

# Minutes of the Escape Committee

## Education and Memoir

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### Introduction: The Iron Lady

**I**N 1988, Margaret Thatcher was the prime minister of the United Kingdom and I was assistant principal at Sir Roger Manwood's School—a public high school established some 450 years before by the Chancellor of the Exchequer for Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup>. I'd taught in a number of schools before Manwood's, and though I'd seen my fair share of laziness and ineptitude, I'd also found that many of my colleagues were quite dedicated to what we all called 'The Profession.' For instance, when the Manwood's school bell rang at the end of last period, around a quarter of our students stayed on to talk to teachers about their work, rehearse for the school play, practice team sport, play chess, debate, or make music. These activities were voluntary on both sides and unpaid as far as we teachers were concerned. We worked long hours, partly because of a certain crusty pride. We believed that 'professionals' did not work just from 9–5, that extra-curricular activities were 'good for the kids,' and that part of our job was what we termed 'pastoral care.'

Along came the Iron Maiden.

Margaret Thatcher's Foreign Affairs Private Secretary at the time (Sir Charles Powell) has described her style of government as 'Leninist' in its tendency to "lay down the law, bully a bit" (Hennessy, 2001, p. 397). In my experience, he got Thatcher dead to rights.<sup>1</sup> She strode through the nation's halls of learning like a Valkyrie, brandishing a mighty sword of reckoning. First, she decided exactly how many hours teachers should work in a year (around 1700 as I recall). Our teachers' unions responded by forbidding us to work for one minute more than the exact number of hours she had prescribed, and ironically, many of us ended up spending much less time with students. After-school clubs and teams that had run for decades, possibly centuries in the case of Manwood's, were dismantled almost overnight. Next, Thatcher tossed educational initiatives at us like hand grenades: Records of Achievement, National Standards, Common Examinations—sweeping nationwide programs that should have been implemented over a period of years were forced upon us without consultation, training, or additional funding. Drowning under an ocean of

paperwork, we watched as Thatcher, like a twisted Mary Poppins, quantified and measured the curriculum so that she could hand it out in dollops, like nasty medicine.

## The Escape Committee

As a young lesbian and a feminist, I'd already made a number of compromises in order to navigate a school culture that was deeply conservative, misogynist, racist, and homophobic. As deputy headmistress, my tasks had included explaining to the head of the Combined Cadet Force that he might want to reconsider some of his Standard Operating Procedure, which included calling women 'dearie' (to their faces) and black students 'darkies' (behind their backs). Our official position on homosexuality (one that I was expected to endorse) was that it was 'a state not to be striven for.' I never understood how one might conceivably work hard to become queer. In my case the process had been quite effortless.

Less easy to put one's finger upon was a pervasive meanness of spirit I'd become aware of at Manwood's—a tendency towards blame and exclusion that was connected, I felt, with the harsh codes and systems that had been handed down through the ancient English hierarchy. I had learned to rub along within these systems, to wear Jaeger suits and stay in the closet, to play the game a little. There were certain rewards: acceptance, status, money, and the fun I had with teaching. I loved the tiny space of learning I'd managed to open up in my English classroom. Autonomous and often free from scrutiny, many of us liberal educators who went through college in the 60s and 70s sought what Eisner (2004, p. 88) describes as "novel and creative responses" to the 'o' and 'A' level curriculum,<sup>2</sup> which was narrow but rich. Though the literary canon (read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Austen, Hardy, Yeats) and through the English language syllabus (read grammar and composition), we managed at least to encourage students to question notions such as fairness and justice, to talk openly about sex, relationships, families, parents, education, gender, sexuality, and race, and to learn to write about such topics with reasonable accuracy, some idea of structure, narrative, or argument, and the beginnings of style and voice.

Now Thatcher had invaded our secret spaces with her damn measuring spoon, and morale, as they say, was low. It was hell, particularly for head teachers, who tried to appease everyone—the unions, the parents, the governing bodies, Her Majesty's Inspectors, the grumbling staff, and, oh yes, sometimes even the students. One local head shot himself. Another was picked up for driving under the influence. I didn't really fancy the job, especially since Clause 28, another of Maggie's initiatives, was about to make it illegal to even talk to students about homosexuality. I decided to exit the closet and start on the book I'd always wanted to write (the one most English teachers have tucked away in a drawer). I'd finance this venture by washing dishes, painting houses—anything else in the world except teaching. It was time to join what we everyone in The Profession called the 'Escape Committee.'

In return for sixteen years of service, I received a set of plastic luggage. In it, I packed the twentieth century equivalent of a typewriter and a ream of bond paper and set out for America.

