporary peace, it ultimately serves as, “...a helpful distraction at

best.” She continues, “I haven’t discovered some magical transformative property of art that will fix the ozone layer and heal the social divisions.”

Unlike the others who participated in the study, Mary offers a critique of the arts in helping us come to terms with environmental and social problems. Mary discusses what she views as the arts inherent inability to help us adequately deal with some of the most pressing issues of our times. She found the process largely ineffective. She closes her paper writing, “Ultimately, if I’m going to use art as a part of my grieving process, I’ll need to divorce my inner critic, make peace with a clear lack of direction, and push myself to be fully present in my work.” Looking back at my observation notes and after reviewing Mary’s work, I’m reminded of how grateful I am for her uncommonly authentic expression throughout the course. Rather than contest Mary’s conclusions or seek to further justify the arts as helping us raise awareness around environmental and social concerns, I think the more appropriate response is to acknowledge that not everyone resonates with the arts as something that can help them as individuals or even the larger communities of which we are a part. Art isn’t necessarily for everyone, nor does everyone find ABR and EXA as personally fulfilling or socially relevant and that’s okay! Every person is unique, some being drawn to more analytical means of thinking and others finding solace in intuitive and expressive encounters. I commend Mary for her courage throughout her ABR process, to continue to lean into the work, and instead of offering up a superficial contemplation, she chose to approach her topic openly and honestly, providing an undeniably real rumination on her experience with the ABR process.

## **Vignettes Conclusion**

My intent of including these vignettes as part of the work demonstrates some of the students' experiences with the class and their respective ABR projects and presentations. They also served as a means to connect the writing (the "graphy" of a/r/tography) with themes, concepts, and ideas that emerged throughout the research and analysis process for both myself and the student/participants. As we have seen through the vignettes, there are frequently more questions than answers that emerge, and the researcher must become comfortable with a certain amount of not knowing throughout the research process. Rolling (2010) describes the ABR analysis process as a proliferative practice that provokes conflict, confusion, and ambiguity. That was certainly the case for myself as I wade through the quagmire of material produced by both myself and the student/participants, while simultaneously confronting my emotive experience through the process, attempting to connect it all to some semblance of intellectualism. I am reminded, however, as I reflect on the totality of the study, that the magic of ABR and EXA lies in the relationships formed with myself and with the other beautiful and brave humans that chose to embark upon this journey of vulnerable and authentic art making and expression, all the while fostering and shaping a community of support, care, and concern for ourselves and one another.



## Chapter 5

### Exploratory and Analytical Process



*Untitled Mixed Media Mask, by Mel Falck*

One rarely knows the shape, tone, and dimensions that an artistic endeavor is going to follow. I think it is a more accurate rendering of the works, experiences, and thinking associated with “Why Art?” to combine this chapter on analysis with the language of exploration, because it is my belief, and the open pedagogical approaches to the EXA support this, that any creative endeavor is one of exploratory awareness. We may have a somewhat faint intimation of any direction that a work will grow, but ultimately, in my experience, most art seemingly takes off on its own, revealing aesthetic realities not considered at the piece’s earliest inception. “Why Art?” as a study and a class has been no different than any other piece of art I have approached, growing, shifting, coming to form with each poetic and liminal encounter with artistic mediums, combined with the “graphy” of the writing process associated with a/r/tography. Each collage constructed, each word written, each movement based aesthetic response to the work, both my own, and those of the students, serves to

catalyze the seemingly disparate parts into a whole artistic rendering, not unlike a mixed media collage or mask, the work growing more rich, exhibiting more depth, with each layer added. The images found at the beginning of this chapter represent one mask that I made as part of the in class mask making experience. I enjoy the layering quality of working with any two dimensional surface, but mask making combines the two dimensional qualities of drawing, painting, and collage with the three dimensional characteristics of sculpture. Yet, the “layering” of multimodalities doesn’t end there; for once the mask is created, it presents a wonderful opportunity to combine other artistic forms together including music, voice, movement, and/or performance, adding to the arts based inquiry. “Why Art?” represents this bringing together of layered and divergent components, much like a mask combined with performance, creating a picture of a congruous whole.

Similar to a finished sculpture, mask, or performance, in this section of writing my goal is to provide a rich portrait of the varied approaches and tools that I used to make sense of experiences shared across this study. Each method used in the class and study, each in-class experience, each memo written, every observation recorded, each piece of art, all serve as individual layers that shape and continue to form and inform the research process. Akin to any artistic endeavor, whether it be a mask, collage, or musical improvisation, there have been periods of chaos and contraction that lacked insight or creative inspiration, but by sticking with the process, staying with the trouble, and remaining open to new forms of inquiry, experimentation, and expression, these moments of inhibition were countered with flow, serendipity, and surprise. What types of surprises you might ask. In the following section, I discuss my initial struggles with beginning the exploratory and analytical process and the realization that I was falling into the same trap, as many of the students, getting

bogged down in the traditional assumptions of how a dissertation and research “should” look and operate, ultimately connected to a bland and dull version of a form of neoliberalist narrow and anxious, inhibited thinking. After discussing some of these initial challenges with making sense of the art, experiences, and writing affiliated with “Why Art?,” I then discuss the organic culmination of my artistic exploratory process, highlighting some of the key features that served to mold the meaning making of “Why Art?,” both as a study and a class.

### **We’re Not Robots! We’re Humans!**

Explaining the uniqueness of ABR dissertations, Atkins (2012) succinctly states, “Arts-based dissertations do not look like traditional dissertations” (p. 63). She goes on to explain:

Art-based dissertations typically have included more than the content of the five chapters, though the standard content may not be immediately observable. Often art-based researchers use evocative metaphorical chapter titles, share detailed and elaborated information about methodology and findings and interweave their literature review with their own conceptual framework. (p. 63)

When I first conceptualized and approached this study, I was exceedingly enthusiastic about the art making practices that would serve as the ground through which the research would spring forth and grow; however, as I moved from the classroom to the computer to write it all up, I was faced with the overwhelming reality that now it was up to me to begin making sense of the experiences had and art produced. In the poetic process, the shift from “real” materials, paints, instruments, paper, our own bodies and voices, to the computer screen was cumbersome. The disparate realms didn’t easily match up and align, so as I tried to conceptualize with written word on the screen, the depth and beauty of aesthetic

experiences rendered, relationships formed, and insights gleaned through physical and sensuous art making has proven a demanding task indeed. I didn't know where to start and like the glaring blank canvas that I have alluded to throughout this writing, I was almost frozen with panic at the thought of detailing the artistic adventure(s) we had embarked upon. So what did I do? I fell back on that which was easy and comfortable to me, linear and analytical methods and thinking to attempt to pull it all together.

Pseudonym	Semester	Where is work saved?	Notes	Artistic Response to Work?	Participant Memo	Uploaded Paper into Quercus?
			<p><i>Visual Journal Notes:</i> This journal is a collection of images and text. The images are mostly of the body, but also include some of the environment. The text is mostly descriptive, but also includes some reflections on the images. The journal is a mix of text and images, and is a good example of a visual journal.</p> <p><i>ABR presentation and Visual Journal in Google Drive:</i> ABR Paper in video</p>	Yes	Yes	Yes
			<p><i>Visual Journal Notes:</i> This journal is a collection of images and text. The images are mostly of the body, but also include some of the environment. The text is mostly descriptive, but also includes some reflections on the images. The journal is a mix of text and images, and is a good example of a visual journal.</p> <p><i>ABR presentation in Google Drive:</i> ABR Paper in video</p>	Yes	Yes	Yes
			<p><i>Visual Journal Notes:</i> This journal is a collection of images and text. The images are mostly of the body, but also include some of the environment. The text is mostly descriptive, but also includes some reflections on the images. The journal is a mix of text and images, and is a good example of a visual journal.</p> <p><i>ABR presentation in Google Drive:</i> ABR Paper in video</p>	Yes	Yes	Yes

### Analytical Spreadsheet Screenshot

The beginning phases of my sense making process was initially a very structured and linear approach to organizing the student writing, projects, and presentations, as well as my observations as recorded through my notes and audio recordings following each class. I was confronted with a mound of texts in the forms of artwork, notes, memos, voice recordings, student papers, etc. So what did I do with all of this information? I did what any good administrator does and created a spreadsheet, went line by line reviewing each student's works, writing, and presentations, including the transcription of my audio recordings taken after each class. I took detailed notes through the spreadsheet and the process was incredibly labor intensive, formulaic, and exact. I'm not just suggesting that this process wasn't helpful. It

was a starting point, but it lacked soul, evocation, expression. In short, it lacked the qualities of an arts based research project. I wish I could say that I awoke from my nightmare of stratified and constricted thinking; instead, I labored on through the fog and mist of words, images, and memories. At one point in this process, I was encouraged by my committee chair to meet with him for a workshopping session. He suggested that I “bring everything;” the art made, the transcriptions, the notes, the observations, even musical instruments, all of it. He proposed that I print off my writing and note taking done through my spreadsheets in large sheets to be hung around the classroom we were working in.

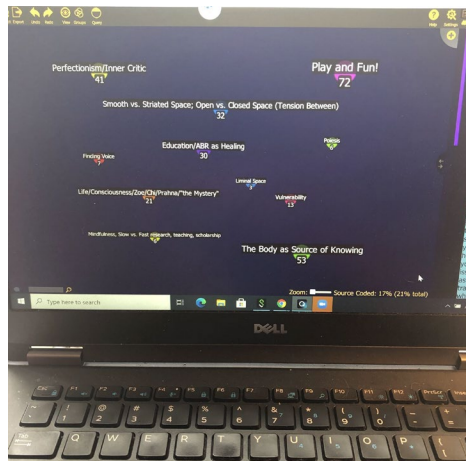
I wish I could say that inspiration struck and the clouds that covered my thinking and expression dissipated, but alas, it did not. Seeing all of that text, language, from both myself and my students produced even more confusion. How in the world would I even begin to pull out themes and areas of connectivity from this mass and mess of language?! I began to timidly mark on the sheets of paper, attempting to pull some semblance of commonality from the disparate parts, circling small sections of writing or specific words or terms, highlighting others. It didn’t “feel” right though. It felt boring, constricted, inauthentic. I was discouraged. After our meeting I took my large sheets back home and hung them on the wall in my office, staring almost hopelessly at the monumental task before me. I felt stuck.



*Initial Stages of the “Wall of Data” WoD*

The entire exploratory process wove in and out of a certain amount of structure that strained against the free flowing organic growth that I ultimately desired in the students' work and my own. The image above was captured after I consolidated and hung all of the notes and observations from the student works and classroom observations. This wall of written language represented my blank canvas, my challenge. As I pondered the writing initially, I would move in close, reading line by line, looking for any connections and themes, wishing and hoping that I could discover some grain of commonality, some thread of consistency. Seeing the immensity of written word before me and after a conversation with a colleague who used more traditional qualitative methods to pull out themes from his research, I turned to a qualitative data analysis software system known as Quirkos. The tension of what a dissertation “should” look like remained and I thought that by uploading all of my writing and combining it with the student writing it would help me to identify solid

categories and themes from the class and study in a timely and effective manner. I was no doubt placing a certain amount of misguided faith in the computer application. I slowly began to realize that even this process was incredibly nonrepresentative and though yes, I did identify numerous threads of commonality across the writing of both myself and the students, it still felt constricted and uninspiring. Not to mention I was still tied to the computer screen which felt less real, less authentic, less vulnerable. It was less expressively artistic. Our humanity, those of us who composed the class and study, in a way “we” felt incredibly distanced from this process. Not to mention, the expression of our souls, both individual and collective, felt lacking in this realm of bits and bytes. There was a want for sentimentality, vulnerability, authenticity and aestheticism.



### *Quirkos Software with Developing “Themes”*

A large part of the challenge associated with “Why Art?” has been navigating amongst and between the logos, the written and spoken word, as I seek to understand, layered within the context of the heart and soul of the EXA and ABR, with their emphasis on the poetic encounter and engagement with creative expression. Art no doubt offers its own form of language, speaking to the sensual, embodied, expressive, fragile, and even wounded aspects of our nature, yet time and again the trap of what a dissertation, research, and

knowledge “should” look like has and continues to meet me at almost every turn in the process. Breaking old, hardened paradigms is difficult work, and as I seek to awaken the students I work with to the expressive and sensuous world around and within us, that ultimately is us, I am simultaneously met with resistance and self doubt within myself. The roots of positivistic, humanist, and neoliberal thinking and stoic affect go deep, and throughout this process, as I worked to help my students understand the value and necessity of truly creative encounters and experiences through varied artistic mediums, I frequently found myself trapped within the same psychic landscape of rational, analytical restriction. Speaking to the value our culture places on rationality as expressed through language, Eisner (2005 ) writes:

For the Greeks, reasoning had little to do with matters of feeling and much to do with matters of rationality. Rationality itself was conceptualized narrowly to refer to the relationship between reason and language. Reason needed language to flourish. Given this perspective, it is not surprising that the arts took on a marginal position. They were conceived of as imitations that did not depend on reason. They still are. (p. 10)

Eisner (2005) notes that the arts serve as their own particular form of language in that they develop our mental capacities to think and learn differently, making communication beyond the rational possible.

Something happened around this period of creative constriction; I began to let go, almost out of complete frustration; I quit trying so hard and began drawing on and over the writing, transcriptions, and notes. It was an intuitive risk of sorts. I let go of expectation and in typical EXA fashion, surrendered to the process, as Levine (2015) indicates of the poietic process, new images and understandings occurring as we surrender to flow, allowing that

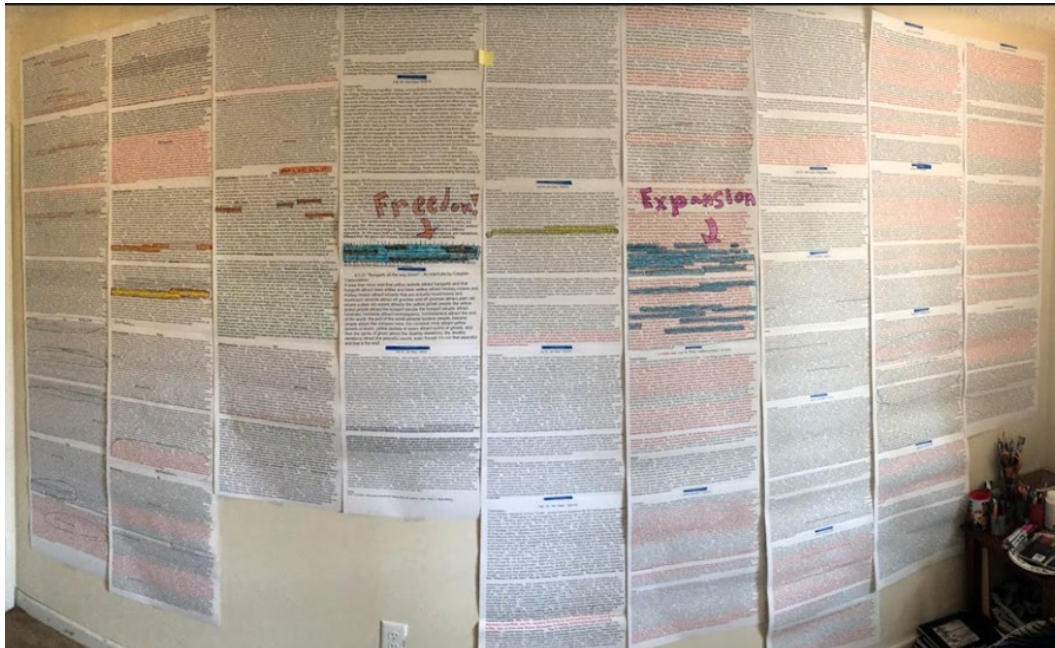


which seeks emergence to do so. The overwhelm of the sense making process still lingered, but I felt that I had taken the initial steps into the forest of the dark unknown and it was around this time that I was visited by what some might consider a “big dream.” Of dreams and the Appalachian approach to the EXA, Atkins and Williams (2007) write, “Like the arts, dreams and imagination provide a bridge between inner and outer worlds. Dreams, imagination and the arts speak a language of their own. This language is primarily non-linear, one of image and metaphor, multilayered with meaning and possibilities” (p. 6). Likewise, a/r/tographical inquiry makes space for the surreal as an informative part of the research process; Diamond and Mullen (1999) contend that even through dreaming, deep realizations can be grasped and played with.

