WRITING AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM: FINDING THE COURAGE TO RESIST COMPLETION

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Dedication

This story is dedicated to my family. So much of who I am is because of the unfailing love and support from you.

To Mom and Dad: You have always been my biggest cheerleaders and gently taught me what it means to step into my own power.

To Dade: I see that power in you. You are my role model of strength and confidence. I would be lost if I didn't have you as my sister. Out of everyone, you understand me the best, and just knowing that keeps me grounded and present.

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Abstract

In 2011, after a serious health crisis, I took to expressive writing in my personal life as a means to navigate through my existential questions. The relationship I developed with writing from this personal practice became a counter-reality to what I was teaching in my classroom as a high school English teacher of 19 years. As a curriculum and assessment graduate student, this contradiction between lived curriculum and classroom curriculum stirred the impetus behind this research in which I ask, how does my engagement with writing uncover realities about what it means to be a writing teacher? Maxine Greene's (1967, 1973, 1978, 1988) existential theories of education provide a meaningful lens to examine the philosophical questions I have about writing instruction, writing assessment practices, and what it means to experience and teach writing as an existential project. Her application of such existential concepts of individual choice, freedom, responsibility, and using the "teacher as stranger" (1973) metaphor, are the fulcrum for the analysis of my practitioner inquiry, written as four autoethnographic narratives. These narratives at the heart of my research have critically interrogated my assumptions about writing pedagogy, and armed me with new knowledge on how to practice writing as an act of freedom in my classroom. Through this personal investigation, I hope to encourage other writing teachers in Alberta to examine their own assumptions, and open up their classrooms and writing pedagogy in order to push back against formulas in order to inspire real change.

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CHAPTER 1: Situating This Story

I applied to graduate school because I was fed up. I was at a place in my life and teaching career where I was exhausted and jaded, and this was *after* crawling my way out of a serious mental health crisis. I still wasn't fully on the other side of it. I looked towards the next 20+ years of my career knowing that I could not continue in the same way if I wanted to have meaning in my life. My enrollment in graduate studies has been in an effort to remain aware of what turned me towards the shadows. It was absolutely the right choice because, to put it mildly, graduate studies has been a second major pivot in my career's direction; the first pivot point was a rock bottom that almost killed me. Looking back over it all, I now can see that there was a slow and steady descent of my spirit: a simmering dissatisfaction born from a growing awareness of gaps, incongruencies, and unanswered critical questions between myself and my world.

This discomfort likely stems from a mixture of personality patterns and subconscious environmental and cultural messaging brought on by my upbringing. I grew up in a speck of a town in northwestern Alberta. It could be mistaken for a crumb on a map, prairie land daubed between the Rocky Mountains and the rolling forests of the Peace River valley. Whenever someone asks where I am from, I always mention a bigger town close by because no one has ever heard of the real place where I grew up. Brownvale is a hamlet laid out as a 4x4 grid of gravel streets and houses, 500 meters off of the highway. At the furthest corner of the town's entrance sat our home, cusped between two empty fields. Compared to the other modest, simple housing in town, our home looked like it didn't belong. The proud and wide, rust-coloured cedar bungalow was surrounded by green yards defined with lattice fencing. Four big windows at the top of a vaulted ceiling were the eyes that looked north to one of the empty lots that my dad used as his own personal golf driving range. Inside our home, the carpet was a rich wine shade for

most of my childhood, an emblem of the out-of-place decadence we lived in. My parents were not wealthy, but they took great care in building a sense of space that projected its own brazen self-confidence for my sisters and me to grow up in. I loved that house and I felt strong inside it.

Our house shared a street with a flaking, abandoned Presbyterian church that had a few rock-bullet holes in the windows. Everywhere you looked you met solitude and silence. When we were a little older, my sisters and I would sardonically describe our town's library as being the world's smallest; it was a simple a-framed structure, with a black roof and white siding. Actually, it looked a lot like an outhouse, but its size would equal maybe four outhouses squared up together. The nonbelievers would laugh at our reports, expecting our description to be a gross understatement. If they came to stay overnight at our place, we would drive by the library on the way to the house and point it out to them, otherwise they would miss it. If we lived there in the time of cell phones, they would have wanted to take a selfie in front of it because it was unbelievably cute. Nowadays, they have such mini libraries mounted on poles, sprinkled around contemporary suburban neighborhoods as community kitsch; our library defiantly stood as a landmark beside the town's only stop sign for many years.

Sunday dinners were at my maternal grandmother's (who also lived in Brownvale) where we would play hide-and-seek, fire engine, kick-the-can, and red rover until the youngest cousins always ruined the violent fun when they wanted to join in. Some of the greatest excitement came in telling stories of my grandmother's wily, black Labrador Retriever named Rookie who would repeatedly outsmart the municipal dogcatcher when he roamed around town. The traps became more and more elaborate, Rookie became more and more cunning, but the truth is probably that the stories just became more and more fantastical. I swear the library was real.

We had an elementary school in Brownvale that I attended for a while. I was in a grade 3/4/5/6 split class with my sister. I was in grade three, she was in grade six, and we had the same teacher. It was like the romantic, one-room schoolhouses from confederation, except this was in the 1980s. It eventually closed down after my grade three year because it was not economically prudent to operate such a small school when those 50 kids could be bussed to other towns. Because of this decision, my face made it into the regional newspaper; I was part of the choir of children performing at a "gala" evening designed to guilt the school division in keeping the school open. We sang, "We are the World." It didn't work.

These images of my childhood, the grandeur of my home in a tiny town, the space and silence and our feeble attempts at filling in that space, makes me wonder if we told those bloated fictions about Rookie to remind us that we were real, that we did exist there. With this urge to make ourselves interesting, it's no wonder that one of the most painful memories I have from my childhood was overhearing my mother angrily tell a friend that another woman described me as a "snot." I was seven years old. That character judgment paired with my childhood home imprinted me with the instinct to shrink. I *want* to embody what that house meant—projected self-confidence at the risk of not belonging—but it has been a struggle to accept that possibility for myself.

For me, shrinking meant following the wide way: it was a safe existence of duty and practicality, complete with the well-worn path of school, marriage, and kids. Choosing to become a high school English teacher was a responsible and easy choice. I like school, and I like to read and write.

The first eight years of my career ripped through my life like a fast and heavy train. Babies, compressed maternity leaves while my husband earned his teaching degree, the

unexpected death of my 34-year-old sister, my parents' divorce, working up to 60 hours a week as a full-time English teacher. My days were stuffed full with packing and unpacking bags, handing out and taking in paper, hauling heavy loads that eventually came up empty—all the energy that was never destroyed but also never seemed to transform into anything important. And I would do it all again next year. As I wade back through that sequence of events, it's no wonder I became deeply dissatisfied and exhausted. Coupled with Catholic womanhood—modeled by Mary's "yes" in quiet obedience and service—I was left with a life's ethos that made me unwell. Every day for nearly four years I woke up tired, bored, unfulfilled, and I knew it was *my fault* for not being happy with my blessings. I had no future vision for myself—who was I without my to-do lists? When I told my mother-in-law that I was considering graduate school, she said to me, "When your kids are grown up and gone, then you can follow your dreams." It's this kind of sensible and conventional narrative, and my own violet tendencies that I accepted for so long that made me almost completely dissolve.

While the bulk of my exhaustion and angst was due to my stressful job, I owe just as much anger to myself for accepting all of these messages without questioning them that deeply. When the common norms don't deliver on their promises of fulfillment—be they from community, church, or career—it's time to realize that this also comes from a passive compliance on my part. But like my childhood home in the hamlet I grew up, I felt like I didn't really belong in my own life. Too many times while I was sitting at the kitchen table and filling in my work plan for the next week to the rhythm of the bubbling on the stove, I would mumble a thoughtless, vicious mantra: *what do I have to do? What do I have to do?*

And this is where my writing story begins and what you'll see in my first narrative vignette: on the living room floor, numb and detached from myself. It marks the moment in time

when shrinking any further would mean death. It was the manifestation of Camus' (1955) diagnosis of desolation: the "[w]eariness [that] comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life" (p. 13).

However, in the same sentence, he also commented that this sense of weariness "inaugurates the impulse of consciousness" (Camus, 1955, p. 13). This offered a seed of hope, a "definitive awakening" (Camus, 1955, p. 13) that I have the choice of whether or not to continue the descent or to recover.

For me, this awakening took place when I started writing for myself, to remind myself that I am real, that I do exist, that I am a life of my own. This writing began first as a "recognition of an 'I'" (Greene, 1995, p. 106) and then became a project in making meaning. It was a major existential crisis that I took into my own hands and carried it through a pen to a notebook.

Once I began my own personal writing practice, the sense that something isn't *right* about how writing is practiced in schools has never quietened within me. The ultimate truth that my personal writing practice has taught me is that the space we inhabit is always moving and in flux, and that includes the space I occupy on the page. What is true of myself in my notebooks is also true in our taken-for-granted institutions: when we don't account for the temporality and individuality of the individual—whether it's writing, religion, or other social conventions—we are acting out of a sort of inhumanity. What I bring to the page isn't bound within traditional rules of expression; it is where I sift through my thoughts and feelings to listen closely to what my life needs. What it needed then was a new and spacious perspective about writing and who I am while writing, one that would permit me to learn from and within my current, personal circumstances.

The story of my writing journey is one of returning to health and to honesty, by exercising my voice and cultivating personal meaning through writing. It's just for me. Unfortunately, this is not how writing is treated in school. Too often my students' beliefs about writing, likely caused by how we teach writing in school, comes from the same damaging ideology that burned me out in the first place. I only have to read through former colleagues' instructional handouts on writing—the ones that live in our department's shared resources folder and confidently claim that students will learn the "formula" for a critical/analytical response essay—to stir up shame at how I also blindly followed other formulas for my own life until I was sick. The unrequited belief in universal, conventional rules of writing that my students crave, I can't, in good faith, "teach." In the one-on-one conversations I have with students, I recognize that we are harming them in a broader cultural sense when we treat writing as *only* utilitarian, *only* a step-by-step method to and an arrival at a confident end. How we live and how we teach may be one and the same. Framed this way, Grumet (1988) asks, "[i]f we accept the forms of our own lives, as given, how do we challenge or transform the questions at the end of the chapter, the organization of the textbook, the conventional territories and agendas of the disciplines?" (p. 87). Grumet's question echoes my own life situation: I lived a routine and unthinking existence, numbed by the "shoulds" and the "have-tos." It was not until I started writing and thinking for and with myself that I challenged the conventions of my life and of writing. If we do not encourage students to do the same with how we "school," they might end up tired, bored, and unfulfilled in their futures as well.