## The Dropped Stitch: Madeleine R. Grumet

Twenty years later (2008), I have traveled in a queer educational circle to find myself back in institutions, this time in The University of British Columbia (UBC) as a doctoral student and as a

community artist for the Vancouver Parks Board, working with a group of seniors who self-define as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual.

In one of my first classes at UBC, Dr. William Pinar handed me a copy of *Bitter Milk* (Grumet, 1988), written in the very year that I quit teaching. As I read it, that period in my history fell into sharper focus, as if someone had reached gently into my brain and tweaked a lens. I came to understand that the unraveling I had witnessed at Sir Roger Manwood's School twenty years before was but part of a more universal unraveling. Long before Margaret Thatcher took her scissors to the fabric of public education, a vital stitch had been dropped.

Grumet (1988) suggests that the subjugation of women in the education system has had an impact upon the school curriculum that is both negative and profound. Women's ways of knowing, she argues, are produced directly from the "symbiosis of the mother/child bond" (p. 15). Men, on the other hand, process the denial of affective relations, causing males, both as infants and adults, to exist in a sharply differentiated dyadic structure and females to exist in a "more continuous and interdependent, triadic one" (p. 17). According to Grumet, our education system has always been dominated by a patriarchy that defines its success in terms of production. The paternal project of the curriculum is to claim the child, to teach him mastery of knowledge. The maternal project is to relinquish the child so that both can be independent.

How ironic, and how depressing, that in my experience of the 80s, it was a woman who carried out this patriarchal work, who strove to establish a curriculum, and indeed a culture, that was "dominated by kits and dittos, increasingly mechanized and impersonal" and without the trust, risk, or intimacy that learning requires (Grumet, 1988, p. 56).

### The Nightmare That is the Present: William F. Pinar

Next on Bill's reading list was his own book, *What is Curriculum Theory* (Pinar, 2004), and as I read this, I became even more convinced of the impact of that dropped stitch.

The first section of the book is called "The Nightmare that is the Present," and here Pinar (2004) calls for a move away from the "miseducation of the American public" (p. 16). Though he does look for ways to unpick the mistakes we have made in constructing the modern curriculum, there is a sense of desperation throughout the text—a feeling that time is running out. Like some contemporary Paul Revere, Pinar seems to be on a wild ride to call us to arms. "The hour is late," he cries, "and the sense of emergency acute" (p. 247). The miseducation of American students he so deplors once again includes 'business-minded' school reforms, with their emphases on test scores, standardized examinations, and academic analogues to the bottom line.

Safe in the graduate reading room, pencil in hand, I pause. *Currere*, one might say, has its way with me, as I regress, back down Memory Lane, to those early days after I joined the Escape Committee and came to the United States. The romantic notion of washing dishes by day and writing books by night had become a reality (of which, more later). This particular memory was of a rare venture back into the classroom. In order to get myself a work visa, I'd signed on for a semester at one of Boston's more prestigious universities as a kind of pedagogical Santa. Donning a spiffy red business suit (I'd bought it in a thrift store), I'd climb into my battered Hyundai and travel around, handing out advice to student teachers on practicum at the local high schools. At the end of the semester, I gave the students A grades if they had been good (if they had not, they got a B plus).

On this particular afternoon, I was sitting in at the back of a Cambridge high school class watching a well-meaning young student teacher (in a better suit than mine) plod through her lesson plan. She had objectives. She had well-polished shoes. She had handouts. She had a neatly typed quiz on Romeo and Juliet. Define iambic pentameter. How old was Juliet? When was Shakespeare born? What was the location of the Globe Theater?

No one cared.

Two girls in front of me were busy passing notes back and forth beneath their desks. Though their faces were fixed in an expression of polite attention, their hands scribbled away at this illicit writing: their own tales, no doubt, of sex, danger, and passion. I watched them compose on the sly as a fly banged its little head drearily at the window, trying to get out of this stifling classroom into the sunshine and fresh air on the other side of the glass. Suddenly, I was seized by an almost insuperable desire to stand up and scream a warning, to tell these poor students to run, to escape, to flee, as I had done. But of course, I did not. Because they could not—at least not without dropping out of high school and looking for jobs washing dishes, and I knew from experience that starving artists had snatched most of those positions.

As I returned to the present, to my privileged location at UBC, I realized that though I had escaped, all over the world, the students were still there, penned in apathetic rows.