In this dream I find myself within the safety of a small camper. It’s cozy and I immediately recognize some of my grandmother’s quilts, creating even more of a feeling of safety. Outside of the trailer, there is a small group of mythical, non-threatening creatures. It feels fun and safe. Suddenly a large, aggressive centaur emerges from the forest wielding a lance. He is breaking up the party and urges me quite forcefully into the dark unknown of the forest. I don’t want to go, but I know I must. After reading my log of this dream I’m struck by the similarity I felt between the safety of linear and analytical thinking as expressed in my spreadsheet note taking system and the safety of the small camper and though I was embarking upon an arts based project, the thought of actually using the arts to make meaning and promote understanding was terrifying. But why?

For one, I’ve grappled, like the students, with my own inner critic, as most of us do. What if the art I produce for this study sucks? What if my committee and others hate it? Does that mean people hate me? Sometimes I hate aspects of myself, so why would anyone

like or love me? And on and on the cycle of internal struggle and self-degradation continued, the enemy of art, disparaging us from taking bold courageous leaps in our creative capacities. It wasn't until I actively began marking on the wall, at first very timidly, that the interrelationships amongst and between the thinking and writing began to very slowly, almost painfully, take shape and form and continue to do so through my ongoing art making practices. I opened up the WoD with two compelling words, "FREEDOM" and "EXPANSION." I was still relying on the logos, but it was as if I was finally giving myself permission to be expressive and even to fail.



*Early Stages of the WoD*

By relating to the notes and writing via an artistic lens, a different form of language and understanding began to slowly emerge, the language of visual creative expression, eventually leading to other forms of expression through the exploratory process, like movement based aesthetic responses and music making, but more on that later. Visual journaling was built into the class and entwined with the study; it also saw its emergence through the WoD as I began

to playfully interact with the art and text. A 6 ft. x 12 ft. large visual journal began to very slowly emerge, grow, and take shape.

I'm a visual artist and as mentioned already in the writing, visual journaling has been ingrained in the course and study's content, many of the students incorporating their visual journals into their respective ABR studies. Ganim and Fox (1999) offer visual journaling as a means to connect with soul, the deepest essence of ourselves and our offering to the planet and community(ies) we are a part, sharing:

It is important to know what keeps us connected to our soul, because without that connection we lose our sense of who we really are. What disconnects us from our soul is our attachment to other people's judgments and opinions. When we fear negative feedback from others, we are tempted to reshape ourselves to conform to their expectations. (p. 138)

I now realize that my early sense making process was strikingly soulless. On a certain level the spreadsheets and formulaic approaches served as a mask, as I attempted to cover my fears, doubts, self-degradation, depression, terror, my lack of love for myself, my selfishness, my ignorance, my passion, my brokenness, my vulnerability, my sensual and sexual nature, and on and on. Feigned objectivity masked the layers and complexity of who I am. In a sense I succumbed to that which I sought and seek to expose, the fakeness of "the professional world," connected to neoliberalist cold and distanced relatedness, as we compartmentalize and hide our raw natures, both beautiful and ugly, behind the mask of professionalism, titles, administration, rote procedure, and bureaucracy. We're not robots, we're humans! The EXA have the potential to lay all bare if only we have the courage to allow ourselves to be seen for our full humanity, offering an opportunity at redemption, healing, and integration, if shared

within a community of support, through which, space can be held for the cathartic release of what might be labeled as “the darker emotions,” fear, anger, rage, grief, despair, despondency. There exists a certain amount of empowerment in sharing one’s vulnerabilities through artistic means within a community of support, yet it requires a commitment to authenticity and the courage to get real with one’s self. It’s important and terrifying work, to face our individual and collective shadow. Zweig and Wolf (1997) describe this important and courageous soul work writing:

We seek to present a beautiful, innocent face to the world; a kind, courteous demeanor; a youthful, intelligent image. And so, unknowingly but inevitably, we push away those qualities that do not fit the image, that do not enhance our self esteem and make us stand proud but, instead, bring us shame and make us feel small. We shove into the dark cavern of the unconscious those feelings that make us uneasy—hatred, rage, jealousy, greed, competition, lust, shame—and those behaviors that are deemed wrong by the culture—addiction, laziness, aggression, dependency—thereby creating what could be called shadow content. (p. 4)

Education as usual denies the shadow. It serves its corporate masters with their yearning for ever more perfection and progress. We must achieve! We must be better! We must be...perfect! Self acceptance and compassion impede on the fear mongering and lies that we’re just not quite good enough. If we were, “good enough,” as is, why would we keep chasing our next achievement, accomplishment, or degree? The denial of our individual and collective cultural shadow serves as excellent fodder for the manipulation of people, using fear as a means to constantly police self and other, measuring one another against an abstract, relative, and culturally shared idea of what it means “to make it” or “be a productive member

of society.” Traditionally, artists have observed cultural leanings and tendencies from the outskirts of social society, offering at times jarring and even humorous critiques of popular culture, arguably the role of our sacred clowns and comedians, poking fun at that which as a society we deem so near and dear. The EXA offers this same outlet for expressing the unacceptable. No, education doesn’t seek to embrace our shadow nature(s), but deny it, then we can live in constant judgment of one another, existing in a sort of panoptical police state that despises and fears individuality and free expression. If we deny expression of that which we fear, abhor, and misunderstand within ourselves (the shadow), then we have no choice but to become imprisoned to our own self denial, misplacing the shame, guilt, and judgment that we feel within ourselves onto others. Teachers have largely become the external enforcement of inner experience. Never, quite, good enough.

The EXA, “Why Art?” offers an outlet for the expression of shadow and soul, some of the deeper aspects of ourselves. The EXA differs vastly in its theoretical disposition compared to the standard fare in education. Whereas ed as usual seeks perfection according to a specified standard that we all must measure up to, the EXA throws out the measuring stick, recognizing that the aesthetic resides within the disparate. Evocation is the standard. Feel it, share it, express it for the benefit of all. The EXA represents an education of individual liberation. As, Jane, one of the students so eloquently captures in her reflection paper on the class and her ABR study:

Between the high expectations placed on me as a young kid and now as a young adult, I have always strived for perfection, but I think this pursuit of perfection hindered my ability to grow through failures. I never took on any task I thought I would fail at, so this project taught me I can take chances and simply grow through

my experiences, good or bad. I have always been hard on myself when I make mistakes so forcing myself to create without expectation helped me treat myself with more grace. I learned not to continually beat myself up but to constantly encourage myself in whatever I decide to endeavor into.



*Snake Man, by Mel Falck*

As I reflect further upon the dream I shared earlier in the writing, I'm reminded of the womb-like nature of the small camper that I was initially within. It was as if I was inside the safety of a small cocoon, constricted. It feels relevant that the matriarchal, protective energy was reflective in my grandmother's quilt. I've spent much of my life terrified that I'll be seen and rejected in the fullness of who I am, the good, the bad, and everything in between, including the masks worn, the hurt and pain hidden, the fear to be expressive and expansive, the anger and rage, my fear to take up energetic and literal space, my constriction. I've very much struggled with my masculine self, having been abandoned by my father,

suffering molestation as a child at the hands of an older male, and the passing of my closest father figure, my grandfather (Pappy) at an early age, all launched me on a path of self-doubt, guilt, fear, and shame. I've been afraid of men and my own masculine strength, taking on a role of submissiveness in many of my relationships. I've had exceedingly poor boundaries and have given my power over to others countless times. The centaur in the dream seems to represent the archetypal herald of the hero's journey, forcefully launching me on my quest for healing and self empowerment through a more active identification with my masculinity. Voytilla (1999) explains:

The Call to Adventure sets the story rolling by disrupting the comfort of the Hero's Ordinary World, presenting a challenge or quest that must be undertaken. The Call throws the Ordinary World off balance, and establishes the stakes involved if the challenge is rejected. Often delivered by the Herald archetype, the Call to Adventure can take a multitude of forms. (p. 3)

I believe this web of personal lived experience of the arts based researcher with other body/minds to represent the role of living inquiry in the a/r/tographical process. I cannot separate out my personal life and psychic influences, both conscious and unconscious, from their entanglement within the study and those of the students. La Jevic and Springgay (2008) elaborate on the perspective of the a/r/tographer as living inquiry sharing:

A/r/tography allows for these experiences to matter, to be examined and questioned in multiple ways. Artists, researchers, and teachers do not simply do art, research, or teach; they live through these embodied experiences and make sense of them in purposeful ways. A/r/tography as such performs an ethics rooted in everyday life. (p. 72)

In all of this, I relate to the students' internal struggles as expressed through their respective ABR projects. During this exploratory phase of making sense of the work produced for the study, I subsequently continued my personal healing journey through working with a new therapist. This particular therapist specializes in men's work, but with a focus on embodiment, locating sensations and emotions in the body and conducting various other activities that engage the body and emotions beyond intellect and talk therapy. In these sessions I realized that I have personally struggled with claiming my space in the world, my right to be here. As I read and reviewed the student work, many discussed their relationship with embodiment and their bodies. That, coupled with my therapeutic encounters around embodiment, and the theory of embodiment as illustrated in the literature, all lead me to incorporate aesthetic based movement responses following each interaction with the WoD, student artwork, theory as expressed in the literature, and even my work with Quirkos, the traditional data analysis software. It became obvious through this process that the students' struggles with self were strikingly similar to, perhaps even in some ways identical to my struggle. La Jevic and Springgay (2008) explain:

As a/r/tographers, we can see our students as participants in our lives as artists, researchers, and teachers, yet by engaging them in a/r/tography, they too become artists, researchers, and teachers, giving them an active role in our queries as well as their own. (p. 72)

In this study, the students became as much an integral aspect of my healing journey, teachers in their own right, as they embarked upon their own healing paths. Irwin (2008) explains, "A/r/tographers recognize that no researcher, or artist or educator exists on their own, nor do



they only exist within a community for, in fact, both occur” (p. 72). As the old adage goes, one cannot heal in isolation.

How beautiful that humans can come together and express fragile aspects of themselves and be supported? How different from the standard classroom with all of its emphasis on individual competition? De Lissoy (2018) explains this ever present race to the top sharing, “As students, teachers, and schools confront a race for rewards and credentials, within which they are persistently assessed, audited, and ranked, education becomes an unceasing effort to achieve above the cut score” (p. 191). Education as usual represents and encourages separateness, but at the expense of the larger classroom community’s well-being. The situation is not one of support, compassion, grace, love, and/or connectivity, but rather promotes individual achievement at the expense of soulful connection with ourselves and others. In one of his most popular lectures uploaded by N K (2013) to youtube, Terrence McKenna discusses this sentiment of hierarchy, power, and individual competition, stating:

What civilization is, is 6 billion people trying to make themselves happy by standing on each other’s shoulders and kicking each other’s teeth in. It’s not a pleasant situation and yet you can stand back and look at this planet and see that we have the money, the power, the medical understanding, the scientific know how, the love, and the community to produce a kind of human paradise, but we are led by the least among us, the least intelligent, the least noble, the least visionary. We do not fight back against the dehumanizing values that are handed down as control icons.

In this particular lecture someone calls out and asks McKenna, “How do we fight back?”

McKenna then explains that we fight back by, “Putting the art pedal to the metal.” I’d like to

think that “Why Art?” represents one small thread, one small offering, to conduct education differently, through introducing students to their unique creative selves and honoring their individual agency and autonomy in their personal exploratory artistic processes. Not forcing them into boxes and categorical thinking to be evaluated and measured according to some outside forces or organization's predetermined concepts of true and accurate measurements of teaching and learning. Soul defies categorization, control, and structure and there is no doubt that we are in a struggle for the soul of education. The EXA offer us the opportunity to free ourselves from rote procedure and sterile curricula, granting us glimpses of aesthetic wonder and enchantment, in gratitude for the complete and total fullness of our individual and collective selves, helping us touch our tender and vulnerable humanity.

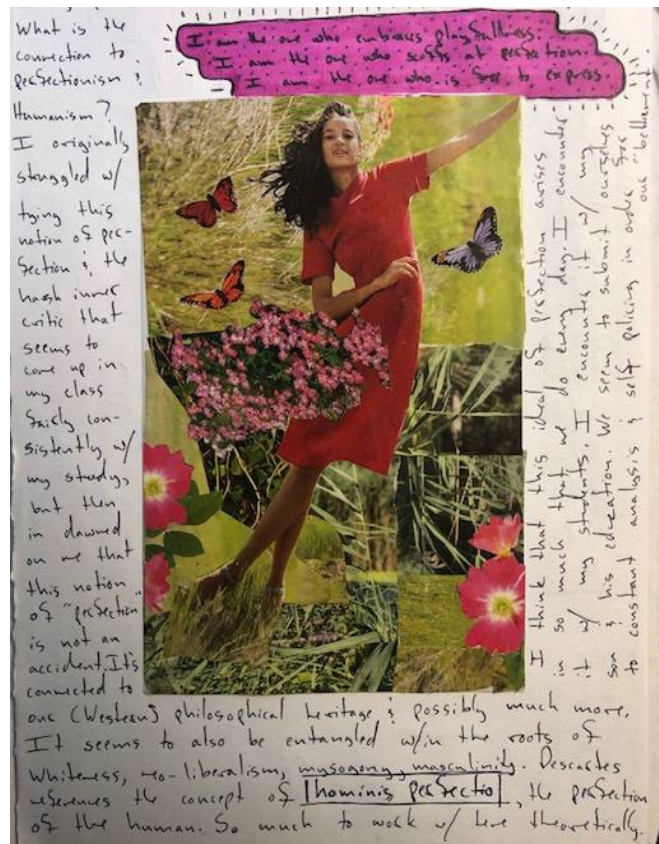
I conclude this section with a brief discussion of the power of the EXA to promote deep connection with ourselves and others, while critiquing education as usual with its focus on individual competition, promoting anxiety and disconnection from soul. In the following section I will discuss how the writing process further contributed to the meaning making that occurred during this exploratory encounter with the artwork and writing produced by myself and the students of “Why Art?.”

### **...The “Graphy” of A/r/tography**

A/r/tography as research methodology combines art, inquiry, teaching, and text, all as a means of generating, rendering, shaping, and interpreting the art and writing produced within an a/r/tographical study (Springgay et al., 2005). The use of written memos to help researchers develop their thinking on a topic is a quite common practice, and considering the emphasis placed on writing in a/r/tography I too used written memos to help facilitate movement in my thinking as I navigated between reviewing student work, creating my own

artistic renderings, and during my review of relevant literature. Capturing this activity of movement amongst and between different “modalities” of analytical writing, Augustine (2014) explains, “as I wrote, I used several different documents: my Deleuzian dictionary, my new literature review, my interview transcripts with memos, and a document that was a “parking lot” of ideas, to which I moved stretches of text from the dissertation to move my analysis forward” (p. 752). During my exploratory phase with the work composed during “Why Art?” I also relied on multiple writing strategies to expand my thinking, including both my visual journal/aesthetic response to student work, memoing following each review of work produced, and thorough notes taken after each class and after completion of review of every students’ work. Birks, Champan, and Francis (2008) contend that, “Data exploration is enhanced, continuity of conception and contemplation is enabled and communication is facilitated through the use of memoing” (p. 68). In this section of writing I will demonstrate how my utilization of memoing, combined with my visual journal artistic responses to student work and writing served to build my inquiry, helped me to reflect upon, and further assemble the ideas, concepts, and experiences pertinent to the study.

## Jane's Perfect Imperfection...



### *Artistic Response to Jane's ABR Project on Perfectionism*

*"I am the one who embraces playfulness. I am the one who scoffs at perfection. I am the one who is free to express."*

Jane's work was one of the first of the students' projects that I reviewed for my exploratory analysis process. Through Jane's ABR project, she sought to understand her relationship to the arts and perfectionism. In the writing that I captured during my visual journaling artistic response to Jane's project I began pondering the connections between the student work produced and in class experiences that spoke to perfectionism and the inner critic that so many students and myself encountered throughout the research process. I ask:

What is the connection between perfectionism and Humanism? I originally struggled with tying this notion of perfection and the harsh inner critic that seems to come up in my class fairly consistently with my study, but then it dawned on me that this notion of “perfection” is not an accident. It’s connected to our (westerners) philosophical heritage and possibly much more.