There is some serendipity with how things shifted in my life from where they were, to where I am now, writing this thesis. According to autoethnographer Muncey (2010), there "is no distinction between doing research and doing life" (p 3). In my darkest times, the life I

participated in (rather than live for myself) was all-consuming. The choice to bring in and listen to my own voice as I wrote in my journals was a conscious attempt to *live* my own life. Without knowing the name for it then, according to Muncey's description of autoethnographic research, I was essentially performing my own private autoethnographic inquiry. The repeated recording of my daily perceptions has been life-changing. By studying my own personal record, I have learned a lot about myself—my preferences and passions, minor neuroses, usual hang-ups—but the most profound lesson I have learned is how much life is transitory and full of choices. Because I have a physical record of my own data, I can revisit past experiences and perceptions and recognize how much I have changed over time, to see the ebbs and flows of life, and because I believe that nothing is permanent, I have a more comfortable connection with a research approach that is open-ended. Therefore, I come to this research with open-ended inquiry about what it means to write and to teach writing.

Having learned all that I have so far, it is clear to me now that living in integrity is a core value in my life. And for me, living in integrity is refusing to live life idly, passively, or without *real* or confident ownership of my choices. Therefore, to continue this open-ended, writerly, experiential inquiry, it's a natural move to ground myself in an educational philosophical orientation that frames my research: Greene's existential theories of education.

Greene's existential theories of education are well-suited for my inquiry because, by its very nature, philosophical existentialism asks questions about the choices we make in our lives, to what extent these choices are of our own free will, and how we struggle to create our own meaning. Much like the interweaving of my journal writing and my chosen methodology of autoethnography, framing my educational questions through these philosophical concepts

mirrors the very visceral, existential questions I asked about my own existence at the precipice of life or death.

When I think back to my really dark times, I think about the distinction between existence and essence, the two signet words of existential philosophy. While Sartre propounds that "existence precedes essence" (Crowell, 2012, p. 9), I only had one of those down. I was existing, but that's about it.

The word "essence" is an interesting one. Sartre's main argument (from an atheistic stance) is that there is no true, meaningful essence that humans are, or an external ideal to both strive toward and to embody. He argued there is no human nature stuffed with divinity to give it its meaning, as there is no human *nature*. Essence implies a substance of some kind; whether it's linked to a divine power or not doesn't really matter. When I was at a point in my existence where there was no substance at all, that is where I lived a half-priced motto of philosophical existentialism. I was just an existence, void of any personal sense of essence.

In the big story of my life, I could no longer rely on anything outside of myself to subscribe meaning and purpose in my life, because then it wasn't really *mine*. Receiving an endowed meaning and essence from a religion, career, or social role was still a reception of someone/thing else's meaning. It didn't add up to enough and that was my greatest mistake in trying to live a meaningful life. This is why existential philosophy means something to me. I was tired of feeling nothing, and I wanted to feel something. I wanted to feel like my life was mine and that it mattered to me.

Journal writing, then, became an exercise in recording my actions and choices and then unpacking them one by one. It was a creative act on both a micro and a macro scale. Word by word I wrote a story of and for myself, and by doing this I breathed *life* into my existence. I

endowed it with meaning simply by the careful attention I was giving it. And, by proxy, I did the same for my*self*. It was no revolutionary action, or upheaval, but a private, quiet, and dedicated routine. My interest in existentialism comes from my own crisis of purpose and meaning; it has to do with creating my life myself by acknowledging what I have control over which, in regards to my inner life, is actually quite a lot. This is a story about my growing sense of agency with and of my inner life.

By way of this introduction, I have already begun to tell this story. The sense of alienation that I described that characterized my lowest moments was an existential crisis: a panicky scanning of what I was doing with my life. Beginning to write for myself was what stirred questions about what I was doing at school, which then became the ultimate question for this research. This existential thread for this thesis has been weaving its way through my life for 10 years; this means reflecting on "who [I am] as a teacher, the choices [I] make as an educator, and the meaning that [I] find as a teacher" (Gutek, 2014, p. 105). As such, this project ventures to be an exercise in helping me reach some clarity about how I "ground [my] own values, [my] own conceptions of the good and the possible" (Greene, 1978, p. 47), and how my personal experiences with writing affect my encounters with my students. Greene encourages educators to "do philosophy," and "doing philosophy" as a teacher, according to Greene, is to become "the stranger who might question the structures that define the world" (Block, 1998, p. 25), most especially, those structures that are embedded in schooling.

My personal writing practice is focused on my daily living filled with insights and analysis about my beliefs and choices, in a "dialectic relation" (Greene, 1988, p. 67) with everything that surrounds me. By reflecting on my own experiences and how they are interconnected with others I am practicing my own qualitative inquiry. Good qualitative inquiry,

while focusing on particular lived experience, has the potential to speak to the broader human condition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). By interrogating how my values and beliefs about writing impact my teaching, I am investigating the very intersubjective nature of education. In the desire to live out the paradox of the personal universal, autoethnography as a research method and product is the natural follow-through for this research.

Ellis (2020) teaches us that "[a]utoethnographic approaches are flexible, reflexive, and reflective of life as lived; they do not follow a rigid list of rule-based procedures" (p. 6). As I wrestle with tensions between beliefs about writing and writing practice and the teachability of writing as an existential project, this speaks loudly to the major questions I intend to explore as well as the process which I undergo in this research: writing narrative vignettes about my lived experiences with writing while posing important questions about educational philosophy, curriculum, and assessment.

The characters that appear in these autoethnographic narratives (aside from myself) are purposefully minor ones, and despite the usual identity protection measures of pseudonyms and composite characters (Tullis, 2013), a benefit of autoethnography is also the "the circumstance that autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the 'auto (the self), the 'ethno' (the culture), and the 'graphy'" (Winkler, 2018, p. 244). Mainly, the other characters are present to provoke questions and sentiments about my journey with writing and teaching writing and what this has to say about our curriculum's (both mandated and cultural) treatment of writing. Inspired by the critical possibility of autoethnography (Holman-Jones, 2008), as I engage in the vulnerability around issues that are both political (educational constructs) and personal (autobiographical experience), I hope to touch something powerful: powerful enough to move my views of myself

and my own teaching practice towards freedom, and stir up even more critical questions and conversations about the taken-for-granted literacy models that we are used to.

In a way, writing this thesis will be an act of exorcism. The box I had put myself in, the comfort in staying on the sidelines and the aversion to standing out, is very similar to our common treatment of writing in school: keep it within lines and boxes and templates, lest the writing be unknowable, unpredictable, unacceptable. While my instinct to shrink makes me a little hesitant of sharing my story through personal narratives, it is the best choice for the questions I have, to move myself towards a future (both personally and in education) of my choosing.

I feel a kinship with Greene. She also took to writing to "name alternatives and to open [her]self to possibilities" (Greene, 1995, p. 107). In order to push back against the urge to shrink or dissolve, provoked by the will of Greene, in the potential that authoethnography affords, and within the desire to make meaning for myself (and therefore, my students), I write this thesis and these authethnographic narratives as my own "existential encounters" (Greene, 1967).

CHAPTER 2: Situating This Study

As intimated at the end of the previous chapter, Greene's work is the overarching touchstone with which this research takes its shape. Her theories of education are rooted in philosophical thought where individual meaning and becoming are in focus; this is the hallmark of existentialist thinking. When I unwrapped my motivation to start my personal writing practice (which then instigated discomfort with how writing was conceived in my classroom) I understood that, at its simplest, my writing pursuit was a search for meaning in my own life. This question of meaning then drew me to engage in existential thinking and curriculum inquiry in the same way.

Before getting to the specifics of this study, I would like you to think of this chapter as a funnel. Beginning at its broadest entry point, I will be outlining Greene's existential theories for education, specifically the major concepts and principles that will focus this research. Next, with those concepts in mind, I will situate my inquiry while I explore the history of writing studies and writer-teachers (specifically in how the individual is positioned within these areas). Finally, I'll move into the details of the research—the methodology and methods—where existential theories of education will justify my usage of narrative inquiry and autoethnography to illuminate my questions.

Existential Theories of Education and Maxine Greene

Unfortunately, I must preface this by stating that existential philosophy is very difficult to consolidate into a simplified list of qualities. The pioneers of the historical movement disagreed with each other a lot, some even rejecting the idea of being considered an existentialist. It is argued to have first begun as a school of thought with Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. However, the term "existentialism" did not occur until the French existentialists (thinkers such as

Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) took up their own theories and ideas inspired by German philosophy as an offshoot of Husserlian phenomenology (Bakewell, 2016). Greene (1967) distills existentialist thinking by characterizing those "who are concerned with authenticating themselves as persons, with acting in such a way (in their case, through writing) as to realize themselves. This is quite different from the communication of doctrine, from explaining how things *are*" (p. 6). This is the very nature of my research.

With that in mind, it is best to focus on how such questions of existentialism are seen through an educational lens. According to Gutek (2014)

> [a]n existentialist education involves examining and becoming conscious of how the forces in the situation in which we live often impose definitions on us rather than being our genuine choices. It seeks to enliven our consciousness that we are our own authors, our own creators, and that we write our own story by welcoming and not dodging the choices, though often difficult, that we find in our situations. (p. 123)

To put it even more simply, "the watchwords of existential thinking" could be understood as "[d]oing, acting, choosing" (Greene, 1967, p. 152). Doing, acting, and choosing are excellent watchwords for a teacher and how she inhabits the classroom space and works with students every day, and could be marker words to help refine the intentional choices she makes in regards to curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Greene's theories of existential education are challenging and rich ideas for which to approach curriculum inquiry, for in her writings are the many questions that get to the *why* we do what we do in our pedagogy, and puts full responsibility on the teacher's shoulders of who and what they embody in the classroom. Furthermore, we must recognize that these choices can also have an impact on the students in a teacher's care without ever being guaranteed a desired outcome. Greene charges that too often we become "[p]reoccupied with priorities, purposes,

programs of 'intended learning' and intended (or unintended) manipulation [that] we pay too little attention to the individual in quest of his own future" (2017, p. 147). As a teacher, it is my task to inspire students to explore and build their own self-awareness, and curriculum is a means by which to do so. If "consciousness…throws itself outward *towards* the world" (Greene, 2017, p. 150) then the objects, experiences, questions and conversations that are a part of a classroom's curriculum can help the student to recognize themselves as a "conscious object" and thereby the student can "reflect upon his relation to the world" (Greene, 2017, p. 150). In this constant recreation of understanding of self in relation to the world, the student creates their own meaning and identity. This is where real learning occurs—when the student can make personal connections to the curriculum so much so that they continually reorder and reshape their self-understanding and their relation to the world (Greene, 2017). If we perceive curriculum "as external to the search for meaning, it becomes an alien and an alienating edifice" (Greene, 2017, p. 153), which can have deleterious effects on student motivation, among other things.