### The Minimal Self: Christopher Lasch

In the final sections of this book of Pinar's, I noted several references to the work of one Christopher Lasch (1984) and picked up a copy of his book *The Minimal Self*. I was not surprised to find that it was yet another commentary from the 80s that paints a bleak picture of contemporary culture. Lasch writes convincingly of the pervasive narcissism he believes has paralyzed human endeavour, rendering artists silent and citizens apathetic. In the face of chaos and barbarity on a large scale—the holocaust, the arms race, and environmental disasters—we have been reduced, Lasch believes, to helplessness and denial. When all we can manage is survival, then art, education, culture, politics, and even human relationships seem pointless. In all fields of human activity, including education, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to keep hope alive (Pinar, 2004, p. 277).

### Freudian Feminism

I cannot help but see a connection between the despair Lasch (1984) and Pinar (2004) describe, the general failure of public education, and that 'dropped stitch' identified by Grumet (1988). After all, Lasch points to the twin evils of fascism and materialism as the root causes of those disasters from which we shrink—that nightmare that is the present. As Grumet (1988) suggests, these are the natural outcomes of a patriarchal culture that has constructed "a highly rationalized economic system of capitalism," and an "orientation towards external authority" (p. 18). The materialistic orientation of our culture and our passion for power and control all stem from that separation we have set between mind and body, between internal processes and external rewards, that fatal Cartesian dualism.

And yet, Lasch (1984) stops short of the 'Freudian Feminism' espoused by writers such as Grumet. Arguing that "feminine 'mutuality'" cannot be played off against "the 'radical

autonomous' masculine self," he believes that the "'feminine' longing for symbiosis" is no less a desire to regress to the "undifferentiated equilibrium of the prenatal state" than is the "solipsistic 'masculine' drive for absolute mastery" (p. 245). I remain unconvinced, but however we ascribe the causes, the end result is the same. All three authors, Pinar, Grumet, and Lasch, suggest that there is an urgent need to discover new purpose.

## Harvesting Silence

When I fled England and teaching in 1989, it was to become a writer, but when I finally rented a garret in America and set up my computer, I realized that I didn't have much of a clue how to begin. I had established the context that Grumet (1988) suggests is essential to aesthetic practice—the studio where the artist "harvests silence" (p. 94), but what the heck was I meant to do there? Thirty five years of education! Hundreds of books and novels and poems, devoured, analyzed to within an inch of their lives, and yet somehow I had missed out on a vital piece of education—how does one go back to pick up the dropped stitch, to encounter the mystery that is oneself? How does one become what Grumet (p. 79) calls a commuter—shuttling back and forth between the actual and the possible? How does one 'strive to become' a writer?

Instinct told me that I should not sign up for classes or workshops, nor should I read any 'how to' books about the writing process. I might have known very little about autobiographical writing, but I knew that I had had enough of academia. I had a great title for the book, so how hard could it be? I fired up my computer, stared for a while at the blank screen, and wrote the word 'Chapter' and then, after a short period of reflection, the word 'One.'

Fast forward five years. You know this story from the movies—sheets of paper are ripped from typewriters and cast on the floor. Cigarettes burn in the ashtray. There are coffee rings and empty bottles. Long walks at night. Gradually, a pile of paper grows in my manuscript box. Editors scribble cryptic advice, and I write new drafts. I become published. I give readings. I finish the memoir and—oh joy!—it is published! A friend of a friend finds a one-stop school for writers and offers me a job as a teacher of memoir writing. I am excited—after all, I have a great name for the class: 'Digging for Diamonds.' I feel that this image reflects the processes I have discovered, ways of mining memory to discover key events there, sedimented and compressed by time, and sometimes, at least, transmuted from the ordinary to the illuminating.

The first class approached. Only then did I realize that (once again) this lovely title was all I had! Nothing in my sixteen years as a teacher had prepared me for this. Hundreds of i's dotted and t's crossed, thousands of 'essays' scribbled upon in red ink, and yet I did not know how to teach people to write, at least not to *really* write. How could I communicate the maniacal dedication required to *really* write—to hunt down exactness through revision after revision, as opposed to journaling or knocking off an interesting first draft? How would I demonstrate that *real writing* is more about clarity of perception than it is about technique? Back in the day, I'd talked about beginnings, middles, and endings, but I no longer trusted in them so absolutely. I had discovered that some stories start in the middle, or stop before the end, that narrative shape is elusive, and that it is as important to change one's stories as it is to capture them. I knew that there are, in the end, no rules, but still, a need for craft, for both discipline and accident, order and chaos, humility and hardheaded pride. There are no roadmaps, though one always has to discover strong intention. That's the real teacher—the intention of the story. My job, I came to

believe, was to help my students discover that, then to become an advocate for the story as it developed.

Where would I have them begin? I sat down with a blank sheet of paper, and at the top, I wrote the words ‘Lesson’ and ‘One.’