Through both the visual image produced in response to Jane’s work, combined with the writing component of the journal, you can see the development of my early ponderings around a major theme that emerged throughout the study, the notion of perfectionism and its influence on our self-image as arts based researchers. The image itself seems to offer a counter to perfectionistic tendencies in the work. In the collage a young woman is content to be, surrounded by beauty and butterflies in a sunlit meadow. Above the piece I write, “I am the one who embraces playfulness. I am the one who scoffs at perfection. I am the one who is free to express.” So again, we see this notion of freedom effectively serving as the christening of the WoD in conjunction with the concept of expansion. These initial marks made on the wall led to my subsequent move towards a more direct utilization of art to facilitate my understanding of the art work produced to help connect theory and writing. Through the art making process of both visual journaling and the use of the WoD the concept of freedom is given visual expression, as our souls long to be seen for who we are in our depths, and our voices long to be heard in their fullness, our art reveals that which words cannot touch. I conclude this visual journal writing contemplating Descartes’ concept of *hominis perfectio*, the perfection of the human, stating:

I think that this ideal of perfection arises in so much that we do every day. I encounter it with my students. I encounter it with my son and his education. We seem to submit ourselves to constant analysis and self policing in order for our “betterment.”

My contemplation of perfectionism as it relates to education and art making didn’t end there, but found its way as well into the memo I produced following analysis of the entirety of Jane’s work. In this memorandum response to Jane’s work I wrote, “I am increasingly suspect of the notion of perfection, as an educator, artist, researcher, human. I don’t think it exists. I think that it serves as a means of unregulated and disconnected severe task mastering, operating more as a weapon, a source of violence and harm, than as a promotion towards healing and goodness” (personal communication, October 7, 2020). It was around this same time as I was reviewing student work, pondering the influences of perfectionism on student work, and nearly frozen with fear and confusion myself on the psychic tensions between what I thought a dissertation should be and what I wanted mine to be. I then began to consider the following, “What if we completely and totally let go of any notion of perfection in all that we do? What would that look like? I think it would look like play. It would look like freedom. It would look like creativity, fun, and joy.” So as the aesthetic response to Jane’s work suggests, I began to “play” with this notion of play, not a concept anathema to the EXA. In this particular memo it becomes clear that I began letting go of my own expectations for the study, writing:

Why must our “work” be so serious, so perfect, so difficult? Is that what “work” is? I want this study to look different from “work.” Yes, in order to complete a task, especially one as laborious and time consuming as a dissertation requires a certain amount of discipline and self-regulation, but what if I/we let go of such internal demands

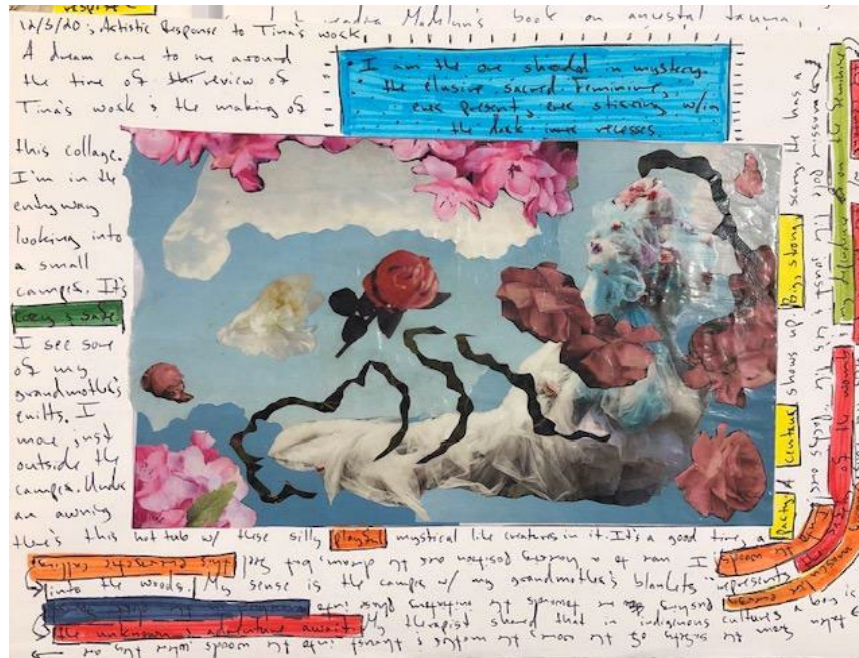
on our effort and time? What if I let go of expectations and outcomes for this study?  
Even the expectation that I will complete it.

In *The Tao of Poiesis: Expressive Arts Therapy and Taoist Philosophy*, Levine (2015) suggests that poiesis is separate from philosophia, contending that poiesis moves from logos (the word), stepping into the realm of the imaginal, an openness to what may come, surprise, surrender. Levine (2015) shares:

There is a certain tyranny implicit in the formation of concepts that aim to comprehend the wealth of experience by abstraction, a process that can only impoverish our lives. How much more pleasant, Chuang Tzu might say, to wander in the cloud of unknowing and to rest in the boundless. (p. 19)

So on the one hand, for the purposes of meeting certain requirements for this dissertation, I am required to submit to the tyranny in the formation of abstract concepts; yet on the other, I endeavor to open myself and my students up to something different, something more, something surprising, alive, vibrant, and playful. This is the EXA. This is ABR, an affective and non-linear open-heartedness to a playful encounter with materials, in an effort to know through making, co-making, co-encountering, co-becoming with ourselves, Earth, the arts, and one another, human and more than human alike.

## Breathing In, I Calm my Body. Breathing Out, I Calm my Mind.



*Visual Journal Aesthetic Response to Tina's Work, by Mel Falck*

Depression, anxiety, body dysmorphia, varied mental and emotional struggles, all seem to permeate much of the student work through “Why Art?”. In reading and reviewing the student projects it became clear that they were using their arts based research as a means to explore the self, but also uplift, heal, and build the self. What better way to let go, to enjoy one’s self and others than through creative play and imagination? Speaking to the power and benefit of playfulness in the arts based research process Diamond and Mullen (1999) share, “An arts based inquiry provides us with an affirmation, a beginning if not a landfall, an opportunity to play differently in and beyond the modernist enclosure” (p. 452). This sentiment seems to capture the exact struggle of myself and the students as we grappled with our sense of identity and our own perceived imperfections and unworthiness, our obsession



with “getting it right,” likely a hangover from our education and acculturation with their penchant for the perfect answer, response, or argument. In my memo response to Tina’s work I ponder this dilemma of harsh self-judgementalism writing:

In reviewing these projects, these student/participant works, time and again, harsh self-judgementalism and degradation comes up. The participants of this study and my classes after this study continually struggling with anxiety and depression. What is it about our culture that is creating such anxiety, such disease in these young people? Is it capitalism? Is it our education system? Is there a thing or system to be blamed? Where do the answers to self-assuredness and acceptance lie? How can the expressive arts help to not only alleviate these symptoms, but also get at the root to heal? What does it mean to heal and how is healing connected to education? Can education be healing? Should it be? What responsibility does education have, if any, to facilitate healing? What responsibility do I have as an educator, if any, to facilitate healing, self-reflection, and Self-awareness? (personal communication, November 13, 2020)

Tina used her project to help manage her tendencies towards anxiety and depression through an ongoing and deliberate artistic practice centered around crochet. In the memo based on Tina’s work I write, “She initially began her project and was spurred on by her initial crochet square, it turning out as desired. She was then met with frustration as she continued her project with a subsequent crochet square, sharing, ‘I would take a deep breath and accept the square for what it is.’ Just, wow! What if we/I moved through life in this way?” Here we see a counter to perfectionist tendencies and a move towards self-acceptance and play. What if we could accept ourselves and one another for what and who we are?

What if we could let down our guards long enough to touch the childlike wonder for life that we all once had, but were educated to think, behave, and believe differently, that life isn't necessarily a beautiful and compelling mystery, but instead a sort of mechanistic like structure that can be picked and teased apart for us to "figure out" and manipulate? What if we accepted that some questions have no answers?

In my visual journal aesthetic response to Tina's work, part of my a/r/tographical writing process, I speak to the aptitude of the EXA to help us connect with our childlike, playful and imaginative selves writing:

In all of the participant projects, in EXA in general, there exists a sense of childlike wonder. Children ascribe personality, spirit, to objects considered inanimate by westernized adults. What if we felt and thought differently? What if our creations, our art, our music did and does have a life of its own? What could we learn from that?

In the image above as an aesthetic response to Tina's work I wrote, "I am the one shrouded in mystery, the elusive and sacred Feminine, ever present, ever stirring within the dark inner recesses." It was around this time as I "sat" with the text and artwork produced for the study, feeling stuck in my own ways around the cultivation of meaning, "What does it all mean???", an almost deafening, maddening inner cacophony of voices resounded, trying to make sense of it all, that I was visited by the "big dream" mentioned earlier. Jung might describe this as a synchronicity, a welcome visitor at just the right time. If you remember, in the dream I am ushered forth, quite forcefully into the dark woods of the unknown and the more I work with, read, re-read, and make art for and out of the study, I'm not sure that meaning is what ultimately matters. Of course I began the study with a focus on meaning, yet

the more I delved into the art making process and poured over the writing, notes, and student projects, the more skeptical that I became that meaning in ABR is a central feature. Rather, what is more important is that each piece, each movement, each crochet square, each dream, each poem and song, is of itself and conveys to each individual differently in that particular moment. One interpretation of the ushering forth into the dark woods of the unknown could possibly be seen as stepping into a lack of control, a letting go of control over even the meaning making process. Earlier in the writing I discussed the poetic process and the EXA facilitator's necessity to "get out of the way" to assist in that process. Education as usual seeks strict control over body/minds. EXA seeks the creation of open spaces that individuals may create and express, frequently in spite of the instructor's original and best intentions. I conclude my visual journal on Tina's work writing:

This study seems to be taking on a life of its own. Synchronicities and serendipities occurring. My study, co-mingling with the studies of my students. My inner work and healing connected to theirs, this study, these ideas. Their ideas seeming like breadcrumbs leading me ever more deeply into the forest of the dark unknown. What might we discover together? (personal communication, December 12, 2020)

Likewise I conclude my written memo in response to Tina's work on a deeper note, attempting to tie it all together. In this section of writing it becomes obvious that I've become frustrated with myself, my penchant for perfection, and the messiness of the whole research process writing:

In the quest for perfection, have we become afraid to fail? Are we afraid to fail? Am I afraid to fail? What if I fail? What if I completely bomb this study? Am I doing it "right?" I feel as I embark on my study, I mirror and reflect the experience of my

student/participants. So fucking what if I “fail?” What does that even mean? What am I even hoping to accomplish with this study? (personal communication, November 13, 2020)

My fears and insecurities around “getting it right” in the sense making phase of the research had me almost frozen with panic. Yet, as I continued to lean into the student work, simultaneously making my own artwork in response to theirs, I slowly began to realize that our struggles paralleled each other's as a community of arts based researchers and that ultimately meaning didn't matter. What mattered was expressing one's self through one's particular means and unique voice in the present moment. This is where arts based educational encounters butt up against the logos, the philosophia, the theoria, because in the poietic and liminal encounter, it's about that moment, that particular experience, not necessarily the sense making following the experience, which takes us out of our embodied self and isolates us in the mind. I attempt to answer my inquiry as noted above writing:

Ideally, I want to honor the arts. I want to lift the expressive arts as a viable means of “doing education.” That educative experiences can be healing, that the expressive arts in all of its messiness matters. Shit, in some sort of weird way, that I matter, that the messy work of the student/participants matters. It's not all for nought. That self work is communal work. That self work in the expressive arts is not naval gazing, but connects to a higher purpose. That to stake claim and make one's voice heard in whatever creative capacity chosen, is important, deep, and necessary, considering the watered down, suppressive, and creatively lacking, superficiality of McDonaldized society.

It was around this time that I began to let go even further of outcome and control, making my initial marks on the WoD, “FREEDOM” and “EXPANSION,” in the hopes that something more expressive might emerge through my exploratory process. In this section of writing I shared some of the ways that the “graphy” of a/r/tography, the writing portion of the methodology, helped to inform my thinking and experience around the work produced within the study. In the following section, I will now pivot back to the WoD, continuing the exploration of its impact on the work and inquiry associated with “Why Art?”

This journey of teaching, researching, and writing for “Why Art?” hasn’t occurred in a vacuum, separate from my lived experiences outside of the teaching, “arting,” research, and writing. Much has occurred in my life since I first began this doctoral adventure seven years ago. Close friends and family have passed away, my marriage dissolved and fell apart, I fell in love with a beautiful, fun, and magical woman, I re-established connection with my estranged father of 37 years, and more recently the mother of my son has challenged my custody rights and access to him. Pressing into the writing and work has been exceedingly difficult at times, especially in regards to this most recent life challenge through which one of the most sacred relationships I’ve known with my son is being threatened. It touches one of my most tender and sacred wounds. Knowing what it feels like to have an absent father, when my son was born, I have been and continue to be committed to an active and loving role in his life, though his mother is currently threatening that. I am not perfect and as anyone who is a parent can attest, I struggle constantly with an at times relentless sense of guilt regarding my parenting. To be honest, sometimes I feel like I can barely keep it all together. I’m a kind person. I’m a wounded person. I feel deeply and this most recent incursion against

my son and I's relationship is causing me to stand in my strength in spite of the inner critic and self-derogatory operating system that I so easily default.

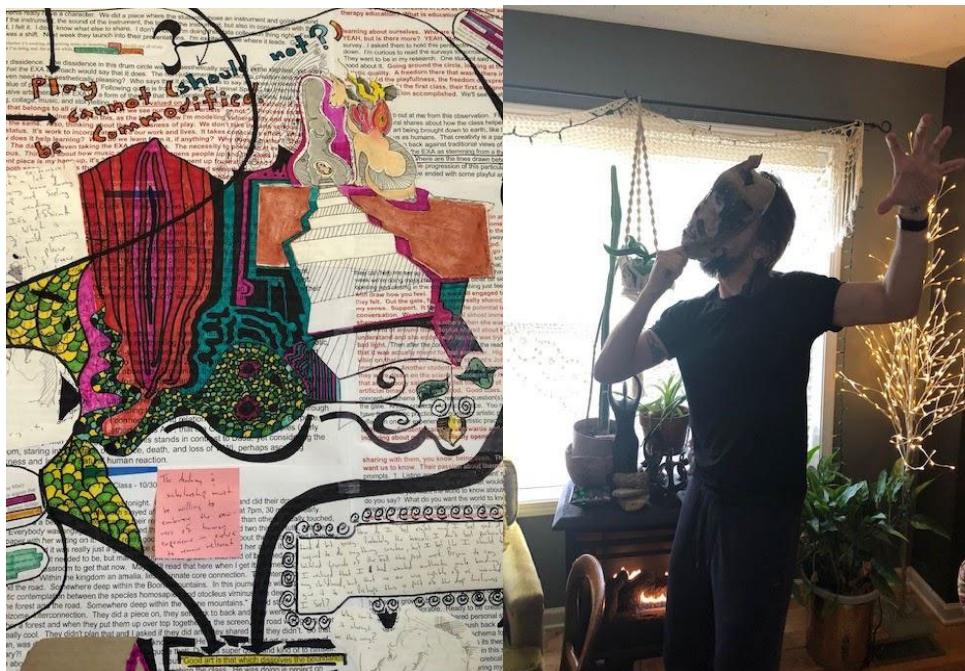
I've been in more therapy than I care to admit since the beginning of COVID-19. It has been good for me and it has influenced my work with "Why Art?" as a class and study. It has caused me to see that I am a good and loving person that has been the victim of abandonment, rejection, and sexual trauma. I've moved through the world so contracted, so small, thinking and feeling myself so unworthy of contentment, love, happiness, even respect. I've been easily manipulated due to my wounding and empathic nature. Working with my therapist and through the support of my partner and friends, I'm slowly coming to realize my worth. Even writing this, it sounds so ridiculous that I've struggled so much with my sense of self. In my struggle for a firm sense of self worth, I relate to my students, sometimes even more than they probably realize, and this is what I love about the expressive arts and this is what is absent from education as usual. When humans make art together, something magical happens, something connective and boundary dissolving, as one of my students said during his ABR project presentation, "Good art is that which dissolves the boundaries of the ordinary."