Greene justified applying existential philosophy to education because "the concerns of teachers are as profound as any philosopher's concerns could be. They have to do with good and bad, with freedom, equality, and justice and all these things" (Greene et al., 1998, p. 30). Concepts such as freedom, equality, and justice spur weighty, existential questions and these are present in the day-to-day classroom. In Greene's (1967) book *Existential Encounters for Teachers*, she provides selections from various existential philosophers' texts as reflective inspiration for teachers "who [know they] must make it possible for [their] students to create meanings" (p. 3). If teachers are charged with the task of educating students to "make their own ways as persons" then the teacher is "bound to be drawn to some existential mode of thinking" (Greene, 1967, p. 4). While the philosophers she included did not necessarily concern themselves

with the idiosyncratic details of school, the education they are asking questions about are "multiple modes of becoming, of confronting life situations, of engaging with others, of reflecting, forming, choosing, struggling to be" (Greene, 1967, p. 4). Not only is this an excellent description of my own personal writing practice, it is an excellent description of my vision for writing for my students.

Having said that, what I must emphasize at this point is that this thesis is mainly focused on my choices, both the personal choices around writing and the professional choices of writing instruction. Of course, since education is both profoundly individual and communal, there will certainly be reflection involving the impact these choices have on students. In other words, the personal "quest" for meaning Greene heralds can be seen both with how I experience writing and how I might be inspired to help my students in their own becoming.

How this paradox is experienced (of education being individual and communal) is also present in looking at existentialism at its simplest: while existentialists are deeply interested in the individual, and how that individual creates meaning in their own life, Greene (1988) also acknowledges that we enact our individuality in context, which undeniably involves other people and institutions. In other words, existentialist themes as they may be realized in a classroom have to do with striving for personal meaning making and becoming critically aware of how our contexts impact our personal choices. This is true both for the students and the teacher. Greene adopted the phrase "doing philosophy" from Sartre, and for her, this meant that an existentialist education was a mode of living, rather than abstract reasoning through some disembodied philosophical principles. Doing existential philosophy as a teacher means adopting a "life of reflectiveness and care" (Greene, 1978, p. 152), persistently confronting all the choices I inhabit in and out of the classroom and what this says about creating meaning in my life. In regards to

this research about my personal relationship with writing and how this impacts how I teach writing, I'm approaching "the quest for a personal truth by asking questions that concern life's meaning" both my own and "to create...the learning [situations] in which students can express their subjectivity" (Gutek, 2014, p. 133). Ultimately, because my personal relationship with writing began from questions about my own existence (which the next chapter will address) and because this then shifted how I wanted to present writing to students, the ultimate questions of this research are deeply existential in nature.

As a high school English teacher researching what it means to write and to teach writing, what is especially salient about Greene's practice was her embracing literature and storytelling as another means of "doing philosophy." Aside from studying some didactic philosophical texts, in her own pedagogy she included fictional texts just as worthy of study for stirring philosophical questions. Because my own experience with taking up writing as a personal project was a quest for meaning, I am adopting the same philosophy as Greene by writing through my own experiences. Much like teachers are thrust into existential moments in their daily lived experiences with students and their lives, stories provide similar grounded and contextual lived experience. It does not matter whether these narratives are fictitious or not; we are drawn into the questions and tensions these characters experience in their lives to then, perhaps, make us question our own, as the perpetual stranger.

Greene was also a strong advocate for the role of aesthetic experience in education as an avenue or open space to not only stir the imagination but to open up our own meaning. As defined by Greene (2001), aesthetic education is purposefully designed experiences "to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what is there to be noticed" (p. 6) in order "to feel more, to sense more, to be more

consciously in the world" (p. 10). By providing encounters with the arts for students, regardless of subject discipline, their sensibilities of meaning move beyond the cognitive domain and involve their whole selves: emotional (embodied) responses and development of the imagination. In her book *Releasing the Imagination*, Greene's (1995) essays center around aesthetic encounters where because these more ephemeral sensibilities are stirred in perceiving artistic works, the ability to think of other possibilities and see beyond the givens in the social context we are a part of is the fundamental launch pad for social change.

As an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, I can readily see how this is realized in my classroom, especially in the ways we interact with literary works. Greene (1978) noted that studying literature was an "alternative to fixity" (p. 34) because the relationship with a text opens up possibilities not only with our self-perception (how we see ourselves in the work) but as "the gaining of multiple perspectives" (Greene, 1995, p. 96). Much like Greene's practice of including literary works as texts for philosophical study, by studying the written word as an art form and writing personal responses about what these big ideas mean in their lives, my students are also "doing philosophy."

Her passionate promotion of aesthetic education for curriculum inquiry also has connections in *currere* as a way to reconceive curriculum. *Currere* as conceptualized by Pinar (1994) is an autobiographically reflective method of curriculum inquiry. It involves an educator's awareness of their personal educational history as a way to attend to curriculum research. Because this research is ultimately asking questions about meaning and considering writing as an existential project, my focus will be around Greene's body of work that applies existential questions and what these have to do with my pedagogical choices and personal life choices. Furthermore, Pinar's *currere* methods are a particular four-step process and are too

broad in historical scope for the aims of this thesis and my particular research questions. While I could find logical pathways to include Greene's promotion of aesthetic education and Pinar's reconceptualization of curriculum as *currere*, in the interest of keeping this thesis under manageable parameters, I will be bracketing out these areas of Greene's influence.

With these overarching explanations of existential thinking and Greene's application of it to education, it is important to delineate some specific concepts that will be the basis of this research.

Consciousness and the Teacher as Stranger

The idea of estrangement as a hallmark of the human condition is central to existential philosophy. Questions of "being" and our unique perception of our own beingness separate us from other living creatures (Cooper, 2012). This consciousness of the self and of "existence in relation to the order of things" (Cooper, 2012, p. 29) stirs a recognition that we, as a species, are alone in this awareness. Furthermore, as discussed in the opening chapter, according to existentialism, it is not by a fixed nature or essence that we come to this awareness either; it is by "the choices [we] have made, [and] the ways in which [we] have tried to resolve the 'issue'" that our lives present us (Cooper, 2021, p. 35) where we further stoke our responsibility in the evaluation of our own lives.

Greene's 1973 book entitled *Teacher as Stranger* serves as a helpful metaphor for the underlying premise of this entire inquiry and speaks to this sense of estrangement in my own life, especially at school. The teacher-as-stranger means that the teacher, adopting an existential philosophical stance, looks at their participation in their school experience as though they were coming home as a stranger: a participant observer somewhat distanced from the structures they are a part of, in order to adopt a critical consciousness of these structures. A teacher's "'habits of

mind' must be such that he is alert to the models and paradigms affecting his vision" (Greene, 1973, p. 80). These "models and paradigms" can include anything from curriculum (both the legal document and the cultural ambiance of public school), instructional choices, student grouping, resource use, assessment and grading practices, to even the micro details of the way the desks are arranged in a classroom, specific procedures for lunch breaks and/or recess, and the common vernacular promoted via school administration and teacher colleagues. While this heightened alertness may feel overwhelming or disorienting, it is a necessary step to inhabit a critical consciousness of the pedagogical choices we make every day. The intent is not to have teachers fall into despair or anarchy; rather, that the teacher "struggle[s] against unthinking submergence in the social reality that prevails" (Greene, 1973, p. 269).

Therefore, it is to be expected that each of the narratives in this inquiry will explicitly explore this sense of estrangement, most especially in how my writing experiences in my personal life are at odds with the experience we (myself included) uphold in school. This focus on my agency within writing instruction highlights another significant attribute of existential educational philosophy.

Choice, Freedom, and Responsibility

Even when a teacher begins to look at their classroom experience from the position of a "stranger," it is the teacher's "obligation to choose and to act, even in the face of uncertainty" (Greene, 1973, p. 86). We cannot remain at a distance in our place of observation. Despite our embeddedness in cultural and societal constructs like schooling, we still have individual questions and choices within this so-called "facticity," those details in our lives that we have no control over, such as our time and place of birth, race, and other features of our environment. What we do, then, is "transcend [our] own facticity" (Greene, 1967, p. 112) by the choices we

make. Transcendence, in the existential philosophical sense, does not mean a solving or total ignorance of such immovable factors in our identities socially contextual or otherwise, but rather it is through the desire and action in challenging determinism, even by exercising simple hope, where we surpass ourselves. Wherever and whomever we are, "[t]here is always more. There is always possibility. And this is where the space opens for the pursuit of freedom" (Greene, 1988, p. 128). As an example, the students that appear on my class lists every year, the program of studies with explicit learning objectives linked to standardized assessments, and the distinct amount of days and hours set aside with each group of students are a part of my facticity, but how we work together in the classroom is how we may transcend such contingent attributes of the schooling experience.

What complicates our understanding of choice and freedom with this in mind (especially when thinking of the particular context of a classroom) is how much the teacher's choices "are contingent in many ways on the social order" (Greene, 1967, p. 42). Freedom is not a limitless void, but a contextual ground "achieved [only] in an ongoing transaction" (Greene, 1988, p. 83), or what Greene calls the dialectic of freedom. Freedom is achieved via our choices *within* our contingencies, and as such, by exercising our free will we actively create our identity. Who we are (our authenticity) is how we stand in our everyday choices and take responsibility for ourselves within this social matrix. Greene (1988) explains that "[w]e might think of freedom as an opening of spaces as well as perspectives, with everything depending on the actions we undertake in the course of our quest, the *praxis* we learn to devise" (p. 5). This is why adopting the stance of a "stranger" is so important. Not critically thinking about our pedagogy and mindlessly conforming to (and adopting the values of) those systems in place is not exercising

our freedom. Stepping back and looking at the mechanism and our energy within it keeps us awake.

Ultimately, this means that achieving our freedom comes with moral responsibility. The ethical quality of existential philosophy is what draws me to it as a way of life and of teaching. In order to live authentically, my goal is to enact my freedom by acting and choosing within my context in order to reach toward the vision of who I want to be. In other words, one way to conceive of embodying existential philosophy into my life is knowing that "the roots of moral choosing lie at the core of a person's conception of herself or himself and the equally important fact that choosing involves action as well as thought" (Greene, 1978, p. 48). It always has to be acted upon, and this means that it is a never-ending process. Ironically, the word "achievement" (for the understanding of achieving authenticity and achieving freedom) implies arriving at an end, but as this is a "dialectic" (Greene, 1988) life I am living, it is an ongoing quest not only for myself, but in knowing that "my freedom is enhanced, not diminished, when I work to expand the freedom of others" (Flynn, 2006, p. 79). Therefore, in striving towards my own freedom, I am recognizing that this is also the possibility for my students.

While teachers are consistently challenging their own pedagogy, they are providing opportunities for their students to adopt a stranger stance for their own lives as well. While contemplating their own freedom—how we choose, act, and "interpret and evaluate the world" (Cooper, 2012, p. 30) —a "good teacher becomes an occasion for permitting a child to decide consciously on [their own] freedom and becoming" (Greene, 1967, p. 72). To teach for freedom means to provide those open spaces in the classroom for the students to become aware of their own individual perspective, expression, and choices in interaction with "the prescribed structures of knowledge" (Greene, 2017, p. 157) of specific disciplines and curricular objectives.