At the start of Lesson Two, one of my students, a middle-aged woman called Marian, approached me to discuss a ‘problem.’ Apparently, she could not seem to finish the piece she had begun in Lesson One. She had written fifty pages, she told me (in some distress) but now other characters were demanding her attention; other scenes were unfurling. She couldn’t stop thinking about this damned piece of writing that she’d begun. What should she do? I thought for only a moment and then informed Marian that this problem was not unknown, indeed, professional writers have a special name for it. She was much relieved. What was the name, she asked. Solemnly, I told her that this problem she had encountered was often called ‘a novel’ in writing circles. Somewhat horrified, Marian pointed out that she couldn’t possibly write a novel—she had only taken lesson one in the beginners’ class! I managed to convince her that this didn’t matter, because she had, in fact, been composing this narrative for years. All that had happened was that she had received permission to write it down.

In convincing Marian, I convinced myself. Never again did I classify students as beginners, intermediate, or advanced, nor did I worry too much about the need to front load techniques. Three years later, Marian had finished her first novel and was well into her second and with her help, and the help of others like her, I was training in my new ‘profession’ as a community artist and teacher. Some twenty years later, I am attempting to theorize what happened to Marian and to me in Lesson Two.

## Education for Social Justice

One thing that I have learned at UBC is that my work can be justified, in a theoretical sense, as ‘important’ despite current suspicions about narrative and authorship (Barthes, 1977; Lyotard, 1984) in what Denzin (1994) calls “the poststructural moment” (p. 296). Though writing can be self-indulgent, serving to re-inscribe familiar stories, it can also be positioned at the sharp end of curriculum reform and advocacy research (Cherland & Harper, 2007).

Wright (2000), for example, has positioned education for social justice taught in non-pedagogical spaces as an important starting point for third wave theorizing. Several commentators have suggested that autobiographical methods and memoir writing have much to contribute to this radical work. Specifically, it can help to shift power away from hegemonic systems and towards the disenfranchised, by giving them the ability to ‘talk back,’ to themselves, as much as to others. Pinar (2004) has said that “[a]t this historical moment, autobiography may have more political potential...than running for state senate, signing a petition, even voting” (p. 47). Janet Miller (2005) believes that whereas much educational and academic discourse attempts to “contain” meaning (p. 111), autobiographical writing can serve as a “queer curriculum practice” (p. 217) that allows it to spill out somewhat, in order to serve as a “critical response to oppression” (p. 185). Anne Cvetkovich (2003, p. 7) advocates for the creation of an “archive of feelings” by women who define as lesbians, suggesting that this can remove therapeutic intervention from the hands of clinicians and return it to where it can most usefully and equitably be carried out—within the lesbian community itself. According to Cvetkovich, art serves to illuminate those places where the personal and the political intersect, particularly where



trauma is concerned—whether this is direct and catastrophic or subtle and insidious—the small slights and injuries that people who are queer experience on a daily basis.

In this next section of the paper, I will turn to my most recent work with queer seniors in the Queer Imaging & Riting Kollektive for Elders, aka Quirk-e, an arts-based, activist group that works at this particular intersection.

## Quirk-e

As I turned fifty, I began to notice how old and older queers are both over-and under-determined in normative discourses. The ‘old’ are often seen as objects of ridicule or pity in a culture in which entire industries are dedicated to making us want to look and feel young, and the old are portrayed as quiet, comfortable, and, at best, ‘wise.’ For instance, when I tell people that I am an artist working with students who define themselves as ‘old,’ most people assume that our work together must be low key, social, and recreational.

The word ‘queer,’ on the other hand, has very different associations, including elements of danger and perversity. Even in Canada, where gay marriage is legal, the existence of people who are old and queer is not well acknowledged. Shari Brotman, Bill Ryan, and Robert Cormier (2003) have found homophobia to be rampant in senior residences and care facilities. At the same time, old people are often overlooked in the queer media, which tend to valorize youth and beauty. For instance, a recent copy of *Xtra West*, a national newspaper for the LGBT community, contained 181 photos of people, only eleven of whom were identifiably ‘old’ (Robson, 2007).

It seemed natural for me to begin working with people who defined as I did (as old and queer), and in 2007, I established a queer writing group, joining forces in this venture with the Generations Project, a program of Vancouver’s LGBT Center that serves the needs of older people. The writing group became popular and was quickly oversubscribed. Through a happy confluence of circumstances, it was ultimately adopted by the Vancouver Parks Board as part of a larger research project, the Arts Health and Seniors Project (AHS). The Parks Board now manages the project, and has acquired funding from a variety of agencies. I am writer-in-residence for the 18 member Quirk-e collective, which meets on a weekly basis at a senior center on the Eastside of Vancouver. Our choice of venue is deliberate and important, since, as Brotman et al. (2003) indicate, LGBT individuals have typically been rendered largely invisible in the context of community facilities. The group operates under my direction, with the coordinator of the Generations Project serving as both a full participant in the group and as its seniors’ worker.<sup>3</sup> A digital artist, skilled in new media technologies, also works with me in the project.