Prior to beginning work on the WoD, I felt these similar feelings of contraction, stagnation, stasis, but as I opened myself more to the process, much as I had been doing in therapy, it became evident that it was bringing together seemingly disparate parts into a whole. It was through the WoD that student writing, ideas, and art, combined and coalesced with my own writing and art, offering the viewer an inroad into the experiences and thinking of all who participated in the study, not in a linear and straightforward form of explanation, but rather through an organic and abstract rendering that leaves interpretation open. The

WoD offers both a macro and micro inroad into the study. Moving in closely to the piece, a viewer may be drawn to one particular aspect of the WoD, an image, a quote, a reference, an idea. Moving away from the piece they can get a sense of the macro and the larger scope of the study. Viewers can trace a thread of their own choosing, connecting to various ideas, concepts, experiences, images, and/or themes that speak to the experience of those who participated in the study. For example, a viewer might initially be drawn to the concept of expansion. They can then follow a thread of their choosing, connecting to a student quote that captures the sentiment of expansion or an image collaged into the piece from a student work. In the viewer's "travels" they might notice a particular observation note that further illustrates how expansion wove its way through the study or student experience. In this way the viewer interacts with the study through their own subjective and embodied experience as they move in closely, following threads of interest, then away, getting a sense of the totality of the visual experience. The WoD, then, serves as an art installation, of sorts, through which the viewer can connect with the class, study, and work in a concrete way with and beyond the logos alone.

It was also around this same time that I decided to incorporate some form of movement into my exploratory process. During therapy, my therapist facilitated numerous movement based experiences, primarily with helping me in the strengthening of my sense of self and my ability to claim my personal space and boundaries. I realized during these activities that as a child, when molested, my boundaries were manipulated and violated. In an effort to remain "a nice person" I have compromised many of my boundaries in life and through this experience of forced separation from my son, I have come to realize that there were relational patterns repeated in my marriage that mirror and reflect my abusers

personality traits. When I finally started exhibiting more firm boundaries with my narcissistic co-parent, she couldn't stand it and has sought retaliation. Many times I have given and submitted to others, oftentimes at the expense of my own well being and dignity. Movement became and has become a means for me to claim my space, my voice, my right to be here. Interaction with the WoD through artistic and visually creative means, combined with my movement based responses to the exploratory process served as a powerful fusion of modalities in my expressive encounter with the study's evolution.



*Section from WoD & “Snake Man” Moves*

The WoD is packed densely with images and ideas. Just this small section of the wall captures so many intersecting and divergent ideas, experiences, and resonations. Collaging, drawing, and writing overtop of the analytical spreadsheet notes, class observations, and transcriptions created a layering and aesthetic quality to the work and helped me to experience and contextualize it differently, more aesthetically and affectively. While the WoD, in many ways, is certainly less clear than other analytical models that I attempted to



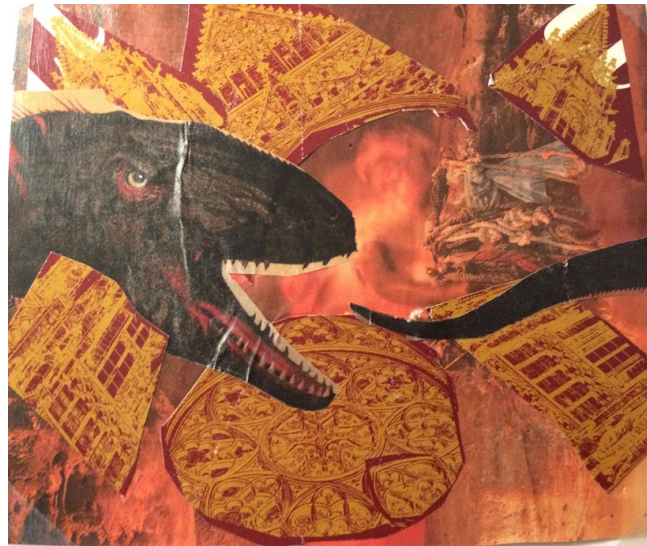
utilize in the sense making process, it certainly was more powerful in illuminating the capability of the arts to help us see, experience, and learn differently and it was certainly a more aesthetic rendition of the work and process.

One quote, written on a sticky note next to an abstract image of a snake, was recorded following a movement based response. It reads, “The academy and scholarship must be willing to embrace the rawness of human experience in order to remain relevant.” The snake has proven a powerful spirit ally and teacher in my life, though they tend to provoke feelings of anxiety and fear mixed with mystery and sensuality. Snake, for me, represents the rawness of experience that I challenge the academy to embrace. Snake introduces us to these raw primordial energy(ies), an undulating, writhing, and slithering mass of power and being. Snake also reminds me of my shadow self, the aspects of self that I tend to deny, repress, and mask from public view and even from myself. For me, embrace of snake, means embrace of those aspects of myself that I have tended to repress in order to be, when a child, “a good boy” or now, as an adult, a “nice guy,” professional, amicable, and civilized. The catch is, I am, we are, SO MUCH MORE! With snake, I embrace my creative, sensual, primal, sexual, strong, creative, weird, and chaotic nature, those aspects of self that might be deemed “too much” in our current educational structures. It is my belief that many of our students are demanding much more of us than the canned, standardized, and white washed curriculum has to offer. Through disciplines like the EXA we can facilitate experiences of soul and depth that many in our classrooms long for.

Caspian, my son, was a surprise. We weren’t planning on having a baby, yet Life, as we know, seems to always find a way. I often joked that Caspian’s soul was coming through, into this earthbound realm whether we liked it or not. I couldn’t have been more happy,

having a child, though it took a bit of growing into my role as a father. The second I met him my love and commitment to him was profound. Caspian was born on June 8, 2012 and the first week we had him home from the hospital we were met with a very surprising visitor indeed. I was asleep, taking a nap in the bedroom this particular warm summer afternoon, when I awoke to gasps and whispering in the kitchen. Caspian's mother and grandmother had discovered a large snake skin draped across our dishes in the cabinet next to the dishwasher. As it turned out, we had an entire snake and rodent ecosystem in our small little farmhouse rental. I spent many days and hours pulling away vines and poison ivy from the back of the house and other "de-snaking" activities, yet to no avail, for after all of the work was complete, I was met by a large blacksnake under my feet in our bathroom. Caspian's arrival was met with a strong harbinger in snake. Literal birth precipitated rebirth on multiple levels that I still don't fully understand.

The arrival of my son on this earthly plane was significant for my personal, emotional, and spiritual development. Snake was a powerful totem during this time and reminds me of the cycles of death and rebirth inherent in life. Now that my relationship to my son is being regulated and restricted outside of my control, I'm reminded of the lack of control that I have over much in my life and I turn to the wisdom of Earth to help me continue to step into my unique strengths and abilities. Through practices like the EXA and my personal therapy practice, I increasingly open to the movements of free flowing energy, creativity, sensuality, and expression that my soul yearns for. Freedom. Expansion.



*Student Visual Journal Entries of “Snake”*

Snake, with its constant rejuvenation in the shedding of its skin also captures another theme woven in and out of the study, expansion and contraction. Before the snake sheds its skin, I would imagine that there is a certain level of discomfort with its former self. I imagine that the old skin must feel confining, constricting as it struggles to free itself from the old,

dead, and dying skin. Andrews (1993) describes the ancient wisdom and power of snake writing:

The serpent and snake has long been a symbol of the sexual/creative life force within humans as is taught in Eastern traditions. The kundalini or serpent fire lies coiled at the base of the spine. As we grow and develop, the primal energy is released, rising up the spine. This in turn activates energy centers in the body and the mind, opening new dimensions and levels of awareness, health, and creativity. (p. 360)

I've personally carried so much shame and guilt over my sense of sexuality for much of my life. Raised Catholic, guilt is a natural byproduct, but to be taken advantage of sexually by a male that I trusted when a child added additional layers of shame. There is something implicitly powerful in owning one's sensual and sexual selves and I believe that the arts help us to touch and interact with these primal energies, like the kundalini as it awakens at the base of the spine, traveling up and through our chakra system, awakening in us the fullness of who we are, radiant, divine, and powerful beings. The arts have helped me to embrace the fullness of who I am and accept that which I've been ashamed. The WoD and my subsequent movement based activities, through which I would move improvisationally at the conclusion of each interaction with the theory, text, writing, and art, in some small way helps me to step into and claim the fullness of who I am, scars, wounds, strength, and all.

The collages above represent one of the student's visual journal entries. I always enjoyed Kathy's work and presence in the class. She struck me as very authentic and kind. She was an intelligent person and was highly engaged with the content of the course. I saw myself in her, a sweet, naive, gentleness. In response to her collage and after reviewing her work I wrote:

The two pieces from Kathy's journal that really jumped out at me are her two collages. Kathy's soul collages are represented in the journal and they are particularly visually powerful. One is titled "Union of earth and sky" and has a lot of snake imagery with reptile, amphibian, loon, emeralds. Shamanic image. Very powerful. Makes me feel like the participant has a hidden and concealed power underneath all of the imagery and talk around anime. Her 2nd collage titled "freedom of religion" is also powerful. An aggressive dinosaur in middle. Reds and golds. Again, makes me feel a hidden power.

Following this thread, what if education was powerful? What if it served as a means of empowering others? Education as empowering. Education feels more disempowering than empowering.

What if, like the snake moving into a more glorious version of itself, we facilitated experiences that helped move ourselves, our students, and our communities into a more expanded sense of self-awareness? "Good art is that which dissolves the boundaries of the ordinary." What if we let go of our sense of the ordinary in our educational encounters? What would it look like to demand freedom of expression in our academic and even administrative encounters? What would it look like to create expansive spaces for soulful expression? It could look like the EXA. Do we make our students' souls come alive through these other standardized and formulaic methods? I think that we all know that they do not. As I reflect over my life, in many ways it seems that we're like the frogs in a pot of water. Neoliberalism, the cruel and manipulative cook that it is, has been ever so slowly turning up the heat on us, to the point that we barely recognize our individual and collective souls dying. The arts and creativity in its myriad of forms must be brought back into our lives on a

structural level. If we do not provide spaces for powerful, raw, authentic, and real interactions in our classrooms, we will cease to be relevant in our relationships with our students.

The WoD itself presents as snakelike, organic, free flowing, and emergent. The lines coming together, moving apart, connecting ideas to images, images to experiences, telling a story of the art making adventures of a small group of people. The WoD combined with movement has helped me make sense of it all, but not on an analytical level, instead in an intuitive, embodied, and affective way. As I move between the WoD, my movement based responses, and even music that came to me during this phase in my life, I touch the vulnerability, brokenness, and beauty of my heart. The affective encounter with this work cannot or should not be measured, nor in some ways can it even be adequately articulated. The power of the EXA and ABR is that to be truly impactful, they must be felt and experienced. Many of the initial models that I used to try and make sense of the study were linear and analytical, setting me on a predetermined path already laid out for me, but they were not aesthetic.

As the snake represents new life, so too it represents death. In this section of writing I began with the birth of my son, life. I will conclude this section with an equally powerful anecdote, death, ever reminding us of the brevity of our lives and that we must make the most of the time we have. During the winter of 2021 into 2022, as I continued with the work of the study and my work with the WoD, there was the death of three people that was impactful to me, all due to cancer. The first was the death of a friend's young son of about 7 years old. I couldn't imagine the grief that he and his wife went through, seeing their young son deteriorate and pass. The second was the death of my friend from my undergraduate

days, Rachel, who had struggled with cancer for years before her fight ended. The third was the passing of my Aunt Tahnia who suffered from an aggressive form of breast cancer for two years before passing. Around this time a song came to me. It wasn't directly connected to the study, but as we have seen through the a/r/tographical concept of living inquiry, all is fair game in the a/r/tographers repertoire of sense making. Around the time that I wrote the song, though it came to me almost without effort, I was heavily engaged with therapy, working particularly hard on dealing with my childhood molestation. For me, though the song represents life, death, and the inevitable passing of the seasons of our lives, "The Winter Winds" also exudes a strength, that though the path may not always be easy, and though we may be faced with self-doubt and fear, the soul's ultimate longing and calling is to adventure, to move into the dark forest of the creative and chaotic unknown, because we know that we must, because we know that stasis, stagnancy, no longer present us an option. The snake must shed its skin if it wants to remain alive and vibrant. As I offer this song to you, the reader, may it also be an offering for the soul of education and educators, that though we might fear bringing our full selves with all of our soulful messiness to the increasingly sterilized and constricted spectacle of education, if we are to remain alive and vibrant ourselves, we must die to the old, in order to grow into the new. I claim this dissertation as a mile marker for the death of the old, contracted, ashamed, and fearful Mel, in order that the rebirth of a more expansive, free, sensual, silly, fun, playful, expressive, and confident Mel may come forth.

"The Winter Winds," by Mel Falck

The winter winds they are calling.

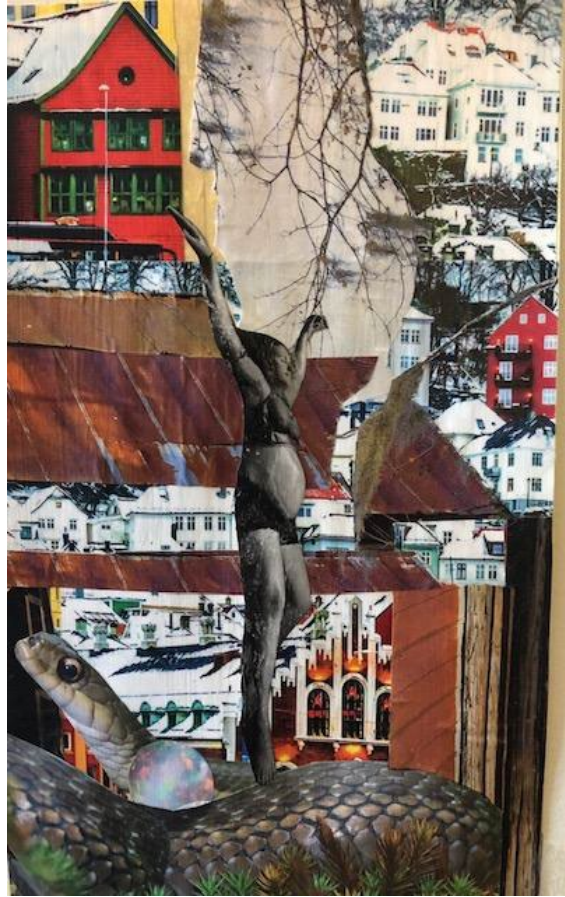
I must go. I must go.

I have lingered much too long.  
But I must go. I must go.  
The gentle snow flakes they are falling.  
The wind it blows through barren trees.  
The ground is firm beneath my feet now.  
My mother, Earth, she carries me.  
The winter winds, they are calling.  
I must go. I must go.  
I have lingered much too long here.  
But I must go. I must go.  
The sun is shining in a blue sky.  
My hands are cold. I see my breath.  
I am grateful for this life.  
I am broken with this death.  
The winter winds, they are calling.  
I must go. I must go.  
I have lingered much too long here.  
But I must go. I must go.  
I have lingered much too long.  
And I must go. I must go.  
I must go. I must go.