Existential Projects

A way for both teachers and students to enact their freedom is to conceive of their life work as projects. It is through our chosen projects where we work and create meaning in our lives. Greene said that, according to Sartre, to "do philosophy" is "to develop a fundamental project, to go beyond the situations one confronts and refuse reality as given in the name of a reality to be produced" (1973, p. 7). Projects, in the existential sense, are to be understood through the concept of transcendence: how my choices and actions, or "mode of engaged agency" (Crowell, 2020) take on meaning and, therefore, reveal who I am. Furthermore, my agency is always in process and in interaction with my context.

It is through our projects (I like to think of them as a life's theme) where we define ourselves. To specify more to my situation, English teachers can utilize text (whether by reading, viewing, or creating them) as a way to "align [them]selves with [their] students' existential quests to understand and construct a meaningful life, a life full of meaning" (Graham, 1998, p. 217). What are we talking about, thinking about, and writing about when we encounter text, and what does this mean to me, personally?

This is why I conceive of my personal writing, how I teach writing, and this research as an existential project. By participating in self-study, I am becoming a "stranger" to my values, beliefs, writing and teaching practice, and how these overlap and inform each other. Particularly, writing as an existential project is a commitment I have made to work through these questions about writing and teaching writing *through* writing. Furthermore, I hold responsibility for the future choices I make about writing instruction. As "the 'author' of the situation" (Greene, 1973, p. 280) in which I live, through my actions (my project) I give meaning to my world.

This also helps to conceive of what the "self" means to an existentialist; the "self emerges in projects, in undertakings; it does not preexist" (Greene, 1973, p. 255). Therefore, the self is a continually evolving process, rather than a fixed entity, and it is in the concept of the self where I now turn to draw out an explanation of how the field of writing studies has considered the self when it comes to writing.

Historical Context of Composition Studies/Writing Pedagogy

In order to interrogate my pedagogical choices as a writing instructor, it was important that I developed an understanding of the features and philosophical underpinnings of writing pedagogy. In this section I will be outlining the historical development of the scholarly field of composition/writing studies which began in the early 1960s (Babin & Harrison, 1999). As with any field, it is important to acknowledge that like any subject/discipline viewed within a pedagogical context, the discourse community's epistemological and ontological position impacts how it is conceived and dealt with in instructional conditions. For the purposes of this thesis and in using Greene's existential theories of education, I will be conceptualizing writing studies—from the current-traditionalist movement, the process movement, critical writing pedagogy, and postprocess theories—in terms of how these movements frame the "self" in writing as this distinction is imperative to my story and research methodology.

Theoretically, the scholarly field of writing studies took off at around the same time as a marked paradigm shift in writing pedagogy. The Dartmouth Seminar of 1966 (hosted by the Modern Language Association, The National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Association for the Teaching of English) involved approximately 50 teachers of literature, composition, language and speech. Representatives from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom gathered to discuss what was to be done about perceived serious problems in

how English as a subject was being taught in schools. The successive publishing of the landmark text *Growth Through English* by John Dixon (1967) served as a "record" of these problems that, arguably, were a result of disunity from three overarching approaches to the English classroom as either focusing on skills, "cultural heritage," or personal growth (p. 1-2). In his work, John Dixon championed the *Personal Growth Model* of English education as "the interplay between [the student's] personal world and the world of the writer" (p. 3). In other words, the English teacher must know their students as individuals and in this attention to the student's world and the school subject, they must "bring the two into a fruitful relationship" (Dixon, 1967, p. 3).

I bring attention to the specific phrasing Dixon used here to illustrate the clear distinction between the cultural heritage and skill-based model of teaching English and Dixon's "personal growth model"; it indicated an invitation to step away from what some composition theorists label the "current-traditionalist" (predominantly skill-based) movement and step into the modern conception of the literacy experience. Rather than a personally removed study of literature, this new direction calls for the students to explore their own lives with the similar rich insight they use to study fictional characters in their literary study.

The movement often referred to as "Current-Traditionalist" (Babin & Harrison, 1999) as prior to this paradigm shift is a skill-based approach to writing that takes a rhetorical, often disciplinary/genre-based focus in writing instruction. Not only does it focus on correctness in written expression, it posits that particular disciplines and discourse communities have their own accepted genres, and that, especially while we prepare students for the "world of work," disciplinary writing, or mastering particular forms and genres, is the ultimate goal of this writing pedagogy. In its current conception, Covino (2001) argues that in this style of writing instruction, attention is paid to the "rhetorical moment," and the writer focuses on the relationship between

the audience, the reality, and the writer. This sort of writing pedagogy encourages "writing that is *not restricted to self-expression* [emphasis added]" (Covino, 2001, p. 37).

Most of the criticism of the current-traditional/rhetorical mode of writing instruction has to do with the treatment of the role of the writer—the "self" involved in the writing. This separation of the self from our writing borders on what Jasper Neel (1988) calls 'psophistry.' In psophistry "writing becomes antiwriting, a sort of physical regimen focused on spelling, grammar, punctuation, and patterns of organization. Here, one teaches writing as a way of disciplining thought's house, making it neat and correct" (Neel, 1988, p. 97). In this type of writing instruction, the teacher conceives of thought as an external entity that is for the writer to control via language. There is no involvement of the writer's "self"; the writer, with language as her tool, is absent from the final product made for the audience for a particular context.

Despite Greene's criticism that this approach would be an "alienating" conception of curriculum (2017, p. 153), there is appeal in subscribing to this style of writing instruction. By keeping the "self" out of the picture, attention can be devoted to the "known" details of effective writing: structure, flow, impeccable grammar and spelling. However, as Kamler (2001) conceives rhetorical or genre-based writing instruction, this is a reductionist, even desensitizing conception of writing in that "predictable descriptions of genre very easily become prescriptive and work to endorse the official discourses of schooling without questioning them" (p. 94).

If we are to focus on any form of expression, including an involvement of a self, let alone writing, it might be helpful to frame the discussion with thoughts from composition theorist Hillocks Jr. (1995). He contends that individuals are an integration of their "beliefs, memories, motives, and aspirations" (p. 23) and that since these elements shift frequently over time, the conception of the integrated and invented self in writing certainly complicates the idea that

writing has known forms. However, as education became more student-centered and individualized, and as teachers became less of an authority in the classroom and more of a facilitator, more attention was being paid to individual student experiences as a rich field to explore when teaching students to write. This is a clear pivot point to Dixon's (1967) personal growth model as this model urged educators to "reexamine the learning processes and the meaning to the individual of what he is doing in English lessons" (p. 2). With the focus turning to more student-centered learning, the discourse around writing instruction had a major shift away from the skill-based model and the focus on writing as a product to the conception of writing as a process. Adopting a workshop approach to written texts, classrooms opened up the possibility that writers write in community, and that writing is a socio-cultural activity. The process movement (Atwell, 1987; Bishop, 2004; Elbow, 2000; Murray, 1985) can be conceived as having three major arms: cognitive, expressive, and social.

In viewing writing through a cognitive process theory, the research around the "self" centers on the cognitive activities that writers perform while they are writing and thereby views writing as a problem-solving, goal-oriented pursuit. Flower and Hayes (1981) developed a cognitive process model that demonstrated that the "composing process was hierarchical, goal-directed, and recursive" (Babin & Harrison, 1999, p. 156). While the magnifying lens is turned towards the individual student's "self" in the cognitive process, writing is still perceived as an object or product that is created, as a means to an end, rather than an activity that is a means in itself.

The expressivist arm of the process writing movement encourages writing instruction that involves students using writing as a space to explore their thoughts and feelings, and to discover their personal "voice." The potential for self-discovery in expressivist writing pedagogy is a huge

selling point for those writing teachers that would subscribe to the *Personal Growth Model* promoted by John Dixon.

However, a critique of expressivist, process writing is that instructors are encouraging students to write "sentimental realism" as "a corrupt, if not extraordinarily tempting genre" (Bartholomae, 1995, p. 71): a self-absorbed, unrealistic approach to not only writing, but to life itself. On the other hand, we can also conceive of expressivist writing instruction as a welcoming space to inspire change from that possible self-discovery (Burnham, 2001). As autobiographical writers would defend, "[r]ather than a 'primal whine,' expressive discourse traces a path away from solipsism toward accommodation with the world and thus accomplishes purposeful action" (Burnham, 2001, p. 25). Autobiographical writing—writing about the self—allows an acknowledgement of an "I," and by such, writers may be empowered to act in the world (Burnham, 2001). In this way, expressive writing aligns with existential philosophy in its focus on individual choice and taking action.

Expressivist pedagogy also has links to socioconstructivist approaches to writing. Social expressivism is a mediation between the scandalized, "narcissistic" perception of expressivism and the critical cause to help students enact social change. Social expressivism is "the expressive concern to potentiate self-aware individuals as agents" (Burnham, 2001, p. 29).

The socioconstructivist approach to instruction views meaning-making as a negotiated activity between individuals and their culture for a more intersubjective view of the self (Englert et al., 2006). In this instructional process "the heart of writing development is the dialogue in which teachers and students collaborate, inform, question, think aloud, self-correct, challenge, and construct meaning together" (Englert et al., 2006, p. 211). Like the other arms of the process movement, the socioconstructivist approach finds fault with current-traditionalist/rhetorical

writing instruction as its structural view of formalized genres often does not make writing a personally meaningful experience for students (Boscolo, 2009).

Critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005; George, 2001; Kamler, 2001) finds pathways in the process movement through social epistemic approaches to writing which implies "political awareness and concern for social reform" (Babin & Harrison, 1999, p. 242). When we think of the "self" in a writing situation, critical writing pedagogy has a much more complicated understanding of writing in contrast with the current-traditionalist/rhetorical mode. Critical writing pedagogy, of course, finds many problems with a current-traditionalist/rhetorical approach to writing pedagogy, arguing that by teaching particular genres we are substantiating already existing hegemonic forms, perpetuating the dominant discourse as dominant. These forms are accepted and stable, and by teaching these forms we may only be serving to grant students access to this hegemonic status. It offers little opportunity for students to write and learn from their own personal experiences, most especially for those voices in the margins. However, without access we "perpetuate [students'] marginalisation in a society that continues to recognize the value and importance of these forms" (Janks, 2000, p. 176). A critical writing teacher is tasked with addressing the interconnectedness of dominant forms and access (among others) in order to open up their writing instruction for all students (Janks, 2000). What of the individual student's sense of self? George (2001) argues that because "language and thought are inextricably linked, [writing] instruction becomes a key site where dominant ideology is reproduced—or disrupted" (p. 94). The promising nature of critical pedagogy in writing instruction is demonstrated in "the relationship between reflection and action [in] what Freire refers to as 'praxis,' and it is essential for Freire: neither critical consciousness nor unreflective action alone will enable people to transform the world" (George, 2001, p. 94). In other words, it

is not enough to awaken students' critical consciousness through reflective writing, but that this writing should inspire students to actively make change *because* of this learning through written reflection. When Greene spoke of the existentialists, she focused on their very role as writers "who are concerned with presenting the personal responses to their own consciousness of existing. They are concerned with authenticating themselves as persons, with acting in such a way (in their case, through writing) as to realize themselves" (Greene, 1967, p. 6). An individual cannot act or exercise agency, in good faith, on what is not acknowledged.