The Quirk-e collective has become quite visible in Vancouver and its members are much in demand at community events. “The showings and readings are great for showing LGBT seniors making art in the community” commented one member in his/her evaluation (Quirk-e, 2007a). We have received generous media coverage in *Xtra West* (Correia, 2007) for doing something to make older queers more visible in the local gay culture. Quirk-e members are proud that their work serves to increase public awareness of the concerns and experiences of older queers in this way and feel a strong sense of connection with the group. They socialize with each other, meeting to hike, write, go out to events, and help each other out with practical tasks like moving house. Quirk-e has had a profound positive impact on several members of the group who battle isolation and depression.

The members of Quirk-e engage in writing and imaging about their lives, and then decide, on an annual basis, what they want to perform from this work for the general public. They are quite committed to interrupting demeaning and hateful cultural narratives experienced by minority sexual subjects and like to live up to their name by presenting work that is funny, shocking, diverse, and unpredictable. In our last presentation, a theatrical show called *Outspoken* (June 2008), we presented solo, group, and choral work, including large ensemble choral pieces in which the group danced with umbrellas, sang of their fears about dying (“We’ll be eaten by cats!”), and performed a graphic choral poem about electric shock treatment (being reconsidered, at that time, as an acceptable ‘cure’ for homosexuality).

Foucault’s (2001) definition of parrhesia, or fearless speech, could almost serve as a mission statement for Quirk-e:

...a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to her/his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to herself/himself for other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. (p. 183)

As Sumara and Davis (1999) have also suggested, it is particularly important for those of us who identify as queer to rewrite heteronormative discourses by writing our own frank accounts that help us to represent and understand our experience. The following quotation, from Quirk-e’s recent print anthology speaks to this purpose: “Being old and being queer is not a single experience, to be expressed by a single voice. We are a discordant and unruly choir, insisting, despite the odds, on showing the height, depth and breadth of our experiences” (Quirk-e, 2007b, back cover).

Our first public show, *Transformations*, consisting of digital self-portraits and text, demonstrated this broad range of experiences. Some of the work we presented expressed grief at the loss of youth and easy physicality, while some of it embraced and celebrated the ageing process. Some of our members actually questioned the identification of ‘old,’ to suggest that it might be, at bottom, an empty signifier. An ex-nun celebrated her escape from the Catholic Church, while another woman presented herself as a turtle, still in the ‘shield’ of her shell. There were the traditional ‘coming out’ stories, but also represented was the woman who ‘came out’ as someone who survived through the practice of self-harm (‘A Coming Out of a Different Kind’). Another member of the group, who suffers from Multiple Sclerosis, chose to superimpose a scan of her plaque-affected brain upon the image of a lost glacier. This piece, called “My Global Warming,” brought the personal and the political together in work that was sad, but not self-indulgent—a vibrant, queer response to trauma as Cvetkovitch (2003, p. 7) puts it, rather than the “hushed tones of sympathy” (p. 4) she has observed in some feminist work on ‘victimhood’.

Bill, who is 74, decided that he wanted to show a nude self-portrait. Though the presentation of nudity is forbidden in Vancouver’s public spaces, we decided that we would simply ignore the possibility of censorship and go ahead and hang Bill’s work, along with the rest, at Vancouver’s Roundhouse Community Center. He found a classic baby-on-a-rug photograph of himself in an old album and then reconstructed the nude pose in the present moment—wrinkles, flab, and all. He imported both photographs into Adobe Photoshop and juxtaposed them in a single frame.

After a show at The University of British Columbia, a student (originally from Singapore, where she had rarely experienced queer culture) contacted me to discuss her response to Bill’s



piece and to ask if she could open up a dialogue with the group. Here is an extract from the term paper that resulted from Michelle's correspondences with Bill and myself:

I found myself slightly shocked yet highly curious. The naked 74-year-old man lying in a sensual pose on a blanket seized my attention and revealed preliminary responses of uneasiness when viewing such a daring and rarely seen image. I found myself taking a step backwards and asking the following questions: Why am I reacting this way? Who says the elderly cannot and should not be sexual? Why am I feeling slightly uncomfortable? What makes this image unusual or even socially taboo? (Keong, 2007, p. 1)

Over 300 students came through the show at UBC, and subsequently, we have established mutual mentoring with students, visited classes, and acquired a volunteer student intern—all as a direct result of this one show. Though we have applied for several grants to fund a sibling 'Quirk-e UBC' project, interestingly, none of our applications have been funded, at least, at the time of writing.