## Chapter 6

### “Why Art?” an Illumination of Soul



*The Pearl of Great Price, by Mel Falck*

I title the piece above as, “The Pearl of Great Price,” for to me it represents the beauty that resides within me, within all of us, that is us, beyond our superficial egoic identity and defense mechanisms constructed as a means to protect ourselves. The pearl is guarded by Snake, who I discussed in depth in the prior chapter. It is curious to me that Snake protects and guards the pearl, considering my (and many others) innate fear of snakes. Could it be that

some of the most precious and mysterious aspects of ourselves can only be accessed through the confrontation and acceptance of our fears? Rilke (2016) likewise suspects that the things we most fear hold the most value in our growth, “Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us” (p. 69). I chose this piece to introduce this chapter because I believe this to be the essence of “Why Art?” and the argument of this study, that soul and its free expression is purposefully being excluded from educational encounters. Of soul and the work of the arts in therapy McNiff (1992) writes, “The loss of soul is a necessary element of our work, a prerequisite, because its absence stimulates a longing for its return” (p. 21). Similarly, in discussing the importance of connecting soulfully with ourselves and one another in teaching and the academy Palmer (2007) writes:

This self-protective split of personhood from practice is encouraged by an academic culture that distrusts personal truth. Though the academy claims to value multiple modes of knowing, it honors only one—an ‘objective’ way of knowing that takes us into the ‘real’ world by taking us ‘out of ourselves’ (p. 9).

Palmer (2007) continues his critique of disconnected professionalism in the academy sharing, “In this culture, the self is not a source to be tapped but a danger to be suppressed, not a potential to be fulfilled but an obstacle to be overcome. In this culture, the pathology of speech disconnected from self is regarded, and rewarded, as a virtue” (p. 9).

My hope is that through this study and writing you have been introduced to the power of the EXA to help us connect with ourselves and one another in deep, engaging, evocative, and profoundly meaningful ways, soulful ways, that honor the uniqueness of every

individual. Students and teachers alike are exhausted and bored with the standard curriculum with its assumption of the universality of teaching, learning, and experience and its focus on maintaining and building a workforce to support our capitalist economic engine (Behrent, 2016; de Lissovoy, 2018; Peterson, 1999; Saltman, 2011). The EXA offers a different type of modus operandi when it comes to teaching and learning. Atkins and Williams share, “In my discovery of expressive arts therapy I have found a way of working that is broad enough and deep enough to hold the multiplicity of who we are as human beings” (p. ix). They continue, writing, “It is a way of being in the world and a way of looking at human experience that honors the necessity of beauty and sees life itself as an act of artistic making (p. ix). The entire argument of “Why Art?” as a class and study can quite simply be reduced to the problem of the loss of soul in our educational encounters and the capacity of aesthetically attuned disciplines like the EXA and research methods like ABR to help us connect more meaningfully with the deepest parts of ourselves, leading to intimacy and connection with one another.

In this chapter I connect the experiences of this study back to the research questions, considering how they were illuminated and discussing why it matters. I then explain how the works, writing, and experiences of “Why Art?” connect back to the original problem posed at the beginning of this work, considering that education has failed to counter neo-liberalist oriented agendas and instead has succumbed to its enticements, offering a model of education that follows strict procedures for teaching and learning. Next, I will discuss how “Why Art?” can help us think about education and educational leadership differently. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by addressing where this work, and artistic studies like it, can move us as a community of educators.

## **The Magic, Movement, and Mystery of Soul...**

Soul defies characterization, categorization, and control. Arguably one of the reasons that its secrets are excluded from standard education as usual with its lust for control no matter the cost. On this point, Peterson (1999) shares, “Because soul has more to do with the imagination, it is impossible to precisely define” (p. 9). For Peterson (1999) soul manifests when, “we experience something moving or profound as when we taste certain foods or hear a moving piece of music. It is also revealed when we experience love, intimacy, and authentic community” (p. 9). Soul represents much of that which is beyond control of our rational selves and superficial egos. Soul can be seen as dangerous, chaotic, creative, sensuous, sexual, and raw. Soul embodies those aspects of ourselves that we cover and sometimes avoid, our more primal selves, our most wounded and fearful selves, our most expansive or even contracted selves. In many ways, soulful living is countered by educational culture. Peterson (1999) elaborates:

In education today, soul is often ignored. Without honoring soul, learning is dull, disconnected, trivialized, and desists. When the soul is neglected, students turn into mere receptacles or automatons waiting to be filled with the teacher's knowledge. Focusing on the loss of soul in education calls for us to examine the disconnection, distortions, and dissatisfaction of teachers and students. (p. 9)

As Peterson and a myriad of other writers and thinkers have considered, soul is elusive, yet it is possible to perceive its movements in our hearts and lives, sometimes faintly and others brazenly. McNiff (1992) contends that it is through creative engagement with materials that, “Art becomes a ritual act that opens people to the experience of soul” (p. 44). The arts, creativity, freedom of expression and being, all help us to form right relations with

soul and in this section of writing, I will attempt to illuminate soul's magic, mystery, and movement within the study in conjunction with the research questions posed. Peterson (1999) argues that the loss of soul in our educational experiences is directly experienced in our classrooms by a lack of passion by our students for deep learning. This is not the experience that I have had with the students of "Why Art?." There is something inherent and magical in the facilitation of communal arts based learning experiences that seems to ignite passion and interest for learning, connection, and experience. In the proceeding section I hope to shed light on the research questions while also paying homage to the movements of soul as it wove its magic throughout the classroom experiences and individual ABR projects. If you remember, the research questions explored within "Why Art?" included:

1. What is the relationship between EXA, ABR, therapy, and education?
2. How does the EXA concept of embodiment shape and inform educational encounters?
3. How does ABR inform the meaning making process?

I now turn my attention to each of the preceding research questions, contemplating how they interacted with the study, with particular attention to their connection to the intimations and movements of soul.

### ***What is the Relationship between EXA, ABR, Therapy, and Education?***

The EXA as a discipline is, well, different. Its unconventional position as an educational discipline birthed from the psychotherapeutic fields makes it an uncommon and powerful way to do education differently. It is a discipline that seeks not so much to explain with certainty, but rather to embrace the numerous tensions, the in/between and liminal states, that are held in a psychic landscape of oftentimes ambiguous and conflicting agitations

including, but certainly not limited to masculine and feminine, right and wrong, black and white, modern and postmodern, qualitative and quantitative, subjective and objective, intellect and emotion, expansion and contraction, embodiment and thought, individual and communal, process and product, alone and together, movement and stasis, work and play, spontaneity and rigidity, ad infinitum. It is my belief, and the literature supports this notion, that this is a strength of the EXA, in that the arts don't presuppose objective truths and solidity, but rather make space for these at times incongruent and multiple truths, as Bill, one of the student-participants writes:

And so, art making in this project did not feel like research. Rather, it felt as though I was taking often dryly presented, scholarly ideas and making them more relatable. However, this process did not lead me to the discovery of a singular answer, but rather caused me to ask more questions. This is the best result I could have asked for, since more often than not, life is a complex, seemingly irrational mess that can be made sense of through art making.

Knill, Levine, and Levine (2010) articulate this same sentiment of the ability of the EXA to navigate between and amongst seemingly disparate experiences and concepts sharing, "Beauty and terror, joy and suffering, come together in the therapeutic aesthetics of expressive arts therapy" (p. 73). Here we see too that there is an element of the sacred that is acknowledged in the process of EXA.



*Clip from John's ABR presentation with Image of Artistic Response to John's Work to Protect his Anonymity*

John's work around music's ability to facilitate a therapeutic intercession for trans people likewise helps us to make sense of the research questions, revealing the power in the relationship that exists between EXA, ABR, therapy, and education. Through John's utilization of song writing and singing, combined with his reflexive analysis in his final ABR paper, he simultaneously educates us on the vulnerabilities of a historically marginalized population, the trans community, and offers the EXA and ABR as a means to not only become more aware of these issues and their impact on lives, but also the capacity of these disciplines in facilitating growth and expansion towards health and peace of mind for a group with historically high rates of anxiety and depression. John's work also speaks to the soulful nature of the EXA and ABR. His authentic and vulnerable expression of his journey through the dark night of the soul shows the potential for ABR to help us move through these experiences, finding inner resources that help us to grow into healthier, happier versions of ourselves. In his final reflection paper, John shares, "My joy is no longer dimmed. The process was more than just helpful. It was educational, fulfilling, and incredible. Arguably

one of the most impactful things to have happened in my life.” John demonstrates important connections among ABR, therapy, and education by using his ABR project as an effective means to raise awareness around important social issues, and while also contributing to the healing of historically marginalized populations.



*Excerpts from Mary's Visual Journal*

Mary's research project was designated as an experiment in art's capacity to facilitate ecological healing and offers another look at the relationship that exists between EXA, ABR, therapy, and education. Mary's project focused primarily on the use of her visual journal to help her get in touch with and process her feelings of anger, sadness, rage, and grief of eco-degradation. Mary's project addresses the relationship between education and therapy by offering both an educative awareness in its critical stance taken against the economic systems which serve to oppress, while concurrently revealing a therapeutic model for the exploration



of the difficult emotions that accompany living in the current global extinction crisis known as the anthropocene. Mary's work embraces the darker emotions associated with facing the realities of a depleted and dying biome, hopelessness, helplessness, grief, depression, anxiety, and despair. In Mary's visual journaling and writing she reflects upon the tensions that she feels between her embeddedness and complicity within unjust and oppressive systems writing, "I had trouble breathing at the thought that the food I eat, the clothes I wear, and the technology I bought was all produced at the expense of someone else down the line. Without any ill intent on my part I was endorsing animal cruelty, inhumane working conditions, and toxic waste."

Her hope for her ABR project through use of visual journaling involved an outlet for the processing of the difficult emotions related to living in a time of eco-degradation and mass species extinction. Mary's project educates us by raising our awareness of these issues, while also presenting a model to hold, explore, and process difficult feelings. She goes on to write,

My life is full of actions that take, destroy, and abuse, and no one else seems to be on the brink of insanity with me. I feel awful for accidentally crushing a bug trapped in my eyelash and the person next to me is fuming about the bus being late. It's not that I think other people are callous as much as I wonder if I'm far too sensitive.

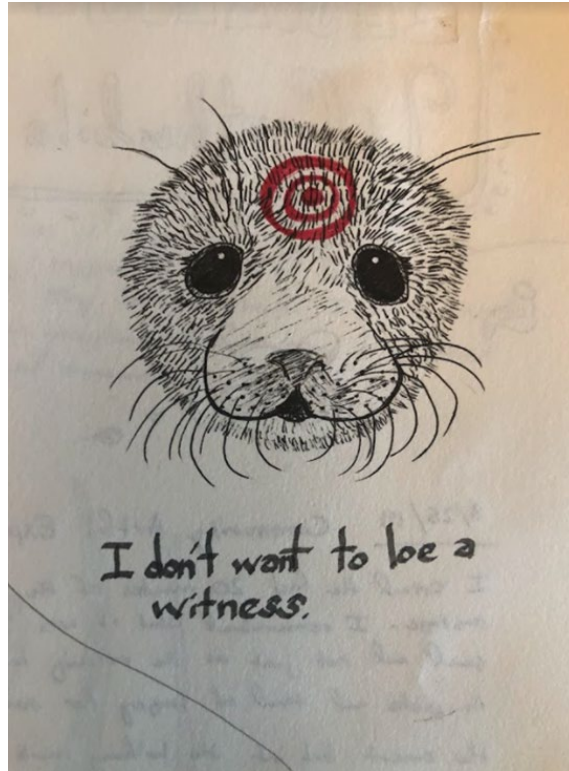
She continued,

It's hard to feel anger at every bit of litter on the walk to class. It's exhausting to worry not just about my future, but about the future of entire species. I don't take pride in my sensitivity because it renders me useless. I'm miserable and guilty every

day, with hardly enough energy to keep myself moving, let alone productively address the pain I'm attuned to.

Mary chose to use ABR as a means to "do something" with her messy feelings, speaking to the therapeutic potential of ABR. She states, "That's why the focus of my arts-based research was climate change. I wanted something to do with all of my difficult and messy feelings, and art seemed like a good way to process what I was feeling, if nothing else".

Mary shares her original research question of, "How can art help people heal in the midst of ongoing ecological destruction?" She went on to state that, "I can confidently say I utterly failed to find an answer to that question. I only barely brushed the surface of all art has to offer during the semester, and I'll admit that I actively resisted trying to engage with difficult feelings throughout the process. The most I can say is that art is only as helpful as we let it or are able to let it be." She discussed how the art making process "helped her to live outside of herself for a moment" and that she "needs that." Mary touches on the relationship between ABR and its therapeutic potential sharing how her ABR project helped to ease some of her suffering, while putting her in touch with things that matter to her, the beauty of nature, yet she concludes her piece questioning the efficacy of the arts to lead to any significant change.



*Excerpt from Mary's Visual Journal*

Mary recognizes the necessity of feeling these difficult emotions of anger and sadness, the cornerstone of any therapeutic intervention, relying on Joanna Macy's writing around grief to inform her work. In the *Greening of the Self*, Joanna Macy (2014) discusses being cracked open by grief by viewing the ecological devastation of Earth. She shares that it's a necessity to touch that anger and grief in order to move towards an expanded sense of self beyond the small ego. She writes:

Once we stop denying the crises of our time and let ourselves experience the depth of our own responses to the pain of our world - whether it is the burning of the Amazon rainforest, the famines of Africa, or the homeless in our own cities-the grief or anger or fear we experience cannot be reduced to concerns for our own individual skin.

When we mourn the destruction of our biosphere, it is categorically distinct from grief at the prospect of our own personal death. (p. 241)

It's hard to grieve, to have the courage to feel, to look into the eyes of fear, death, suffering, to sit with it and allow it to move through, to be touched by the suffering within and outside of ourselves, to soften our hearts to the experience of the "negative" emotions. It requires a profound empathy. It's easier to deaden, to numb out and distract ourselves from the suffering, fear, grief, and despair. It's much harder to allow oneself to feel these feelings. Yet through disciplines like the EXA and research methods like ABR we can explore and process these difficult emotions in both an educational way that helps us to understand more deeply, while connecting our intellect with our emotive selves, all while in a supportive community with other artist practitioners.

Mary's project serves as one example of how the EXA and ABR helps to educate us on difficult topics, but more importantly help us move into the feeling process, not only individually, but collectively. With the EXA, then, we are both educated by the issues brought to our awareness, like eco-degradation, and then encouraged to feel through these complex and difficult problems. Through the arts, we do it both alone, and together. We can't heal in isolation. We can only heal with the help and support of our community(ies). The EXA allows for this space, facilitates this space of expression and feeling. This can't happen in a standardized classroom format. When the space is fostered, the open space to allow for learning, expression, and feeling, it happens. Trust has to be built. Vulnerability has to be demonstrated. That is incumbent upon the EXA facilitator. Mary's project illustrates that the individual threads of the EXA, ABR, therapy, and education are in reality woven together and mutually complementary. The EXA as pedagogical encounter helps us to become bold with one another in our chosen expression, combined with our individual ABR endeavors, helping to simultaneously teach the community about issues pertinent for the collective's

betterment, but ultimately presenting us with a therapeutic model to evoke, express, accept, and heal the suffering and difficulties in our midst.

As a licensed therapist and someone who found their way into the field of education incidentally via the counseling profession, the way I teach is akin to therapeutic approaches to group facilitation. Knill, Levine, and Levine (2010) describe the role of the therapist as “the holder of space, but only if holding is understood as a setting-free for the realization of one’s possibilities” (p. 72). My professional identity and training as a therapist, combined with my personal values surrounding the importance of promoting individual agency, autonomy, and expression all influence my approach to pedagogical interactions. I consider myself more of a facilitator than an instructor. Instruction carries a certain hierarchical position of power and authority, whereas an EXA facilitator is seen more as a fellow human traveler in life’s journey with the students of an EXA class. Atkins and Williams (2007) explain this collaborative aspect of the Appalachian approach to the EXA writing, “It is a collaboration between therapist and client, scientist and artist, teacher and student. It acknowledges that all participants bring an equal voice to the conversation and make a valued contribution to the work” (p. 7). I tend to learn as much, if not more from the students. I don’t stand in front of the class and lecture. We frequently sit together in a circle, one physical means of delineating our interconnectedness and equality. I don’t speak in absolutes. I strive to set a tone through which we speak from our individual and unique experiences.