However, there are issues within this mission to champion students' voices in writing. Kamler (2001) suggests it is, perhaps, a naive mission for transformative education for it risks reinculcating the dominant discourses embedded in students' personal stories. If we encourage students to write about their own personal experiences "in the presence of others—including teachers—[it] can be not only voyeuristic but dangerous, a form of surveillance to see if students produce the right voice" (Kamler, 2001, p. 41). She argues for a safer approach, "a notion of transformation that is more modest, more semiotic, more textual—and for a critical pedagogy that creates distance, a theorised space to analyze texts of personal experience as discursively produced and therefore changeable" (Kamler, 2001, p. 36). Kamler's suggested approach to the "self" in critical writing pedagogy appears to be a sort of "middle way." While recognizing that "all writing is personal" in that we are "gendered, classed, racialized and sexed" beings (Kamler, 2001, p. 83), she also suggests that we only recognize these realities at the linguistic level and not identify it as reflective of a student's "essence." Having students perceive writing as merely "self-discovery" in the psychological sense means that their personal narratives become more textbook than mutable fiction, and therefore, much less likely to inspire change. That is, when we ask students to write their personal stories, we should also ask them to hold this writing at a

distance, so that the analysis of their language choices are not conflated with their identity, or "voice."

This infirm view of the self shifted the discourse about writing again. Just like the process writing pedagogies' deep criticism of its predecessor (current-traditionalist, rhetorical understanding of writing instruction), the conversation that followed in writing studies is lumped together as "postprocess" theories. Those involved in this conversation (Dobrin, 2011; Kastman Breuch, 2002; Kent, 1989a, 1989b, 1999) are looking back at process pedagogies with their own judgments, "[endorsing] the fundamental idea that no codifiable or *generalizable* writing process exists or could exist" (Kent, 1999, p. 1). Influenced by postmodern thinking and poststructuralist theories, they have much to critique about the construct of the unified self presented in writing which both current-traditionalist and process writing pedagogy are guilty of upholding. The "self" in poststructural theories is seen as a non-unified, non-stable being, one that is not only multifaceted but is also incomplete and consistently a "disintegrating play of selves" (Sarup, 1989, p. 59). Even if a writing teacher employs the less product-focused expressivist writing pedagogy, they may still be offering a stable self that can be discovered or mined for in writing. Because poststructural theories sought to dissolve the concepts of "self" and "presence," the chase for finding a stable "self" (or a stable anything) in writing is impossible. It's the fruitless search for something to hold onto when all you have is a shadow of endless signifiers. Accepting that "the space called 'self' [is] continuous play" presents a problem when applying it to writing contexts: "the recursive, unfinished, unclear, unsatisfactory, frustrating process of writing describes everything, that would like to present itself as prior to and manipulative of writing—everything including 'us'" (Neel, 1988, p. 123). The current-traditionalist and process-based approaches to writing instruction involve the impulse to objectify and structure thinking (even

the self) in writing, and at the very least, this makes writing "teachable." For postprocess compositional theorists, the idea that writing is an activity rather than a body of knowledge, that it is a dialogic, communicative interaction actually makes it "unteachable" because all writing is situated, interpretive, and indeterminate (Kastman Breuch, 2002).

Tobin (2001) acknowledges that these theoretical arguments are difficult to reconcile in the reality of the classroom because the problem with theories that are anti-foundational in nature is that they are very difficult to transfer to any pedagogical context. While theories of authorship and voice may be steeped in naive positivist notions of self, it may still be necessary in pedagogical situations. He argues that "it may be enormously useful for a student writer...to believe at certain moments and stages of the process that she actually has agency, authority, an authentic voice, and a unified self" (p. 15). To existentialists, the individual self "is always in process, but in process between possibility and necessity" (Greene, 1967, p. 102). What Greene suggests here is that knowing we are always in process, the "self" that we write from is based on the necessity of the present moment and is filled with the unrealized "not yet."

Be that as it may, there are some theorists who are attempting to marry the tensions that exist between postprocess composition theories and its application in pedagogy. By calling on the human gift of imagination—as in the suspension of necessitating a stable, objective, concrete anything in order to advance writing education—it might be more useful and, paradoxically, realistic to accept a sort of "fantastical" notion of the self and human agency, so that teachers and students, in a postprocess era, will still be able to engage in composition. Allen (2018) proposes that "[f]or our disciplinary purposes,...there is no *composing* in a world without creative capacity, without a feeling of agency, without something like faith in our selves" (p. 185), even as we practice skepticism about the integrity of those selves.

This echoes Tobin's (2001) reticence with a full acceptance of poststructural theories of composition in a classroom setting. In order for writing teachers and students to engage in fruitful inquiry, we may need to engage in accepting "self" and "agency" in writing as an ethical process for progress. This will likely involve an acceptance of knowledge, writing, and the self in writing as fluid and never full in essence. If we cannot resolve our multifaceted, ever-evolving selves with a tool (language) that never adequately or truthfully "represents" us, we must settle for the best we can do.

Over a span of 60 years, the discourse community of composition studies has shifted the conversation of the nature of knowledge and the concept of the "self" in writing, and this has certainly complicated the instructional efforts of writing teachers. It would be easier, certainly, to adopt the philosophical premise underneath one "movement" and use it as a foundation for all writing instruction in the classroom, but this is not only naive, it is unfair as we set ourselves up for inevitable cognitive dissonance (for both teachers and students alike) when life reveals its many exceptions that are incompatible with one adopted writing philosophy.

Writer-Teachers Teaching Writing

A more specific angle within composition studies that I situate my research in involves studies that explore teachers' writing identities: how the personal writing practices of teachers impact their pedagogical approach to writing in the classroom. With a specific focus on teacher individuality—existential concepts of choice, freedom, and authenticity—this next section outlines poignant studies in writer-teacher activities.

Leaders of the field of writer-teachers such as Donald Murray (1985), Nancie Atwell (1987), Wendy Bishop (1999), Peter Elbow (2000), Donald H. Graves (1983), and Anne E. Whitney (2008, 2009) stand as teachers of writing that write along with their students in order to

gain insight of the writing process on a personal level. Such convictions have launched enterprises such as the National Writing Project (NWP), founded in 1974: a national network of educators in 175 sites, to "advance writing and the teaching of writing" (NWP, 2021). The common sense follows that those teachers who write will then know better how to teach writing. Literacy teachers' reading lives have received a lot more attention in the research than teachers' writing lives, most especially when it comes to the personal writing lives of teachers and how those experiences have any bearing in the classroom.

In a study of seven secondary teachers by Gleeson and Prain (1996), only four of these teachers self-titled themselves as writers, while the other three did not. Gleeson and Prain clarified their definition of "teacher writers" as those teachers that engaged in writing outside of class time. While colleagues and students alike lauded the teachers in their study as excellent writing instructors, these teachers varied considerably in their understanding of how their own writing impacted their writing instruction in the classroom. For example, one writing teacher believed that modelling writing was an effective instructional strategy while another teacher was more compelled to target writing instruction specifically to individual student needs. According to Gleeson and Prain, there was "no consistent pattern in terms of practices and success that differentiated writers and non-writers in their teaching of writing" (p. 48). Furthermore, the philosophical positions of these participating teachers (in regards to how they view writing as a construct) was not provided.

Robbins' (1996) study of 12 high school English teachers and their approaches to writing instruction challenged the necessity that writing teachers be writers themselves. He argues that behind this presumptive advice is an implied "acceptance of a constructivist view of composing, the broader philosophical beliefs of process-based instruction, and a progressive view of

education" (p. 126). That is, in adopting this principle of writing instruction, we are asking teachers to embrace a profound philosophical disposition which could prove especially daunting if a teacher did not align themselves with what this implies. If we are to adopt Greene's teacher-as-stranger stance, this would prove to be problematic as encouraging one particular philosophical position would thwart a teacher's authenticity. Unsurprisingly, the teachers in Robbins' study had a range of viewpoints and relationships with writing and writing instruction, and these approaches were intimately tied with their personal writing experiences and training. Therefore, a "one-way fits all" pedagogical wisdom for writing is not as practical as once believed.

Similar to the stated goals of the NWP, Cremin (2006) conducted a two-year research project aimed at developing participating teachers' and their students' creativity in writing. Furthermore, it sought to follow the possible correlation between a teacher-writer's progress and their effectiveness at teaching writing. The main takeaway the teachers had through their experience was the heavy emotional discomfort they had while writing. Seeing first-hand that the writing process was unpredictable and fluid while adopting a writer-teacher identity had transformed their teaching practice to involve "more sensitive and empathetic support" for their students struggling through the writing process (Cremin, 2006, p. 428). What this work accomplished, then, is the participating teachers were able to approach their classroom writing instruction, to see anew from a "stranger" position to test their theories about writing. Whether or not this had profound changes to their relationship with writing or in their personal writing practice in the long-term was not discussed.

From a Canadian, elementary school context, Yeo (2007) conducted a study that explored how teachers conceived of literacy and how their personal and historical contexts had shaped

these conceptualisations. Yeo had found, overwhelmingly, that these literacy teachers had grown up as passionate readers, but are "not writers in the same way" (p. 119). Simply put, their conception of literacy equated to reading, and this is evident in their personal histories as well. In terms of their views of composition, their perceptions around writing were focused on "*school*-literacy and *classroom* composition" (p. 125), rather than any other social factors (like their childhood home environment did with reading) that may have influenced their understanding of writing. Only one participant in this study had a personal writing practice outside of the school environment, and arguably had, according to the researcher, a more robust (i.e., complex and varied) teaching practice when it came to writing. Unfortunately, there was no deliberate delineation as to how this teacher's writing instruction was more "robust" than the other participants in the study.

Brooks (2007) conducted a case study of grade four teachers that emphasized the impact of teachers' self-assessment of their identity as readers and writers and how this self-assessment had an impact on how they taught their students to read and write. Not surprisingly, each of the teachers in the study had a very different perception of their own reading and writing identities. What is interesting about this study is the amount of questions Brooks asked about the "kind" of readers and writers that these teachers are supposed to be for their students, much like the proverbial assumption that those who can, teach. Mainly, the teachers in the case study accepted that whatever their students needed to become better writers and readers superseded any personal efforts at their own reading or writing, and that they believed that their non-school related participation in reading and writing had little to no bearing on their effectiveness as literacy teachers. In other words, the personal projects that they may have been a part of outside of the

classroom that are laterally connected to their instructional choices did not inform their teaching projects.