Though this socially significant work is often fun, rewarding, and empowering, I do not wish to suggest that it is always simple, comfortable, or easy. In fact, instead of offering the usual reassurances about 'safety' at the beginning of our sessions, I rather remind the group that making art can be risky. The first audience of any work of art is the artist herself, and it is she who may be most surprised by her own creation and who may have most to learn from it. With Butler (2001), I believe that there is "no account of oneself that does not, to some extent, conform to norms that govern the humanly recognizable" (p. 26). At the same time, our sense of self is, I believe, emergent, fluid, and distributed (Varela, 1999), and making art can be a useful way to construct and reconstruct identity. Grumet (1988) points out that radical works of art interrupt our customary responses, contradict our expectations, violate memories and displace recognition with estrangement. Jeanette Winterson (1995) puts it this way, "True art, when it happens to us, challenges the 'I' that we are" (p. 15).

Most of the members of Quirk-e will attest to having experienced this kind of challenge. Indeed, two or three members left at the end of the first year because they had expected, and wanted, to spend time socializing and sampling a range of handicrafts, rather than concentrating upon two media and the hard work of revision. It took them, the group, and myself some time to understand and process the fact that Quirk-e could not meet their needs. In a sense, the group engaged in 'revising' itself during this first year, clarifying its intention by striking a balance between the homogeneity that focuses the group's political and artistic purposes and the diversity that authentically reflects the realities of being old and queer (as opposed to accepted cultural stereotypes). This revision was extremely painful and troubling for everyone involved—a reminder that all identifications operate to exclude 'others' and are, in a sense, both artificial and traumatic.

Other members of Quirk-e have been resistant to the challenge of 'true art' (as defined above by Winterson (1995)) but have managed to surmount their anxiety. An example is provided by Gayle, a transsexual woman who wanted to represent, in our first show, her transition from male to female. Initially, she chose to do so by taking a picture of herself in her previous identification as a man (Michael) on his wedding day and setting it next to a current photograph of herself as a woman (Gayle). Gayle brought the work to me for feedback (though it was quite clear that she was very proud of it and considered it to be 'done'). When I asked her what she had intended the

piece to communicate, Gayle told me that she wanted to show how her female self had always been ‘inside’ Michael, and how, though she no longer identified as male, Michael was still part of her history and experience. When I suggested that her work did not yet communicate this, Gayle became very upset. She told me that she’d spent hours on this piece. In fact, she was sick of working on it. What the hell, she wanted to know, did she need to do to improve it? I let her know that I could not make her artistic decisions for her. It was up to her what she put in the show and up to her what she did with the piece. She could show the piece as it was, if she really wanted, but in my opinion, it did not yet reflect her intention.

The next week, Gayle came back to the group with a new idea, which had generated a series of technical questions. She had decided to morph the picture of Michael into the picture of Gayle much more gradually, using a series of shifting images. She worked with our digital artist for many hours to produce a more nuanced representation of her transition. In the final work, the picture of Michael fades and become smaller, as the picture of Gayle, (always latent in the picture of Michael) grows larger and more substantial. Eventually, Gayle’s image replaces Michael’s, though a tiny image of Michael still shimmers faintly in the region of Gayle’s heart.

Here’s what Gayle had to say in an email she sent me after the show, and in the artist’s notes that accompanied her work:

At times, I felt frustrated and a little annoyed...but I do think (my work) is much better now than it was...you never told me, ‘do this’ or ‘do that’ but I would go away and stew on things for awhile and new ideas would spring into my head. I must say all of this has been a very good learning exercise. (G. Roberts, personal communication, September, 2007)

Transition is a process of physical and emotional changes. Showing only two photographs... would capture some of the physical changes of the artist but not her emotional changes...That required presenting the two photographs... modified in ways that suggest the passage of time and, with it, the gradual emergence of the artist’s female gender identity that was present all her life. (G. Roberts, 2007, [Program Notes from Transition Show])

I believe that Gayle’s remarks go to the heart of the matter. In the process of stitching together her stories and exploring and exploding two photographs—one of her as Michael, a man on his wedding day, and one as Gayle, an out and proud transsexual woman—she has created new understanding and represented herself differently. This process, is of course, the process of revision, which implies, epistemologically speaking, both seeing, and then seeing again, differently. My role was firstly to ask Gayle to state her intentions as they formed in the process of making the art and then to challenge her to get the art closer to these intentions as they emerged. From a pedagogical perspective, technique was called forth by the desire to communicate these new understandings more exactly, so my final task, as teacher, was to ensure that Gayle was provided with the technical skills she needed to do what was necessary.