From the moment we all step into the classroom, each day together is an exciting adventure of expression through which I lead by example and invitation, opening, holding, and closing the space we share, allowing for stillness, then followed by group participation that builds as the students’ individual and collective courage and trust grows with each

passing EXA experience. There really is a simplicity to the class process. Sure, there are assignments, readings, and activities, but my ultimate goal is to provide just enough structure to get them started, yet maintain a certain amount of simplicity in each class, to allow for spontaneous movements of play and expression to emerge. McNiff (1992) relates the role of the arts based facilitator back to the beauty of simplicity writing, “In describing what we do, I frequently say, ‘The simpler, the deeper.’ Simplicity brings feelings of depth because it liberates us from the need to explain everything. A one-sided use of reason traps us in the intellect” (p. 12).

One example of this simplicity in action was during one of our class closings through which we created and shared artist trading cards with one another, as indicated in my observation notes from this experience (personal communication, December 11, 2019). Artist trading cards are a way to share an aesthetic response as a gift to other fellow expressive artists. Students were welcome to choose any means to create their cards and set to task expeditiously. This was our final class and as such the trading cards were serving as a gift of gratitude for and to one another. At the closing of this special class we circle up standing in front of our cards. We then thoughtfully and slowly move as a group in a clockwise direction stopping at each artist's group of cards, carefully exploring their work and choosing a card that resonates with us to keep. In my notes from this experience I write, “Going around the circle, looking at the artists trading cards, there was a playfulness there. There was an artistic quality. A freedom there that wasn't there in their early work. I brought that to their attention and asked if anyone else noticed the playfulness, the freedom of expression that seemed to be present in the artist trading cards vs. reflecting back on the

first class, their first assignment that they did. There was a free flowing spirit/quality to the work” (personal communication, December 11, 2019).

When I consider the relationship between the EXA, ABR, education, and therapy, I must bring myself to the center of the mandala. In terms of the relationship between therapy and education, my training as a therapist shapes the activities. As I want my clients to be comfortable expressing themselves, so too I seek to hold a similar space of unconditional positive regards so that the students in my class feel equally as comfortable. My style of teaching, my unique personality, and fondness for deep, meaningful, and heartfelt community influences the way I conceptualize each of these fields, but more importantly affects the way in which I engage with the material and frame the classroom environment. I strive to create a safe enough space of non-judgement that everyone recognizes their valued contributions, artistic and otherwise. This does not mean that there is no structure to the classes I teach or no desire within myself to direct certain activities in a certain way. It does mean, however, that I remain open to the surprises and unexpected occurrences that so frequently accompany opening to creative and playful processes. In this I am reminded of Knill, Levine, and Levine’s (2010) discussion of poiesis and the importance of the EXA facilitator to simply let go and get out of the way. Then, if we’re lucky, something magical happens. Students respond in kind, as they did in any number of our class experiences on painting, or through our eco-art activities, and music and movement class, or any other number of in class experiences. For example, in observation notes that I recorded during our class on soul collage I wrote, “The class dove into the art making process! They really seemed to enjoy it! So much so that we ran short on time to adequately share with one another our work at the end. Time flew for both myself and the students as they

acknowledged that their sense of time shifted during the art making. This is liminality! This is poiesis! When they did partner up to share their pieces without one another, the energy and excitement in the room was evident, just as it was during the actual art making” (personal communication, February 12, 2020). These experiences reflect the power and dynamic interrelationship that occurs through EXA pedagogical practices and ABR methods that ultimately lead to a therapeutic encounter.

This authenticity that I require of myself, where does it fit into the relationship between EXA, ABR, therapy, and education? Where do therapeutic concepts like authenticity belong in the educational experience? Can I, in the role of instructor/researcher, ask of this authenticity and vulnerability of my students? I'm thinking of this work, EXA, education as healing, as facilitating vulnerability and openness. Some classes are open to the "openness" and vulnerability, some are not, at least initially. Of the two classes that compose this study, one felt challenging to the notion of vulnerability, contracted. Others have not. I explore in my class observation notes and reflexive memorandums of how the EXA is all about vulnerability. For example, in my memorandum reflecting on Kathy's ABR project I wrote:

I'm also struck by this student's willingness to share her project, her creative endeavor, all of the students, past, present, and future willingness to share their projects with me, with one another. In a recent article I read on vulnerability and education, the author argues for the importance of an educator expressing and modeling vulnerability in their classrooms. My feeling is that I do just that, encouraging my students to bring their authentic selves to their projects. (personal communication, January 17, 2021)



EXA as education is vulnerable. It is open. It is real, authentic, and courageous in its authenticity and expression. EXA as education and leadership is messy, organic, non-linear, open. If education, as the latin etymological roots suggest, is to lead us out, then the EXA arguably lead us into ourselves, to then share that which we learn and experience out with our community, for the benefit of ourselves and others. One major theme that has emerged through the study is that ABR and the EXA is about community. The EXA, ABR, a/r/tography is a collection of separates, together. Separate selves, coming together through the art making process. The process of fostering and growing community, connection, and strengthening the self through the community, like the trees that will pour nutrient rich sap into the roots of a stump of a tree that has been cut down. Those in the community that have a certain level of vitality and health, liberty, freedom of expression, empathy, love, compassion, pour their life giving sap into the brokenness of others. The community becomes stronger together in the art making process, in the courage it takes to be expressive and open. As was the case in Mary's demonstration of "I do it wrong!," the group sat in silence as Mary expressed herself, holding space for her to share, no judgment, no criticism, we simply held the container for her to be as she was in that expressive moment.

Yet every person absolutely has the distinct right to be as open and expansive or protective and contracted as their level of trust and comfortability within the community allows. During one classroom encounter around mask making, a student presented their mask with the phrase painted on it, "My authenticity is not for your consumption." The share was powerful, bold, authentic in its declaration that this student honored their contraction, their firm boundary on what they were comfortable expressing with the class. This encounter has served as a compelling exploration of authenticity, vulnerability, expansion, and contraction.

If the EXA in education is to be non-judgemental in its conception and execution, then contraction is not something to be judged, but appreciated as part of the individual and communal process. In the honoring of our personal contraction, then, we live authentically, not allowing others to partake in what is not theirs. This is the power and beauty of communal spaces through which individual responses can be received without criticism, analysis, or judgment. To honor the student's experience of contraction, is to honor their agency, their power and right as individuals to assert their boundaries and process in whatever way is fitting and beneficial for them, as determined by them. As powerful as these experiences may be, it's still complex, nuanced, and difficult. This is a powerful example of how these kinds of spaces allow for surprise, resistance, and bold authenticity and it is through a supportive community of individuals dedicated to creative expression that this becomes possible. I think examples like this serve to strengthen my claim of the power of the arts in education and its relationality to therapeutic outcomes and also shows how difficult and nuanced this work is.

Considering this encounter, I don't necessarily think that resistance to the EXA and ABR process serves as indication for the invalidation of the inherent therapeutic nature of the EXA, but in reality may in fact support it. The etymological root of the word therapy means to heal or be made whole. A foundational element of any therapist's or EXA facilitator's work is the ability to hold what Carl Rogers (1961) defines as, unconditional positive regard, for one's clients and their unique process of expression and healing. This is quite simply the ability of a therapist or educator to purposefully craft spaces where their personal opinions, agendas, and values are held as secondary to the client or student's particular learning and healing processes. Through unconditional positive regard the educator/therapist strives for,

“acceptance of every momentary experience of the other. The good, the bad, and indifferent momentary experiences are accepted with equality” (Bozarth, 2001, pp. xii). Regarding the relationship between EXA, ABR, therapy, and education, in my experience, if one is practicing the elements of EXA, primarily the fostering of safe, supportive, non-judgemental spaces, through the process of communal art making in an unconditionally positively regarded environment, they flow together seamlessly, sometimes to the point that they are indistinguishable from one another. There is no singular answer to this question; however, I believe that the relationship between EXA as pedagogical practice, combined with the ABR research process, invariably facilitates both personal and communal healing and learning and in many ways that are unexpected by the facilitator and participants alike.

The EXA and ABR connect to education differently, holding space for the mysterious, the sacred, the nebulousness and ambiguity of life. It is a form of education that embraces uncertainty and growth. There is no avoiding that the EXA and ABR are inherently “therapeutic” in that they help us to become aware of our imaginative, embodied, and affective selves, offering each of us a model for acceptance as the community supports us in all of our humanity and imperfection, becoming more whole, together. The EXA and ABR offers a different type of “learning” that is beyond facts, figures, data, and explanations. The EXA is a discipline about relationality with one another and connectivity with our deepest selves. It undoubtedly offers us authentic community with one another and through these experiences of authenticity we learn that we’re all the same in our common humanity, sharing similar struggles and suffering. We learn that people can hold one another in loving support, even people who barely know one another. In closing, the relationship between the EXA, ABR, education, and therapy is undeniable. One simply cannot engage in these

activities, even in the midst of resistance to the process, and not have an affective and meaningful encounter of some sort. The outcomes for these communal arts based experiences are as varied as the unique individuals themselves, however, the connective capacity of the EXA and ABR towards therapeutic and educational outcomes is irrefutable.

### ***How Does the EXA Concept of Embodiment Shape and Inform Educational Encounters?***

In chapter 1 I discussed how the concept of embodiment emerged and deepened the experiences within “Why Art?”. I made the case for the lack of meaningful embodied experience in education as usual, tying this lack to a humanist and cartesian legacy that largely locates our “beingness” within the realm of the mind. By failing to acknowledge that we are our bodies, minds and emotions working in sync with, not separate, distinct, and disconnected from our fleshy, earthly selves, we deny the fundamental reality of our sensuality and interconnectedness. Through the EXA concept of embodiment I worked with my students to craft varied classroom experiences that grounded us in the immediate sensory moment, connecting us deeply to ourselves, while also raising consciousness of our interconnectivity to one another. Through appreciation for our embodied experience we opened ourselves to the rapture of being alive and soulful encounters with one another. Each class is designed with embodiment in mind, introducing students gradually to this process and culminating in our class on music and movement. Everything ranging from our class openings to our class on painting and movement or our class on music and movement, all grounded us in our embodied sensorial experience. Our opening Qigong exercises, like discussed in chapter 1, or mindfulness based body scan meditations, yoga based movements at the beginning of class, all helped to connect us with our bodies, bringing us to present awareness with one another. These activities helped to build confidence and trust in slowing

down just enough that we may be fully present with/in our bodies, one another, and the creative experience to transpire. Our culminating activity on music and movement reflects how through a consistent and slow introduction of embodiment throughout the term via class opening experiences and other activities like our class on painting and movement, students were introduced to the relevance of embodiment in the educative process. Through our culminating classroom experience on embodiment, in fact, one of my favorite classes in the sequence, I endeavor to expand upon our embodied awareness that we have grown into thus far as a community of arts based practitioners.

I have likely belabored the point that the primary role of an EXA facilitator is to provide just enough structure that participants have at least a faint direction to pursue in any given EXA experience. The challenge is also to allow enough space that participants feel free to play, improvise, and invoke spontaneity. It is a delicate process and requires a certain level of sensitivity and intuition to the group's dynamic. Push too far and participants can shut down and close off. Don't push enough and the experience can feel flat and empty. As educators we are well aware that every class is different, each group relating differently to course content, material, and activities. One of the two classes that compose this study seemed a bit more hesitant to participate in the EXA. I sensed some distrust, anxiety, and fear at many of the activities that invoked embodiment and movement and it wasn't until our culminating activity with movement and music that it seemed that the class began to open more vulnerably with one another and take more creative risks in their art making ventures and responses.

I was especially nervous for this particular class to participate in this activity because up until that point in the term, there seemed to be reluctance to fully engage with the arts. In

my observation notes leading up to this activity I was actually a bit discouraged with the class, students arriving late, leaving early, and seemingly rushing through assignments for the sake of being done (personal communication, October 16, 2019). Regardless of their level of participation, I was committed to leading them through an experience of embodied awareness that unfolded quite differently than any of the other groups that I have used this activity with.

The activity involves a series of exercises that build upon one another beginning with simply tuning into our bodies and classroom space in the present moment. We begin standing in a circle together, all tables and chairs pushed towards the outside walls of the room, opening up the space for free movement and bodily exploration of the space. After taking a few deep healing and grounding breaths together I instruct the students to draw awareness to their bodies and to stretch and move as their body feels inclined while remaining in the circle together. I then encourage the students to begin exploring the classroom space, slowly sauntering throughout the room, with and between other bodies. We play with pace. We walk slowly, purposefully, feeling our bodies, taking in the sights, sounds, smells, sensations as we move throughout the classroom. I then encourage them to walk at a fast pace, weaving in and out of other bodies. What does this feel like? Can we feel our heart beating faster? Do we feel a bit more anxiety with the quickened pace? I encourage them to look around the room and notice. Notice the others in the room, the light coming through the windows, the chairs in the corner. It is an exercise in embodied awareness and grounding in the present moment, meant to decenter us from the common experience of the everyday, ushering in the liminal, the in-between state as we begin our embodied art-making journey together. During all of this, the class was responsive. I was encouraged to continue the activity.

Following about 15 minutes of purposeful and mindful movement within the classroom space, I then direct the students to one side of the room, I put some music on and we then engage in two movement based activities. The first involves the use of dow rods, held aloft between two individuals at their index fingers. The students are invited to dance and move, keeping the dow rods supported by the mutual pressure of the partners. Some students stand in place, feet fixed, moving the dow rods between them in slow, controlled movements. Others are more expansive and expressive as they take up the space. Moving freely, taking risks, having fun, the dow rods sometimes falling to the floor as they incorporate more grandiose moves into their dance. There's giggling and the energy continues to build as we enter the next movement based activity involving mirror dancing.

We set the dow rods to the side and the students were asked to find a new dance partner. I, of course, offer an example of the activity, asking for a volunteer. One of the students steps forward, the only directive is that we face one another, as in a mirror, and move as if we were looking at our own image. We begin dancing and moving, at times me leading, at others, the student. I'm a bit thrown off by how sensually the student moves, it's kinda sexy, but I go with it, enjoying the openness that the class is finally willing to engage in. I then invite the others to participate in their own mirror dancing, beginning as couples on one side of the room and dancing through the space towards the other side. It has taken some time, weeks in fact, but I'm finally feeling like we're really connecting as a classroom community and we're having fun in the process!

Following these movement based activities, we then move to our circle where I have placed a number of drums and percussive instruments. The students are energized! As soon as I invite them to choose an instrument, they jump at the opportunity! The energy is

palpable. I provide some basic instruction on hand drumming and then we engage in some basic, introductory drumming activities to get everyone warmed up. After these beginning drumming activities I then open up the circle to some drumming. In past experiences, when facilitating a drum circle, I find that I typically carry the rhythm for the group, keeping a steady rhythm as the other drummers skate over top of the consistent heartbeat-like pulse that I maintain. This particular group was, well, different. They had no interest in consistency, a steady beat, or an aesthetically pleasing sound. To my “experienced” musical ears it sounded like noise and dissonance. I was losing complete control of the group and to my surprise, I initially resisted their direction. This had never happened before, but it felt important. It was no longer “my class,” it became our class and I opened to following their lead. They played for some time, quite aggressively, cathartically, and I let the circle take its course. Once they had completed, I then moved to the next activity. The class was finally engaged. They were willing to take creative risks together.

Following the drum circle I then pulled two chairs into the middle of the circle and invited participants to choose an instrument and have a conversation with one another without words. I was incredibly surprised at their level of interest, for this class seemed a bit disinterested up until this point in the term. In this activity it remained clear that they were willing to follow my lead, but follow the direction that inspiration led them as well. Two students joined in, one choosing a drum and the other a wooden xylophone. I invited them to “talk” with one another via their chosen instruments. Typically students will engage in this sequence for a few minutes, then will conclude their musical discussion. The two students who entered the circle this particular evening played for what seemed an eternity. I was conflicted. I didn’t want to interrupt their jam. It was obviously a meaningful “conversation,”



so I stood by and waited for their conclusion. They concluded their musical session and I thought for sure that the class had lost its creative steam, but again, to my surprise, more students jumped at the opportunity to have musical conversations of their own. In fact, two students came to the center simply to scream as part of their conversation. This had never happened before. It was powerfully cathartic.