At this point, the discussion of teachers' personal writing identities was rather superficial. Cremin and Baker's (2010) study opened up a more complex discussion about how teacher writer identities are formed; rather than it being a self-proclaimed role outside of the classroom, Cremin and Baker examined how *in the act* of writing in front of students, this impacted how they saw themselves as writers. For this study they followed two teachers who positioned themselves as writers in the classroom, while they modelled writing with their students. The researchers found that writing in the classroom in front of students "was a site of struggle for the practitioners as they performed and enacted shifting identities" (p. 19) and this shifting occurred between various interpersonal, institutional and intrapersonal aspects that were often in conflict with each other. As a result of their research, and the complexity behind a writing teacher's teacher-writer identity, Cremin and Baker (2010) suggested that more writing teachers need to reflect on and consider the multiple influences on their writing identities and how, through their classroom dialogue and behaviour, they are, consciously or unconsciously, positioning their students as writers. The observation of teacher-writers in this study (and in most of Cremin and Baker's work) concentrates on teachers' *performative* positioning, and that the writer-teacher persona they adopt and enact in the classroom "can be both limiting and helpful" (p. 51).

McCarthy et al. (2014) built on previous research that focused on the tensions writer-teachers have when their personal and philosophical viewpoints about writing are contradicted by curriculum mandates and standardized testing. Their study sought to understand how teachers negotiate these conflicting roles when conducting writing instruction. What they found was that of the 20 teachers they studied, the majority of them utilized a combination of writing discourses,

although mostly via process and genre approaches. Ultimately, what did have an influence on how these teachers negotiated these varying writing discourses in the classroom was based on what curriculum was adopted by their school district and/or the professional development opportunities they had access to. The researchers concluded that "[t]eachers need opportunities to delve deeply into discussions about...comprehensive writing pedagogy,...including understanding the discourses endorsed by the official curriculum" (McCarthy et al., 2014, p. 86). This is part of the work of this very thesis, encouraged by Greene's admonition to remain "alert to the models and paradigms affecting [my] vision" (1973, p. 80) about writing and writing instruction.

Cremin and Baker (2014) revisited the data set of their 2010 study, and focused on a single teacher and the discursive, multimodal nature of her writer-teacher/teacher-writer identity. Like the other studies, this focused on a teacher that demonstrated and modelled writing along with her students, and the teacher's shifting identity positions through this process. This complex undertaking rests on Graves' (1983) assertion that "the teaching of writing demands the control of two crafts, teaching and writing" (p. 5). Cremin and Baker contend that this examination of teacher identity switching during writing instruction is a fruitful method to understand their negotiation of the multiple expectations and identities they bear. They conclude that teachers' writing identities are "a complex mixture of individual agency and external pressure" (p. 340) and to what degree teachers feel they are making autonomous choices.

Whitney's (2008) research with the NWP offers some insight into the transformative nature that writing intensives (as professional development) have on writing teachers. Whitney noted that many teachers who participated in the summer writing institutes put on by the NWP stated that the experience "transformed" them. To question exactly what this transformation

meant, Whitney studied seven teachers from one NWP Summer Institute. Whitney (2008) argued that these teacher transformations were "changes...about ways of knowing and seeing [more] than about enacting new courses of action" (p. 175), or what Whitney succinctly described as "reframing" (164).

Not surprisingly, the findings conducted on teachers' relationships with writing and its influence on their teaching of writing is as varied and individual as the teachers themselves. All of the studies examined provide snapshots of groups or individual teachers involved in teaching writing, however, with very little detail of how their personal (outside of the classroom) experiences with writing have impacted their philosophical stance on writing. While Whitney's (2008) study involved insight into the stances of individual teachers and how writing experiences can impact teachers beyond the classroom and into their personal lives, she admits that more research needs to be taken with "a broad view of professional development and includes the teacher as person in its vision of the professional teacher" (p. 178). In other words, we need to ask what writing means for these teachers in their own lives, and not necessarily tied to the classroom, as classroom practice "is not in and of itself a sufficient criterion for deciding whether transformation has taken place" (p. 179). There needs to be much more examination about the tensions that exist in a teacher's individual, philosophical beliefs about writing and how these impact the institutional context they are a part of. The research reviewed involves studying teachers negotiating their identities as they write, but does not offer the positioning of teachers teaching writing in the classroom for aesthetic, non-teleological ends.

Woodard (2015) explores this reality, and argues that teaching—most specifically teaching writing—is a dialogic practice. Teachers bring much more than their postsecondary teacher "training" into their classroom as they "live their identities and practices across times and

spaces" (p. 37) and must negotiate this complex cultural network every day, in every lesson, and in every assessment task.

Furthermore, the "writer-teacher" persona that is communicated in the literature (and what was hinted at by Whitney) is still tied to curriculum objectives and product-oriented writing. Whitney (2009) addresses this issue in arguing against a distinction between "personal writing" and "professional writing." Critics of the NWP question its relevance, arguing that the process relies too heavily on "introspection and unfocused reflection on matters ranging far beyond the classroom by engaging teachers in writing about themselves and their backgrounds rather than direct examination of classroom practice" (p. 239). Repeatedly, the members of this discourse (writer-teacher identity impacting writing practices and instruction) made note that little research has been completed in this area (Cremin & Oliver, 2017). What I hope to contribute to this burgeoning area of study is an insider perspective: a rich investigation of the philosophical grounding of a writing teacher and how this influences my life *and* my classroom instruction, for a broader understanding of the construct.

By following the thread through my personal relationship with writing as the impetus for this thesis, I am answering Woodard's (2015) appeal for "increasing metacognition about [my] own textual practices including identifying [my] actions, naming them, and attempting to unpack the multiple practices embedded in them" (p. 56). This begins with how my beliefs have been shaped by my own writing and teaching experiences, with the hope that I may contribute to filling in the gaps in this discourse.

Research Problem

As a high school English teacher, baffled by also being a "writing teacher," I have tried to piece together what epistemological and theoretical standpoint of writing pedagogy I embody

and where I "fit" with other theories about writing that are communicated in curriculum and assessment practices. Because I did not give much attention to writing in my undergraduate degree (beyond the reading-heavy focus of my BA as an English major), I believe I have been fumbling through writing instruction my entire career, relying on other teachers' practices, curriculum objectives, and standardized testing to shape the construct for me. When I began my own writing practice and adopted the term "writer" for myself, I compounded my own confusion. What has been made abundantly clear throughout my exploration is that having a foot in all of these camps, and then trying to communicate to students what writing *is*, makes for a very confusing discussion. I know that on many occasions I have sent mixed messages to my students about the life-enriching potential that writing has, all the while preparing them for standardized exams that are an extremely narrow representation of disciplinary/genre-based writing. It is by confronting these tensions about my own philosophical notions of writing and writing instruction that I may offer a more ethical process and understanding for myself and my students. According to the discourse community around writer-teacher identity and writing instruction (Cremin & Baker, 2010, 2014; Cremin & Locke, 2017; Whitney, 2008, 2009; Woodard, 2015), the personal relationship a writing teacher has with writing is underrepresented in the research.

Pelias (2005) states that "[e]very time a paper is graded, an article for a journal is reviewed, or a scholarly essay is written, scholars are reflecting and affirming what they value" (p. 417) and this awareness troubles me. The multiple ways I present and treat student writing in the classroom is communicating *my* values about writing, and often, I *know* I'm sending contradictory or mixed messages. Frankly, this raises ethical concerns. For example, I wanted to expand my students' notions of writing by instituting and practicing expressive writing with

them, and yet we also spend a significant amount of the time we have together "training" for an instrumentalized interpretation of writing that is found on their final, standardized exam.

Becoming familiar with the history of writing studies helped me in knowing where common trends or fads in writing instruction come from, and this clarified some of my own writing values. However, this knowledge still does not validate the in-the-moment decisions I have to make when it involves students' writing (and my reaction to it), nor did it provide a satisfactory explanation as to what was really underneath my choice to include expressivist writing practices in my classroom.

My approach to my research problem, as true to my typical life projects, was to write about it. By doing this, while I focused on specific, poignant moments in my understanding of writing, I stepped "in the middle" of the research process, and as such, Greene's theoretical framing took shape after I wrote. It may be blasphemous to state emphatically that this is the last chapter of my thesis that I have finalized, because as the writing of this thesis unfolded, it became clear that the methodology of narrative inquiry and analysis are not linear; rather, it illustrates the circuitous nature of writing (more specifically autoethnography) and the considerable reflexivity that it requires.

This expanding fog reveals the current tenuous and paradoxical speculation I have of writing. I can accept that the act of writing is both self-discovery and self-creation, and the reason I can come to this position is by reading my own writing, looking backwards on my thinking, and seeing the impermanence of everything. Pinar (1994) writes that autobiographical writing "is the task of self formation, deformation, learning, and unlearning" (p. 220); as such, the "data creation" was all of the above, and is also reflected in the research problem, methodology, and methods.

In this thesis, and in adopting Greene's existential theories of education, by nature of my research questions and chosen methodology and methods, the separation between the "I" and the subject matter of the research (both myself and writing) is not possible, and therefore, the story that is unfolding here is also stamped with my interpretation (Freeman, 2007). In teasing out this convoluted tangle of self and writing, I hoped to develop a clearer framework of the writing construct and allow this to shape my treatment of it in my classroom and the ethical imperative that exists there. Therefore, this thesis is a series of confrontations with the many questions that have challenged me as I tell the story of my growing relationship with the act of writing and its meaning in my life, and how this is (currently) positioning me as a writing teacher.

Research Questions

The central question that my thesis asks is: *How does my engagement with writing as an existential project uncover realities about what it means to be a writing teacher?*

Within that central question comes other questions I have about writing and writing instruction:

- How do my beliefs and personal experiences while writing position me as a writing teacher?
- What curriculum and assessment theories and structures have influenced my conception of writing, both personally and professionally?
- In what ways does my relationship with writing reveal an interplay between a personal writing identity and a professional writing (teacher) identity?

While exploring these questions, this thesis has three major aims:

- to examine and interrogate my personal and pedagogical relationship with writing
- to examine how this relationship with writing has inspired me to effect change (and subsequently increase tensions) about the construct of writing in my classroom

- to further inquire about writing *through* writing. The process of writing this thesis is forcing me to not only examine writing at a distance, but also as a lived experience and mode of inquiry.

Telling this story of my shifting relationship with writing in my personal and professional life has deeply challenged how I treat the construct —how it is presented and perceived in the classroom—and how this has shaped my pedagogical practice.

Foundational Theories and Theoretical Framework

After conceptualizing the historical framework of writing pedagogy and examining the research of writing teachers teaching writing, I offer the following helpful theoretical concepts that led me to adopting Greene's existential theories of education as my theoretical framework.

Yagelski (2011) posits that "writing is an ontological act" (p. ix), a phenomenological practice of learning how to be in the world. Drawing on Freire's (2005) critical theory and Kent's (1989a; 1989b) paralogic rhetoric, he argues that how we traditionally teach writing in school contributes to a problematic view of the self: one that is disconnected, fragmented, and consumerist. To embrace an ontological theory of writing is to conceive of writing that is more present-awareness focused, not product-based, that which establishes *connection* not only amongst academic disciplines, but in and between human beings and their world.