## Uncanny Encounters: Deborah P. Britzman

Lasch (1984, p. preface) prefaces *The Minimal Self* with the following quotation from Henry V: “He is as full of valor as of kindness, Princely in both.” Lasch’s choice of epigram suggests that he sees both strength and kindness as essential prerequisites of the “cultural revolution” and “reorientation of values” that he hopes for (Lasch, 1984, p. 253). Similarly, in her preface, Grumet (1988) also stresses the importance of human connection and relationship, suggesting that the “very ground of knowledge is love” (p. 8). This suggestion is examined more closely by Deborah Britzman in *Novel Education* (2006), where she argues that emotional life is the “grounds for thinking itself” (p. 66). Rather than framing knowledge as something that exists separately from the learner (a commodity that can be dished out in dittos by student teachers in nice suits), Britzman positions it as something inseparable from the tricky processes of the psyche and its individual history. She puts it this way: “Learning can be imagined as convening those elusive qualities of an *uncanny encounter* that compose the sublime” (p. 9, emphasis added).

Despite the skepticism Lasch has expressed about Freudian feminism, I feel that it may be the place for me to start to theorize some of my observations of what it’s like to write memoir. Pinar (1994) suggests that when we enter the past in the first stage of *currere*, we can only cast around for clues, free-associating in what he calls “an intensified engagement with daily life, not an ironic detachment from it” (p. 23). In this way, we explore the “biographic past,” which also exists in the present in a complex and contributive way (p. 22). Britzman (2006) warns us that in this emotional journey, there is no firm ground, rather, the unconscious rules through “its own unruly laws of primary processes: condensation, displacement, substitution, undoing, and reversals into opposites, all delightful deconstructions of symbolization” (p. 9). Through this kind of “aesthetic undertaking,” Britzman suggests “the world is transformed, conviction is made, affect is given free reign, and new realities are created” (p. 9).

As Marian taught me, back in Lesson Two, Britzman’s statement holds true for the aesthetic undertaking the writer enters into through her art, a lawless territory in which there are no rules, no boundaries, no right way to proceed. As we become our first audience and read what we have written, we receive a ‘novel education’—Britzman’s ‘uncanny encounter’ with self. We have tapped into things that we are not allowed to say or that we didn’t even know that we knew. Britzman (2006), Grumet (1988), and Salvio (2007) have all acknowledged the role of the subverted unconscious in this work and gestured towards aesthetic practices as a way of exploring the material uncovered there. Grumet has called this process *ruminare*—the practice of turning over what we have learned to find “glimpses of meaning” (p. 136). Just as the cow ruminates, using its extra stomach to turn over and digest what it has ingested, so the learner ingests and reflects upon experience. These ruminations, as Grumet points out, can then be re-symbolized in the highly creative form of a work of art.

### Some Preliminary Theories About Writing Processes

Although no road maps are available for this journey into the past, I do believe that there are certain helpful strategies that writers can use along the way. Firstly, it is important to have a sense of where to begin. Many of the writing exercises I use are calculated to help writers find key locations in their biographic past—places in time that serve as ‘hubs’ of feeling (to borrow a

term from network theory), packed with emotional content. Over the years, I have developed a knack for designing prompts that help writers to locate these hubs and then to unpack the material they contain (digging for diamonds). These prompts and exercises are designed, I have come to realize, to unsettle the writer, creating little cognitive breakdowns as Varela (1999) would say, openings through which new knowledge and insight may emerge.

Coming at things sideways is important—almost anything that distracts the writer from trying to go head to head with emotional content. These methods include paying close attention to imagery, imitating other styles, indulging in associative ‘leaps,’ juxtaposing random words or engaging in ‘free’ or automatic writing (in which the pen keeps moving on the page), and moving from one point of view, say first person, to another, such as the third, or changing tense (perhaps from the past to the immediate present). I am much taken with the notion of enabling restraints (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008) which translate, in the realm of creative writing, to form and genre. As the poet Ann Sexton once put it, “form [is] a cage, and if you [have] a good strong cage, you [can] let some really wild animals in it” (cited in Salvio, 2007, p. 97). Some of the members of Quirk-e had great success, for instance, with an exercise of mine that demands that writers use a noun and a verb (which I handed to them on a slip of paper) to complete a poem in exactly twenty minutes, using each word at least once. These were the only (proscriptive) rules; everything else was up for grabs. Though I gave some thought to the words I handed out, in terms of their symbolic power (‘bridge,’ ‘open,’ ‘convoy’), the proscriptions were, in a sense, unimportant, except in that they radically limited the time people could spend agonizing and prevaricating (the writer’s diseases) and provided constraints that offered a kind of freedom.