This was the first time that I had experienced such bold expression in this class and I attribute the loosening of their inhibitions to the embodied decentering processes built into the class. To become embodied is to become aware of our power. It is a force for liberatory and expressive experience. To move, to sing, to dance expressively in community with others is a declaration. It is a declaration of our individual uniqueness, held in community with others seeking mutual healing, and our willingness to be who and whatever we are, to claim our right to be, and to take up the space as our bodies navigate expansively. In an interview conducted by James (2022) on the liberatory potential of embodied awareness, Cator shares, “the sense of being powerless is connected to disembodiment. If we’re not embodied, it is easy to feel powerless in the midst of all that’s going on. Embodied liberation is about reclaiming the true innate power that resides within ourselves.” In this class experience just discussed, the students claimed their power. For the first time they not only allowed themselves to be seen, but declared resolutely with strength their ability to express themselves in a way they deemed fit. I provided the loose structure and format, attempted to lead by example in my self-expression, and they chose to lean into the process expansively and powerfully. This class on music and movement always opens the community to more. Through the embodied practices incorporated throughout the semester, we built embodied awareness together and the freedom of bodily expression was birthed in our culminating

class on music and movement, freeing us to be more spontaneous, playful, and engaged. These exercises, without fail, seem to take the class community to the next level of connectedness, trust, and vulnerability, but it was particularly potent with this specific group of students.

While this whole class example describes the power of the EXA in facilitating embodiment, several students' projects also provided powerful examples. Millie's focus on an exploration of her emotions through artistic expression serves as an exemplary aesthetic response to the inquiry of how the EXA concept of embodiment shapes and informs educational encounters, from her exploration of how music resonates as an extension of her own body, to her open and vulnerable expression of her struggles with body image as expressed in her visual journal and collages. All coalesce to present us with a picture of the EXA and ABR in action, embodiment emerging organically through Millie's ABR process.

Millie comes to awareness through her artistic process, that ultimately music and even art making itself represents an amplification of her embodied experience. Analogous to the well known Beatles song, "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," Millie introduces us to a musically responsive aesthetic understanding of the awareness that all art making is in fact embodied experience. She notes that, "Through my guitar playing, I've noticed that sometimes it feels like my guitar is speaking. When I bend a string, it's like it's wailing. My guitar truly does function as an extension of myself and allows me to enhance emotion by using another object." So here we see that the utilization of artistic technologies like instruments serve to connect us deeply to our embodied experience as multiplicitous beings, body, mind, emotion, and soul. In Millie's work there is an acknowledged frustration with the mind, likening identification with one's mind as a prison. Even one of the songs selected

as part of Millie’s videographic presentation seems to speak of this fissure in self, “Stranger to Myself” the vocalist singing, “Are you a stranger to yourself? Do you wonder if your thoughts belong to someone else?” (Loving, 2020). In Millie’s project and work we see suggestions of a unique dilemma of the human. We sense that we are so much more than our thoughts alone, possessing a soulful, heartfelt, and deep nature, yet our predicament lies in our exclusive identification with the mind and its constant superficial egoic chatter, which our current educational climate seems to favor. Millie’s work helps us to perceive ourselves differently, holistically, emotively, deeply, and in her introspective reflections brought forth and buttressed via her artistic renderings, we are invited to become more fully aware of who we are through EXA and ABR based practices that touch our embodied essence and soulful constitution.



*Clip from Millie’s ABR Videographic Presentation with Painting to Protect her Anonymity*

As educators it is imperative that we engage the whole student, including drawing awareness to our embodied existence and experience. This is a strength of the EXA, the recognition that we are so much more than our minds alone, but complex and multifaceted

beings of mind, body, heart, and soul. The EXA concept of embodiment helps us to realize the fullness of our potential as we engage in what might be considered risky expressions of movement that in many ways defies standard educational practice, leading us towards increased awareness of our soulful nature(s). Through embodied discernment and practices like I just discussed we can gain confidence in and acceptance of ourselves, igniting passion for learning and creative expression and thinking in our students. To live a disembodied life denies the reality of who we are and disconnects us from ourselves. An embodied approach to education situates us in the realm of the relational, better equipped to authentically relate to ourselves and more apt to meaningfully interact with others.

### ***How Does ABR Inform the Meaning-Making Process?***

As we have seen through the theory shared and ABR projects discussed, ABR presents as a chaotic creative process, meandering, sauntering, at times painfully, and others clearly and joyfully. The meaning-making that occurs within ABR, in my experience, is hard to pin down. There are no absolute truths provided or clear answers given and as discussed in the chapter on *a/r/tography* as research methodology there exists seemingly inexhaustible questions generated from an ABR project. Equally important to an *a/r/tographical* research exploration, there exists no fixed agenda or singular answer, rather the *a/r/tographer* seeking to open spaces through art making and self-reflexive practices that tend to generate inexhaustible contemplations. No one can instruct you on how to proceed, save your own internal compass. It's an intuitive process that at times seems as if one is groping through the dark. It is an adventure into the unknown, much like my dream through which the centaur forces me into the dark forest. When I began this project I had no idea what I was getting myself into. In fact, I was a bit cocky, thinking that I have done ABR before and that my

success in that endeavor would translate seamlessly into this new research undertaking. I was mistaken. Teaching and being with the students was the easy part and afterwards, confronted with the task of organizing and ordering the work into some sort of intelligible whole, I quickly became frustrated and frozen. As I discussed in chapter five, I then fell back on familiar practices like spreadsheets and software systems to assist, yet the further I tread down that worn, familiar path, the less real, soulful, and unique to mine and the student experiences it felt.

If there is one thing ABR demands, it is flexibility. It also insists upon poetic engagement with materials. Even when given full creative liberty, as I saw in both myself and my students, there exists a certain timidity in expression, a continual fear that research should look a more traditional way and an underlying anxiety that it won't be taken seriously unless it follows a linear, straightforward, and more succinct path. ABR is no doubt the dark forest of the unknown. It is most certainly soulful work, hence I think some of my and the students trepidation with jumping in with both feet. Soul work presents its own form of rigor, more rigorous than the quest for validity in research. The soulful work of ABR requires that we be open to our darkness, our shadow, the feelings, thoughts, emotions, and archetypal energies that we fear, reject, abhor. Given latitude in the choice and direction of their ABR projects, the students of "Why Art?" consistently chose topics that were personally meaningful and profound. My sense is that through these projects, many of the students were embarking upon their own personal healing journeys, opening to their darkness in the hopes of transmuting lead into gold. ABR is an alchemical process of not only coming to terms with our hurts, wounds, and traumas, but giving it an outlet for expression. It is so much more than simply representing our experience artistically. It's about leaning into the artistic

processes that allow for us to face and interact with our darker, more shadowy selves. Mary articulates this point perfectly writing, “I realized that I need to engage with, rather than simply describe, my anguish.”

John’s insights drawn from his ABR project also serve as an interesting complement to the question of meaning making as it relates to ABR, concluding that meaning and important outcomes from research don’t always need to be quantifiable. John reminds us that humans are complex and multifaceted and that ultimately strict measures and quantification can actually detract from some forms of research like ABR. He shares, “People are hard to quantify. Even without distinct measures, I can attest to how powerful this experience was for me.” Here we see a relevant point as it relates to education as usual. John challenges the notion of evaluative measures, a hallmark of our current educational climate, and trades this mechanistic form of relating to the world with an acknowledgement, a declaration of the significance of his personal, subjective, and emotionally curative artistic process asserting, “I find it hard to attach a statistic to my emotional and psychological growth. Does this mean my findings do not matter? Do I need numbers to prove that I feel better?” Here too we see the movement of soul through John’s work in the oftentimes inexplicability of pinning down with scientific specificity the measurable outcomes of ABR. Soul defies distinction and order, yet we can sense its movements and flows when we engage in creative practices like the vocal performance and songwriting associated with John’s ABR.



*Root and Plant Image from Tara's Visual Journal*

Similar to John's inquiry regarding the meaning ascribed through ABR, challenging the necessity of quantifiability, Tara initially struggled with a new form of research that favored expression over strict procedure and method. Tara's project helps to illuminate ABR's unique contribution to meaning making, research question number three, and communicates the propensity of ABR to help us gain new perspectives and deeper insights that frequently lead to more questions. Her ongoing meditative practice combined with visual journaling helped her to explore society's influence on creativity, as well as our relationship to the current climate crisis. Root and plant imagery consistently surfaced through Tara's visual journaling practice, spurring in her a quest to understand what she and our society is rooted in. Through the image making process Tara engaged in a deeply meaningful reflexive practice that led her to the realization that our society is largely rooted in the crusade for economic gain, no matter the cost to our environment and creative capacities. Tara's project also speaks to our more soulful natures and expresses a yearning for free, creative expression pondering, "What if society reflected what truly roots people and helps them grow? What if

we stopped assigning a monetary value to how people spend their time? I imagine a society where creativity outside of profit is valued.” Tara’s ABR project is a soulful expression of how an ongoing arts based practice and engagement with artistic materials and imagery can serve to take us into unexplored realms leading to deeply meaningful realizations that are both individually and collectively relevant.

As I ponder this question, of how ABR informs the meaning-making process of a non-traditionally designed research project and reflect upon my and the students' experiences, I’m not quite sure that meaning is even what truly matters with ABR. Meaning seems to be located in the intellect and at least historically in the field of education doesn’t necessarily reflect an embodied experience and interaction with the materials and the other humans who connect with and witness the expression as put forth in an ABR project. I wonder if meaning detracts from the lived, felt, sensorial, and emotive experience of the moment thereby distracting from the story being told by the arts based researcher. Sure, meaning can be extracted in anything, yet I’m not convinced that meaning is what truly matters in an ABR encounter. Instead, I think that authenticity, vulnerability, and emotional expression should be the primary determinants of a successfully executed ABR project (Chilton & Leavy, 2014).

We live in a culture that is literally obsessed with meaning. What does it all mean? Yet ABR provides something more, an opportunity to touch the deeper parts of ourselves, the soulful parts of ourselves that in many ways confound the intellect. Anna explains her process of accessing her emotions through ABR and her realization that access to her feelings was beyond verbal and written language, our primary mode of meaning making. She writes, “I was surprised to see that for someone that talks a lot I have a hard time showing my true



emotions. This was the time to really be true to me and face my true emotions. This process was helpful because I feel like I know myself a lot more now and can be certain about some personal things that I was unsure about.” Millie expresses a similar sentiment through her ABR writing, “My biggest takeaway from my research is that practicing art creation will lead to heightened self awareness of emotions, thus allowing us to experience more beauty in our daily lives.” Likewise, Jane speaks to the self-reflexive nature and potential for ABR to deepen our awareness and relationship with ourselves writing, “My visual journal also became a mode of reflective conversation and an instrument for me to silence my inner critic. I used my journal with the mindset to learn from what I make, reflect on myself, and further develop my art.”

The nature of meaning, for me, has shifted over time as I navigated between and amongst the student art and writing, my own artistic musings and writing, and the theory associated with the EXA, ABR, a/r/tography, and postmodernism. In relating back to the research question of how ABR informs the meaning making process, I am now more sensitive to the ambiguous and fleeting quality of meaning. It is my sense that meaning, feeling, and creativity all flow together, move apart, fall apart at times, and come back together in a constant dance of internal and external variables, sometimes known consciously, but others felt instinctively. If we allow for it, through entry into liminal space, the arts have an inherent way of bringing us back to the felt sensorial experience of the present moment, which in reality, is all that actually is. Meaning as it pertains to this study represents an evolutionary opening, an expansion towards something more than sheer intellect, the roots of our artistic practice(s) growing forth from the present moment. Like the snake that sheds its skin or the butterfly that emerges from the chrysalis, meaning moves out

from our intellect alone, held and experienced in our body(ies) through felt, danced, sung, painted, drawn, collaged, created and co-created, co-mingling, and co-encountering with other bodies, hearts, and minds.

In the latter writing of this work I question the importance of meaning itself as it relates to this study and the artistic process. Perhaps I'm being too harsh, but I do believe that our traditional and modernist notions around meaning requires a more nuanced understanding of human experience. Postmodernist notions of understanding speak to the ever shifting nature of reality and meaning. Of course meaning matters, yet when I reflect upon the art made as part of this study, I'm more interested in what moves us, what touches us in our sensitive, soulful spaces, what encourages us, what and who supports us, and what heals us. I was moved emotionally and deeply throughout this process by both the work and art of the student-participants and my own. The root etymological understanding of the word "mean" can be traced back to the middle English word *menen*, which translates to intend or to have in mind. Meaning as it pertains to "Why Art?" reflects much more than intellectual assent. It represents a sensual, emotive, soulful and embodied experience that was only possible through the courage to express and lay bare the vulnerability of all involved in the artistic processes. Meaning most certainly matters, but upon conclusion of this study I now realize that meaning is a complex, multifaceted, and nuanced experience that grows and changes in every direction based on our unique perspectives, experiences, and soulful longings as individuals and as a community.

Through the students' work and my own experiences with ABR I now see that meaning is ultimately secondary to the vulnerability and authenticity expressed through the work. Franklin (2012) writes, "The best art is the most honest, authentic art." Yet it takes

courage to, as Anna indicates, face our true emotions. I now see that by turning towards more traditionally accepted qualitative methods of research I was avoiding aspects of myself for fear that, as one research participant mentioned in their work, my emotions would take off on their own. I was afraid. I now realize, too, that this is likely the resistance of some of the students to the ABR process. It's not necessarily always the most uplifting of experiences once we open ourselves to the creative process of poiesis. It can be, but not always. Speaking to the transformative power of confronting our darker emotions Greenspan (2003) writes, "Finding the power of the sacred, not despite suffering, but in the midst of it: This is the alchemy of dark emotions. Through this alchemy, grief moves us from sorrow for what we've lost to gratitude for what remains. Fear of life's fragility is transformed to the joy of living fully, with openness" (p. 40). ABR is a tool, an uncommon means of conducting research that has the power to take us deeply into our emotive and soulful self. "Why Art?" serves as one example of a community of arts based researchers coming together, moving apart, leaning into our work as authentically and honestly as possible, that the lead of our sacred wounds may be transformed into the gold of a new awareness and appreciation for Life, ourselves, and one another.

### **Will We Choose Rational Efficiency or the Mystery?**

Windowless classrooms, sterile white walls, abrasive fluorescent lighting, uncomfortable seating arrangements that serve to separate learners, not connect, this is a common picture of almost any classroom found in the U. S. today. In many ways the physical space of our schools and classrooms appear as outward manifestations of how we conduct teaching and learning. Cold, rote, mechanistic, standardized, efficient, predictable, and tedious. Anything considered as detracting from the subject matter at hand is discouraged

and dampened. Our approach to teaching and learning has been reduced to a model of rational efficiency that displaces the soulful, creative, organic, inspiring, chaotic, aesthetic, and relational encounters that in many ways defines our humanity and co-existence with the more than human beings that comprise our Earth home. Riley-Taylor (2002) explains the disconnective, alienating nature of our current predicament in education writing:

Our traditional educational model has long relied on a reductionist way of knowing, emphasizing the legitimacy of a *portion* of the full range of human capacities to know. Schools are places, quite often, where many come to feel a sense of alienation, of numbness, of separation from parts of themselves, from the larger community, and from the ecological world. As a result, children in mainstream schools have been de-educated, in many ways taught, to close their eyes to the wide array of sensibilities which vitally affect who they are and how they know. (p. 6)

“Why Art?,” in many ways, represents the antithesis of an anesthetized model of education. It is a class and study that serves as a form of aesthetic education, increasing our sensitivities. The arts based experiences built into the class content reflect an aesthetic sensibility that helps to awaken our senses and perceptions to the vibrant and dynamic worlds around and within us. Speaking to the unique capabilities of an education grounded in the aesthetic Greene (2001) purports, “We see it as an effort to move individuals (working together, searching together) to seek a grounding for themselves, so that they may break through the ‘cotton wool’ of dailyness and passivity and boredom and come awake to the colored, sounding, problematic world” (p. 7). “Why Art?” embraces this spirit by staging the arts and creative expression at the foreground of the curricular design and pedagogical approach. We were a community of artist researchers who came together using expressive

arts based methods to go deep within our personal lived experiences, while also connecting us to one another and the environment.