Yagelski (2011) further concludes that all schooling (and virtually all composition theories) are based on a Cartesian view of humankind, as "dualistic [beings] in the world" (p. 3). Many composition theories (as outlined earlier) have epistemological positions that purport knowledge as portable and separate from the self:

> ...the mainstream Cartesian view of writing reduces writing to a skill (albeit an extremely useful one) and ultimately distances the act of writing from living in all its complexity. This mainstream obsession with the text separates writing from *being*. It compartmentalizes writing and limits it to an activity in the service of learning or

> communicating; as a result, we treat writing only as a communicative or cognitive tool...(p. 144)

Similar to Yagelski promoting a more inquiry-focused approach to writing instruction—"learning *from* writing rather than learning *to* write" (p. 145)—I drew from another social constructivist theory: Richardson and St. Pierre's (2018) theory of writing as a method of inquiry. If I am to conceive of my journal writing as a process by which I am "becoming," then this thesis further adopts this mode of inquiry as research. By writing and investigating personal narratives, I use writing as a method of inquiry for the development of an ethical self, inspired to "[engage] in social action and social reform" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018, p. 818). To some extent I expanded my journaling practice in this thesis by writing as a means to explore my relationship with writing, while further questioning how this relationship has been brought to life in my classroom.

It would be accurate to say that my personal journaling practice over the last 10 years has been very much a practice of Yagelski's ontological theory of writing and Richardson's writing as a method of inquiry. Both are modes of in-the-moment exploration, attempts to understand and see ourselves reflexively in a specific context in a specific time. Furthermore, by participating in this for 10 years, and in making it a predictable activity in my classroom I am promoting a "regular practice of writing *as a practice*" in order to "foster a more conscious awareness-of-the-self-writing" (Yagelski, 2011, p. 119). This sustained writing practice has helped to shape my sense of self "as a being-in-the-world" (Yagelski, 2011, p. 120) and I hope my students foster this same sensibility.

The theoretical standing that brought me to this thesis was practitioner-driven, rather than composition theorist-driven, based entirely on a posteriori knowledge. However, like Yagelski states, "practice is always theory-driven" (p. 97). Analyzing my personal and classroom writing

experiences with the social constructivist theories of Yagelski and Richardson and St. Pierre could potentially open up understanding of what writing is to other teachers and students, perhaps even to re-examine taken-for-granted curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Furthermore, it moves beyond the "technicalities" of the career and inspires broader philosophical questions about the purpose of education, how knowledge is constructed, and how these contribute to teachers' and students' wellbeing.

These broad philosophical questions brought me to adopting Greene's existentialist theories of education for this research as, ultimately, I am exploring in what ways writing (and teaching, and teaching writing) is action inspired by a search for meaning. By bringing existential questions to my own personal and professional writing experiences I am engaging in curriculum inquiry that puts me in the position of a "teacher as stranger" (Greene, 1973), investigating my classroom choices and the multiple forces that shape them.

Justifying Narrative Inquiry, Practitioner Research, and Autoethnography

Because this thesis is essentially the story of my shifting relationship with writing, it so follows that I am approaching this research problem through narrative inquiry. Concisely stated by Clandinin et al. (2007), "[t]o use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study" (p. 477). The phenomenon I am investigating is how my relationship with writing has impacted my life as a writing teacher which is representative of narrative inquiry, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000): "[n]arrative inquiry characteristically begins with the researcher's autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the *research puzzle*" (p. 41).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that narrative inquiry always begins with an autobiographical framing, occupying a three-dimensional space: temporality, sociality, and

place. In Chapter 1, I explored the dimension of temporality in my explanation of my shifting relationship of writing over a span of approximately 10 years. Like my personal writing practice has taught me, this thesis is exploring a "right now" positioning and understanding of writing and writing pedagogy. The dimension of sociality involves my particular attention to my interactions with my "self" as discovered through writing, in the classroom (both as a graduate student and as a teacher), and a researcher.

Narrative inquiry, born from the theoretical nature of literature and storytelling, is qualitative research that focuses on the particular, in a certain moment of time. As practitioner inquiry specifically engaging in self-study, the hopeful outcome of this inquiry was to arrive at a deeper understanding of the self that writes, what it means to "teach" writing, how these inform each other, and how this puzzle interacts with the institution of school and the greater community.

I instituted daily life writing into my classroom because of my own beliefs about writing in my personal life. Naive, perhaps, because I never really questioned whether this was a "should." I admit now that I did not think very critically about what I was doing. I developed my own life writing practice and it became a reassuring mode to understand the world. This sort of writing helped stabilize a confusing and difficult time in my life and stirred the question, overall, what writing was. What was the purpose of writing? How is it different from the writing that I "teach" in my classroom? Am I being fair to my students if I am not introducing this other conceptualisation of writing to them? Personally, I was expanding my own understanding of writing and its role in life, but pedagogically the practice of writing was shriveled to scores and standardized tests. Brookfield (2017) states that my rationale functioned as a "pedagogic gyroscope," something that stabilized me when I "felt swept along by forces [I] can't control"

(p. 122). Since beginning graduate school, I have been compelled to ask these larger critical questions which serve as the basis of this inquiry.

Positioning myself as a practitioner-researcher, my seemingly small questions about writing pedagogy (and the many external factors that contributed to my exploration) are actually part of the fabric of much bigger questions about the aims and ends of education. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) state that "[a]t the heart of practitioner inquiry, is problematizing the ends question" (p. 9). The sorts of ends questions that I am problematizing involve the manner in which writing is conceived in curriculum and assessment frameworks, the messy encounters of a writing teacher being a writer, and the extent to which a teacher brings in their personal experience into the classroom as its own educative material.

Teachers' stories are a rich source of insight (Clandinin et al., 2007) into these questions and my storytelling and analysis may inspire other teachers to ask these critical questions about their own pedagogical choices. The taken-for-granted assumption that teachers who write outside of school will have a better sense of how to teach writing is a grand narrative that has been accepted by literacy teachers for quite some time. Graduate studies has pushed me to interrogate my programming choices. Especially since my personal writing practice was such a juxtaposing experience to how writing was conceived in my classroom, I was intrigued to take a closer look. Therefore, my "desire to engage in an autoethnography derives from the disjunctions that occur between [my] own experience and the official narratives set out to explain it" (Muncey, 2010, p. 10).

To sum up my whole research process from question to method, I borrow these words from Mitchell et al. (2005):

> Self-study is a powerful tool for uncovering and discovering one's underlying values and the manner in which actions and beliefs intertwine. This form of critical reflection has

> been used almost exclusively by practitioners who study their own practice through the lens of their personal beliefs and values by adopting a form of autobiography or autoethnography with the intention of aligning their practice more closely with their values. (p. 166)

Exploring this relationship with writing through a series of narrative vignettes would best illustrate the depth of these professional questions. Establishing this process as autoethnography is a natural progression when employing narrative inquiry, to examine the particular person in a culture: the story of a teacher who writes, whose understanding of writing changes, and who brings this experience into the classroom (which is frequently a site of tension between curriculum and lived experience). In autoethnography, I am the site of inquiry which will likely reveal that the separation between a personal life and a pedagogical one is based on a false dichotomy.

Autoethnography is a rich exploratory method that ranges (stylistically) from aesthetic and evocative prose (Ellis, 2004) to more traditional ethnographic analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006). In order to properly pursue the philosophical and pedagogical questions that are vexing me, I am choosing a method that mirrors the style of my personal writing practice: documenting the events of my days and reading them for what they offer in understanding my "self" in a social context, for "[a]utoethnography manifests, in process and on the page, a writer's reflective practice" (Colyar, 2013, p. 374). I seek to establish a middle-ground between the dichotomized poles of evocative and analytic autoethnography (Stahlke Wall, 2016). This middle positioning in autoethnographic research methods also reflects the social implications of bringing this sort of writing into the classroom. This story won't just be a rebellious tale about my expansive understanding of writing and my work in the classroom. I need to include an evocative, personal history of how I came to this writing practice to acknowledge the non-teaching forces in my life that brought me here. Furthermore, this speaks to the broader,

existential questions of the blurry line between a teacher's professional life and their personal life. What (if at all) boundary exists to keep the teacher from bringing their "self" into the classroom? In writing the autoethnographic vignettes, I explore my personal, practical knowledge as a teacher.

A gift that performative writing (evocative autoethnography) can grant is the recognition that this is a snapshot "seen as a geographical marker, a 'here' rather than a 'self'" (Pelias, 2005, p. 419). As such, it points outward. I imagine that many fellow high school English teachers, especially those that identify themselves as "writers" are struck by the nauseating tensions that the pressure towards a paradigm of the technical "training" of writing infuses. While I am sure that I won't be the only person to engage in a self-study about this teacher-writer-teacher identity, I expect that I will be asking the questions and addressing the issues that connect with other writer teachers.

This is why narrative inquiry is essential and germane to the intent of this thesis. "Narratives...give us understandings of people in a way that more 'objective' methodologies cannot" (Freeman, 2007, p. 134). If I were to set "writing" as a conceptually concretized object outside of the self, the exploration of the dialogical nature of writing—that it is both a method of discovery and creation of a "self"—would not be possible. The interwoven relationship that writing and I have can only be told within a narrative epistemology and its concern for lived experience.

Methods

While spending months researching the field of writing (composition) studies and the discourse community of writing teachers, I began my research by creating field notes. These came in two forms: (1) notebooks that included direct quotations from the theoretical material I

was reading, interspersed with questions and insights to how my reading related to my research questions, and (2) an ongoing, digital journal that provided more detailed reflections, voiced in the same style as my regular, personal journals, which acted as a conversation with myself and my research process. Both served as a record of my ongoing questions and developing understanding. Furthermore, because the ongoing digital journal had the same "style" as my personal journals, the reflections became highly emotional at times. This proved to be helpful in not only the early drafts of the narrative vignettes, but were recordings of the *process* of writing-as-inquiry as a mode of research.

After writing my thesis proposal and presenting at my colloquium, challenged by my thesis committee to explicitly ground myself in my experience, I began creating minor, piecemeal drafts of personal narratives that I believed were poignant moments of my confrontations from various writerly roles, both personally and as a writer-teacher and teacher of writing. These involved moments from different social positions: nascent expressive writer, high school English teacher, provincial assessment marker, research subject (investigated for my writing pedagogy) and graduate student. While the narrative of myself as a research subject provided interesting angles of how I understood writing through the eyes of another researcher, precisely because it was another's interpretation of me as a writing teacher and was not from my own vantage point of myself, I chose not to include it as part of my data. Each of the other four social positions offered something distinct not only in the chronology of my own lived experience, but in the different challenges that my own writing values presented to my expanding notion of the writing construct.

Once these drafts were comfortably "complete," I read them repeatedly and recognized that all four narratives revealed cognitive dissonances and subsequent frustration about writing.