Recently, I’ve been reading Lodge (2002) and Zunshine (2006) who pick apart some of the ways in which writing can reflect the processes of consciousness. I find the notion of qualia to be useful. By representing the actual lived experiences of consciousness (for instance, “I tasted bile at the back of my throat”), we take the reader there and also take ourselves ‘back there’ to relive the experience and remember and feel more about what happened. I constantly encourage writers to show not tell—probably the most frequently used adage in writing circles, for excellent reasons.

### Conclusion: The Mechanical Bull

From Grumet (1998) and Britzman (2006), I have learned the importance of handing over to the unconscious. This includes, as I have said, paying close attention to imagery, particularly those images that drop at my feet ‘by chance’—those products of attention to intention that Dillard (1990, pp. 21–22) describes as “dropped pennies”—easy to walk by, but containing the potential for revelation. Just the other day, I was listening to a popular show on my car radio, when a phrase seemed to leap out at me, to stop me in my tracks: “She probably lost her virginity to a mechanical bull” (Leary & Johnson, 2007).

I paid attention.

From Bill Pinar (2004, 1994), I have learned the usefulness of theory, and I applied some: the misogynistic humour, the disregard for innocence, the reduction of sex to mechanical rapaciousness—these all could be said to represent those things that Lasch (1984) has so deplored about our culture, to sum up twentieth and twenty first century nihilism and heartlessness. When I Googled the origins of the phrase, I found it to be attributed to a fictional

character—a one year old called Stewie from the popular cartoon show, *Family Guy* (MacFarlane, 2007).

Stewie is the perfect poster child for narcissism—a product of the paternal project for the curriculum. He understands all things technological but is emotionally stunted. For instance, though he cleverly constructs devices such as fighter planes and mind-control devices, he uses them to seduce women and to murder his brother, his mother, and others (including Julie Andrews and Gay Pride marchers). He rationalizes his matricidal tendencies thusly: “It’s not so much that I want to kill her. It’s just I want her not to be alive anymore” (MacFarlane, 2007).

I was, of course, also reminded of Grumet’s (1988) very different use of bovine imagery to describe the process of becoming, in a sense, at one with the world by ingesting and transforming experiences into embodied knowledge. The use of this image in such divergent ways serves to illustrate, rather neatly, the huge chasm between the feminine longing for symbiosis and the masculine drive for absolute mastery and autonomy.

I shall leave you with a third bovine image—one that works to stitch back together, through the tale of an ‘uncanny encounter,’ some of the polarities that our society and our education system have constructed—‘male’ and ‘female,’ ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious,’ ‘human’ and ‘divine,’ ‘political’ and ‘artistic.’

In the ancient Greek legend, Europa walks with her maidens to collect flowers when she encounters Zeus, who has taken the form of a bull. Europa greets him fondly, strokes him, then climbs upon his back. Zeus carries her across the sea to Crete, where she becomes the first queen of that island. The etymology of Europa’s Greek name is εὐρυ- “wide” or “broad” + οπ- “eye(s)” or “face” (Kerenyi, 1951), suggesting intelligence and broad-mindedness, and also, I will suggest, a look of amazement. As Lasch would be interested to note, the result of Europa’s wild ride with the Escape Committee is positive political change and the establishment of a matriarchy.

I take great faith in our willingness to be surprised by the uncanny.

What’s that I hear you ask? Was not Europa raped by that bull? Only in the later, patriarchal Roman reinterpretation of the original story. Clearly, stitches have been dropped before in the long history of our species—unraveled, stitched up, and dropped again.

## NOTES

1. Dead to rights is a British term meaning to be caught in the act of committing an error or crime, red-handed. For example: *They caught the burglars dead to rights with the Oriental rugs.* This phrase uses *to rights* in the sense of “at once.” [Slang; mid-1800s] (Dictionary.com, n.d.)
2. The ‘o’ and ‘A’ level examinations (‘ordinary and advanced’) were British nationally administered public examinations required for college and university entrance under the old two tier education system, which segregated those students on track to higher education from those who were steered towards vocational training. In 1988, the system was phased out and replaced by examinations common to all students—the General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE).
3. Seniors’ workers are qualified individuals attached to the arts groups to monitor the emotional and physical health of the individuals in the group. Such a worker might also make recommendations to the artists around health issues, for instance, recommending text with larger font or regular movement for arthritic members.



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