In this section of writing I will discuss how this study serves as an antidote to the overarching problem that standard educational practices have been reduced to superficial procedure, sacrificing depth, beauty, and our expressive and soulful natures for the sake of efficient outcomes. Many of the class experiences reflect an aesthetic sensibility, from mask making to our sessions on music and movement, each experience is designed to release our focus on the intellect alone, that we may experience a poietic and embodied encounter with materials leading to an increased sensitivity to both our individual and collective lived experience, to include the other of the more than human world. In this portion of writing, I will rely on our class sessions dedicated to Eco-Art to help elucidate the ways in which “Why Art?” contributes to awakening us to the colored, sounding, problematic world that Greene proposes.



*Eco-Art Piece Created during “Why Art?”*

We file slowly, almost ritualistically down the path, this time not figuratively, but literally into the unknown of the forest. I’ve instructed the students that we will not be speaking once we enter the forest, nor will we speak once we arrive at our location to partake in a communal eco-art activity. We will instead attempt to tune into our surroundings, making space for the forest to speak to and with us. Much to my surprise, the students respect the silence, every time. There is a sense of the sacred as we meander down, down, down into the womb like surroundings, trees and hillsides encompassing us as we travel. Blue jays call back and forth to one another as we wander, alerting the rest of the forest’s inhabitants to our

presence. There is a palpable sense of the sacred, of the importance in spending purposeful time outdoors with the trees, streams, rocks, and earth.

We follow the inspiration of Andy Goldsworthy, a well-known sculptor who uses earth elementals to compose the most beautifully crafted designs with and from natural surroundings. There's a sense in Goldsworthy's work that it commingles with Earth, blending, complimenting the pristine habitats. Today we will create our own versions of earth based sculpture, choosing to work individually or collectively as we feel led. We arrived near a stream in a wooded area located on campus. We stop, together, the students seeming a bit apprehensive before splitting off individually and in pairs to begin their work. Again, to my surprise, they work intently, some with wood and rock, others with leaves and ash from a nearby fire pit. The students are engrossed in their work, some building elaborate rock sculptures, crossing back and forth through the nearby stream, others very carefully place twigs, branches, and various shapes and sizes of splintered wood into a large, gaping, wound in a tree that appears to have been cut into by a group of humans lacking the sensitivity to its wise and strong presence. The gesture seems like a heartfelt offering, a bandage for this more than human elder who came to being long before any of the little sisters and brothers who are present, older than those who caused the wound. The elder carries the scar of the ignorance of our culture, blind to the magic and beingness of the plants and trees. The students of "Why Art?" in turn provide an aesthetic response to the trauma, attempting to adorn the ancient tree with remnants of its woody kin.



*Eco-Art, Covering the Injury Inflicted by Humans*

There is something sensitizing to being in and working with nature, as opposed to against it or being completely removed from it as we encapsulate ourselves within cold, sterilized buildings. As we work in silence, individually and collectively, there's a sense of the beauty in the playful interactions between humans and nature, many afterwards, speaking to the recollection of engaging in similar activities as children. The silence serves to calm one's inner chatter, awakening us to the voluminous voices around us, the birds song, the wind as it blows through the trees, the chatty, bubbling, stream. One of the students shared their experience of eco-sculpture stating, "I got really inspired by the idea of forgotten beauty



and Goldworthy's idea of following the flow of nature. This did make me feel more connected to nature. I paid more attention to forgotten parts of nature than I ever have. It made me realize weeds, dead pine cones, and fallen flowers can be so beautiful." Another student, Katie, shares her artistic process of gathering natural elements and arranging them in an aesthetically pleasing manner. She captures quite poetically in her writing the subtleties involved in cooperating with elements found in nature. There is a certain childlike wonder that comes through in her writing about the experience. She shares:

I walked down to a creek to make my natural sculpture. While taking in the scenery, I saw a flat mushroom floating down the current. I 'rescued' it after it got caught on a boulder, and decided it would have to be in my sculpture. Said sculpture is made from lovely white sandstone, shale, and hunks of quartz stacked into pillars and a circle. On top of a slab of shale, I set down the flat mushroom and put a wet catkin on top of it. After adding ferns and violets, it was complete. I made an alter for the rescued mushroom and drowned catkin, and now both were above the water as the stream flowed between the rocks at the base of the structure. The phrase, "On Solid Rock I Stand" came to mind, since the rocks were protecting the mushroom and catkin from the water and sinking sand.



*“On Solid Rock I Stand,” Eco-Art by Katie*

Another student shares her reflection on the eco-art making experience writing:

My biggest takeaway from our class discussion was that creating art with nature can be a great way to connect with your inner-self and release emotions. It not only allows you to be free of judgment from others but also your own self-judgment. Once we stepped into the woods, I immediately felt free from the responsibilities of everyday life and was able to focus on the sounds of nature like birds chirping, leaves rustling, and water trickling. I was able to physically interact with nature such as picking up leaves and rocks and create them into something I never would have expected. Overall, I greatly enjoyed this experience and it allowed me to be proud of the artwork I made.

In these experiences we see a renewed appreciation for our natural environment. Exercises like these serve as more than just something fun to do, though it is in fact quite enjoyable. Purposeful time together outdoors, interacting slowly, quietly, and deliberately with Earth, awakens something within us that is a fundamental aspect of being human. The rational efficiency model of education as usual, as Riley-Taylor suggests, serves to de-

educate, to dis-enchant us from the magnificence and beauty all around us, teaching us to turn off our sensitivities and empathic connection to the natural world. One student, capturing this sentiment of becoming reacquainted with childhood memories in the woods writes, “This activity did reintroduce me to an old hobby and get me to start taking more walks around there instead of always driving by.” Another participant shares, “This did make me feel more connected to nature. I paid more attention to forgotten parts of nature than I ever have. It made me realize weeds, dead pine cones, and fallen flowers can be so beautiful.” Tara, shares of her recollection back to childhood from the exercise, “I feel more connected to the landscape by creating my sculpture. It made me nostalgic to playing in the woods for hours on end as a kid.” Anna shares of her eco-art experience, “Spending some quiet time outside definitely has made me pay attention to my surroundings.” One student speaks to her experience of the activity writing, “I feel that we should try our best to forget societal norms for productivity, beauty, and worth, and look even at the small beautiful things that live around us.” Another student reflects on how the exercise helped them to remember memories from their childhood writing, “For the first part of my life I lived in Alabama I had weeping willows and lots of pine trees so this exercise led me to thinking of memories I've had and lots of reflecting.” Marla writes of her experience with eco-art, “I would definitely say that this exercise made me feel more connected to the landscape. It gave me an opportunity to explore the area with a keen eye, and building my sculpture made me feel like I was altering the landscape in a very minuscule but beautiful way.” Similarly, Bill writes of his felt sense of connection with nature, “I feel as though this project most certainly connected me with the landscape.”



*Eco-Art Mandala*

Measured against the reductive model of education which curtails any other forms of knowing, exercises like this might be perceived as unimportant, useless in furthering the development of the intellect and skills to participate in the market economy. My contention is that activities and ritualistic exercises like this help us to realize the fullness of our humanity, as we embrace the reality of our interconnectedness with our earth home. We are all earthlings and the scientific reality is that a diverse biome helps to ensure the preservation of all. Our educational system teaches us to leave behind, to forget the soft, gentility of the plants, animals, mountains, waterways, earth, and air. Our educational system serves as a

mechanism to train our youth to become productive members in an economic system built on exploitation and profit, disempowering us, numbing us out to the sacred connections and vibrant life forms all around us. Exercises like this, if we open to them, serve to touch and massage our heart spaces, slowing down enough, quieting our minds just enough, pausing just enough, to listen and hear the voice of the wind, the call of the crow, or the myriad of other voices of Earth that speak beyond the typically regarded linguistic mechanisms of the human. They too, then, become our teachers. The teachers we need for humanity, if only we have the humility to accept their lessons and offerings.

Exercises like this teach us the power of art to transform education, yet the magic of these experiences simply cannot happen unless we first place ourselves, our classes, our students, in the midst of the natural order, slowing down through varied mindfulness, embodied, and creative practices as discussed throughout this work. Through the concept of embodiment when with Earth and its more than human inhabitants in a purposeful and special way we enter liminal space, our bodies intermingling and interacting with the bodies of Earth. Crow caws, flowers dance with delight in the warm, gentle breeze, the olfactory earthy goodness filling our senses, awakening in us our connection to Earth, air, water, fire. These are the embodied relationships with the elementals, the other forms and bodies through which our bodies are birthed, grow, then later, degrade, and die, returning to that which we came in a never ending procession of coming and going, expanding outward, contracting inward back to the womb of Earth from which we all came and through which we will all return. This is the power of art to transform education beyond sheer intellectual assent, moving us back to our hearts that beat with an effortless rhythmic understanding of our aesthetic responsibility to our community(ies) and to our planetary home, as the students so

beautifully demonstrated with their aesthetic response and sensitivity to the wounded tree elder and other artistic Earth based renderings.

Embodiment, the recognition that we don't just have bodies, but are bodies, sharing sacred, borrowed, liminal space and time with other vulnerable and temporal bodies helps to make educational encounters therapeutic. Art making challenges our standard protocols for meaning making beyond the mind to include our breathing, felt, emotive, sensorial experience, touching some of the deepest places within us, while connecting us to one another and the wise ancestors and teachers, the multitudinous spiritual elders and mentors of Earth. In these poietic encounters we enter the liminal, the threshold between that which we think we are, coming to the recognition of being so much more, not just a singular individual in a vast sea of meaninglessness or a struggling, broken, separate whose sole purpose is to gain the intellectual mastery and disciplinary regimental prowess to succeed in the market economy. No! The arts, made in community and collaboration with the many others to include the more than human others and ancestors of Earth, help us to realize that true meaning lies in our ability to share in the knowledge of our sacred relatedness to the beauty and mystery of our co-mutual being and becoming.

### **Initiates Into the Realm of the Imaginal...**

“Why Art?” reveals the power of art in doing education differently. Through the EXA a dynamic, creative, and interconnected experience emerged allowing for the free expression of the students enrolled in the class. Encounters like those discussed in the vignettes and throughout this work shows us that when a community of people come together to engage in art making practices community connections are built and strengthened. My observations notes from one of the last class of the study demonstrates such, “During our

closing session I asked the students to share their thoughts and feelings about where they began as artists and arts based researchers with the class and where they see themselves now. A number of the students commented on how they felt more relationally connected to the group after having spent weeks making and sharing their art with one another. There was also a noticeable difference in the quality of art produced from the first to the last class. Some of the students shared how the class helped them to become more comfortable with the arts and see the value in the arts as a tool for both multidisciplinary work and personal growth and development” (personal communication, December 11, 2019).

The student ABR projects associated with “Why Art?” also help us to think about education differently, demonstrating the ability of the arts to help foster deep and meaningful connections between the chosen artistic modalities and the artists, showing us the soulful, deep, and authentic expression of the student experiences. These experiences would in fact be difficult to achieve without the arts. From Millie’s use of soul collage and music to help her understand how the arts can help to process emotions, to John’s use of vocal performance and songwriting as a means to facilitate a therapeutic intervention for transgendered people, all the projects elucidate in their own unique way how the arts help us think and more importantly feel differently. As John indicates in his research, these experiences are difficult to quantify, yet their impact on the students mental and emotional well being are evident. “Why Art?” offers up a form of education that places merit in the emotive, heartfelt, and soulful expression of the student, introducing them to the creative freedom associated with both the in class activities and their chosen research topic.

“Why Art?” also serves as a model for a new approach to educational leadership. With its emphasis on the arts and creative expression we can envision new and

exciting directions for the field of educational leadership. Imagine schools and colleges where creativity is truly valued and purposefully woven into the fabric of our institutional systems. What if educational leaders and administrators promoted and engaged themselves in practices similar to those discussed in “Why Art?”? I envision vibrant, lively, kind, relational spaces, like those created during “Why Art?” where students, teachers, and administrators alike share from authentic places within themselves, perhaps even making space for the expression of deep and vulnerable emotions. I imagine spaces of playfulness and levity, mixed with deeply fulfilling work. As I mentioned in one of my class observations, “Where there was tightness and uncertainty, there was now a spirit of fun and play at work and it showed” (personal communication, December 11, 2019). “Why Art?” serves as one example of doing education differently and points to a new vision for educational leadership, through which we can become initiated into the realm of the imaginal, discovering new possibilities within our bodies and being that we were previously unaware of because we were never given the opportunity to realize them (Greene, 2001).

### **That Which We Seek, is Also Seeking Us...**

In closing, “Why Art?” and disciplines like the EXA and research practices like ABR that frame its design and execution are inherently adept at advancing a form of teaching and learning rooted in the free expression of the community members who engage with these embodied art making experiences. Through varied artistic exercises like the ones illustrated in this study teachers and students alike claim their voice, communicating the oftentimes conflicting and uncommunicable of our affective and soulful selves. Through the student experiences and my own, the work of “Why Art?” demonstrates the sacred act of self reflection that accompanies any committed and ongoing artistic practice, calling us into the



deep waters of our psychic and emotive lives, while frequently defying rational and reasonable clear cut answers and categorizations. “Why Art?” demonstrates a form of education that is different from our standard practices in education, casting vision for a contemplative, reflexive, and affective onto/epistemology.

This study is significant because it moves us, if even just a little, towards respect and appreciation for our individual and collective heartfelt lived experiences. The stories shared help us to go public with our vulnerable, soft, playful, and even wounded selves, trading hard data and facts for the oftentimes ignored sensuous, fleshy, and delicate humanity that we are. “Why Art?” shows us that we are multiplicitous beings and that students are bored and frustrated with a sole focus on intellect alone, disconnecting us from our vibrant, embodied selves, and from one another. “Why Art?” matters because our vulnerabilities matter and that healing will only be obtained, first individually, then collectively if we allow ourselves the courage to express that which touches us in the deepest parts of our being. This study moves us towards the acknowledgement of the necessity to practice education with a caring and compassionate hand, while introducing our students to artistic exercises and practices that can help to both melt our hearts and grow our capacity for love of one another and increased self-acceptance.

“Why Art?” is a recognition that modern life and culture has stripped us from our inherent capacity to create original works of beauty. It represents an effort to be “brought down to earth” through awareness of our embodied existence. In a neo-liberalist world, the very act of creating something new and different is an act of political revolt. Lenzo (2002) shares, “the truth is that art is our birthright. Our lives are art, or could be, and every aspect of our experience opens itself to the clarity and beauty that comes with focusing our

attention, our creative energy and imagination upon it” (p. 2). “Why Art?” recognizes that as an educational culture, we have become numb to artistic, aesthetic, and soulful experience, and offers an antidote to its anesthetization.

“Why Art?” demonstrates that in order for us to reclaim our inherent capacity to perceive the beauty of our lives, of our relationships, of the natural world, to reclaim the nature of soul, we must embrace our instinctive tendency towards artful living. This does not mean that we all become painters or pianists. It does mean that we allow ourselves to be drawn into creative dialogue with our own existence in some way, whether it’s poetry writing or gardening, singing or satire, pottery or bee keeping. The method or mode is irrelevant. What matters is the cultivation of an ability to overcome our numbness, so that we can live more creative, meaningful, fulfilling, and visionary lives (Lenzo, 2002). And in touching the heart centered creative space that exists within each of us, we become more sensitive to our own connectivity to our deeper selves and to our communities, both human and more than human alike.

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## **Vita**

Mel Falck was born in Wheeling, WV. He graduated from Wheeling Park High School in WV in May 1995. He completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology December 2004. Following completion of his undergraduate degree he worked for a local domestic violence prevention agency before enlisting in the U. S. Army as an Intelligence Analyst. Mel was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Military Intelligence corps February 2008. Following completion of his military service in 2011 he began work on a Master of Arts degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling with an Expressive Arts focus. The M. A. was awarded in August 2014. In May 2015, Mr. Falck commenced work toward his Ed. D. in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University. Mr. Falck resides in Boone, NC with his fiancé, son, dogs, and cats.