For each narrative vignette I posed these questions: (1) What values and beliefs about writing are present? and (2) What "other" is present, and how does this space of questioning/interaction speak to my values and beliefs about writing?

While each of the narratives revealed different insights to these questions, the tension present in the narratives and the underlying motivation of this thesis (the whole premise of studying writing) both expose a search for meaning. It was then that I decided that Greene's (1973) application of philosophical existentialism for education as a type of curriculum inquiry would be an effective and fertile investigation for my research questions. Her propositional metaphor of the teacher-as-stranger, and the existential concepts of teacher and student choice, freedom, responsibility, consciousness and projects not only are a fruitful lens by which to analyze the narrative vignettes, they clarified the two questions to provide a more purposeful and sharper focus with which to respond. Finally, they also serve as a thoughtful backstage to this whole thesis.

The analysis for each autoethnographic vignette became what Denzin (2013) labelled "interpretive autoethnography." In the writing of the vignettes and in their analysis, "[i]nterpretive researchers [attempt] to secure self and personal experience stories that deal with events—mundane and remarkable—that have effects at the deep level of a person's life" (Denzin, 2013, p. 130). When other people are present in a narrative, most members were able to read through the narrative and give feedback and permission to be presented as it was written. In the case when members could not give such permission (as in the narrative in Chapter 4 that involves "Ryan"), a composite character was utilized, the name was altered, as were some of the other contextual details of the story in order to protect anonymity.

After my first full thesis draft, I revisited the narrative vignettes again to examine "to what extent my personal [stories enable] me and the readers to understand culture" (Winkler, 2018, p. 237). Therefore, in my analysis, I explored the social implications in and of these findings. These included teacher identity and professionalism, classroom dynamics, and the role of curriculum and schools in teaching for freedom. It's important to remember that "autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self. Thus, self is a subject to look into and a lens to look through to gain an understanding of a societal culture" (Chang, 2008, p. 49). The understanding of an individual as a socially-integrated being is essential to this thesis if it is to contribute any valuable understanding to the discourse.

However, this brings me back to the troubling puzzle that I started with: "even in autobiographical narrative, the narrator is a position, an angle of vision and not simply the [person] confessing his or her authentic feelings or truths" (Kamler, 2001, p. 144). The process of writing these autobiographical narratives, and the entanglement of the outsider and the insider of research—and by very nature of the complex, iterative, creative nature of writing itself—means that as they were written, they are not a "recording" of my experiences; they are an interpretation of those experiences, presented to you as an uncomfortable wrangling of word choices.

I approached the data collection and analysis for this thesis in the same manner as I have with my personal writing practice—writing about moments and events that have caused me to pause, that I find salient and full of possibility for exploring my questions, with the wisdom that hindsight affords, seeking how the interpretation of these moments have impacted my personal and professional identity and what these stories communicate about school culture, and the larger

social dynamics beyond. It may be possible to extrapolate that how we treat writing is a reflection of how we view individuals, schooling and society as a whole.

Going Forward

> Composition theorist Hillocks Jr. (1995) states:
>
> Every teacher of writing has a set of theories that provide a coherent view of the field and means of approaching the task of teaching...the assumptions we make and the theories we hold have a powerful effect on what and how we teach. (pp. 26-28)

If I am to honestly assess my "view of the field," I have to confess that I came to a personal, expressivist writing practice (journaling) to open an intimate dialogue with myself that just thinking or speaking would not allow me to do. Writing helped me catch and record some glimpses of my subjective experiences, and it was mainly in *the record of this process* that has shifted my thinking about writing, about who/what the "self" is when given a pen and a notebook, and how these two concepts may not be separate things. The 25 filled notebooks that I have are an emblem of a "self's" past, present and future: an artifact of time past, from a voice in the present tense, looking towards the future. If I accept that "[s]elf is a process, not a structure" I also want my students, as young as they are, to conceive of themselves in "the process of becoming...always in motion" (Muncey, 2010, p. 23).

When we view the construct of writing as an activity, we bear witness to a frustrating and illuminating macrocosm of the concepts of the self. I have tried to shift the conversation about writing in my classroom after experiencing how "morning pages" (Cameron, 1992) and journaling provided some clarity and wisdom in my personal life. If we conceive of writing as always a work in progress, perhaps students could see their efforts in learning (and themselves) in the same light. Furthermore, the very nature of hindsight—that we are always better and wiser

when we look back from a position of having learned—speaks to a more gentle pedagogy when it comes to "teaching" writing.

I assume that there are other writing teachers who are equally as baffled as I am at the question, "What/who am I as a writer?" Most curriculum and assessment interpretations of writing are a simulacrum of the complex construct that it is (because our conceptions of writing *are* so intimately tied with our conceptions of the self, and of knowledge in general). Teaching certain writing forms for certain scores and tying these to certain disciplines serves to dissect and reify not only writing—a very *human* activity—but the students themselves, as they are deterred from claiming writing as something as essential to them as breathing, imagining, or questioning. Students begin to associate with the scores and skills ("I only got an 85%. What did I do wrong?") as identity markers ("I'm not a good writer."). Every year I teach, my heart breaks a little more at how we deaden the life of writing mainly because of particular curriculum viewpoints and assessment frameworks that we are pressured to follow in the classroom, when it is often *through* student writing that the inescapable humanity of the job is brought to bear. It is in these moments, when my sense of "self" is further ruptured, and my consciousness is awakened, struggling how to formulate my response, do I acknowledge that our typical ways of teaching and conceiving of writing with students is not sufficient. In this strain, it further begs the question, "For whom does the teacher speak: the curriculum, the school, the profession, the students, the teacher?" (Britzman, 1991, p. 23) What am I communicating about writing to my students, in both explicit and implicit ways? (Boscolo, 2009).

It is in this spirit of mining my assumptions about writing through a narrative search for meaning that this thesis takes on.

CHAPTER 3: Writing in the Beginning

Creation Myth (Narrative Vignette #1)

We were on the floor in our living room; he, seated perpendicular to my left thigh, intently staring at my face; me, not facing him and looking nowhere. He was crying, pleading with his posture, hands cupped around my knee. I was sitting.

He was desperately trying to maintain eye contact, to *will* me to feel what he was feeling, as though just the stern concentration of his love could reanimate me. He was saying things to try to reassure me, and I know that he meant it. But I also know that if it was somehow appropriate or possible, he would have tried to shake me. In my absence, he was doing all of the feeling for both of us: anger, fear, desperation, heartbreak, defeat.

I remember thinking to myself that I should be emotional at this particular moment. I mean, he was. Why wasn't I? I was *supposed* to be feeling *some*thing rather than this conscious catatonia.

I can't even describe myself as being cold. Or distant. I can't even tell you that I was the opposite of happy. Binaries are pointless when there is no center some*thing* to ground them in description.

The only thing I remember hearing myself say was "I think something's wrong with me."

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I went on medical leave in the Fall of 2011 for major depression. I was stressed and overworked. I wish I could refrain from blaming my working conditions as a contributing factor to this, but I would be lying by omission.

I hate lying. Look at where it got me. Sitting on my living room floor, numb and robotic. The occupational hazard of being a full time English teacher in a school that runs at a frenetic

pace institutionalized by the quarter system is well known in my school. Several years ago, when I was a fairly new and naive teacher, I overheard a former associate principal ask a visiting Education professor if she knew of any new English Education graduates she could recommend hiring, and casually added the proviso that the candidate “had to be a little crazy” in order to teach English here. The departmental mandate at the time had teachers take in and grade six essays per class, per quarter, which equaled a 60-hour work week for eight weeks. The discussion at department meetings was dominated by standardized exam scores and accountability results. These expectations, along with the cultural narrative that teachers essentially be martyrs for their students (which is exacerbated by teaching in a Catholic school, where, if we are to take our Christian mandate solemnly, we are expected to be a model of Christ, which, as we know, was a martyr) makes it even more damaging. My evenings and weekends were filled with school work, but this was my “cross to bear" as an English teacher at my school. By the 2010-2011 school year, my exhaustion made me hollow; I was participating in a life I didn’t relate to and this kickstarted my genetic penchant for rumination. Given all of these conditions, something had to break, and it was me. My symptoms were:

- oversleeping (loss of energy)
- unintentional, significant weight loss
- loss of motivation
- loss of resilience
- loss of the capacity to feel joy
- loss of the capacity to feel anything
- loss of the mechanism that stops your imagination from painting scenarios where you are suddenly diagnosed with fast-moving, terminal cancer, because the

- loss of the will to live meant that you wanted to die, but not by your own hand, because how could you do that to those who love you?

I can't explain why I decided to get help. All I know is that I folded into tears in my doctor's office during a routine visit. I told him that I was so tired. He urged me to seek out counselling and wrote me a prescription. Scribbled, medical jargon on a square of paper was the first time I saw that writing could save a life.

I simultaneously started to journal when I began treatment, mainly because my counselor was a practitioner of cognitive behavioural therapy. It started as a means of processing my inability to feel nothing other than shame and guilt at my selfishness for wanting to die. Countless entries would read like:

> *"I'm feeling nauseous and headache-y this morning. I can never tell if it's anxiety or if I'm 'legitimately' sick. What an awful way to begin the day. There's a physical dread from simply being awake pulsing in the core of my gut. It's like, 'Oh. Great. I'm alive. More time to face the muck and shit again.'"*

> *"Woke up with nausea and dread again, probably somewhere around 3:00 and couldn't quite get back to sleep. I tossed and turned and tried to lasso an idea my brain could rest on and maybe set off into a dream, but nope. Restless. Anxious and frustrated, fruitless, fretful sleep."*

On a Saturday, trying to rush out the door to attend my school's graduation ceremonies, my husband called out to me from the kitchen, "Don't you think you should say goodbye to your children?" I was sitting at the bottom of the stairs, slipping on my high-heeled shoes and I felt an anger rise in me that I had never felt before. That's when the jaw clenching began. Later that evening, I wrote through it, blasting everything and everyone around me for filling up my waking hours with passive aggressive suggestions of how to live my life: "We all need to be rowing in the same direction." "Why not try practicing gratitude?" "I thought you were going to wait until the girls went to bed before you started marking?"

As emptiness turned into anger, I took that as a good sign. It meant I had the energy to swing at something, the impulse to make a mark that a thinking and feeling life was still here. Journal writing was a simmering "Fuck you" to apathy. It was a scratch on the wall of a cave. It was my own *examen conscientiae* because the traditional one listed contemplating suicide as a sin, and I found that terribly cruel and unfair. I couldn't passively accept that if I just "had some faith" that that would fix me because I had already been trying that and it had led me to this ledge and abandoned me. The anguish of mental illness is knowing that I somewhat brought it on myself, but yet was somehow still a stranger to me. It wasn't a conscious choice but was still a product of my consciousness. My beliefs, my guilt, and my shame were a codependent, unholy trinity, and the journal was a place to claw and bite and snarl into.

In the tomb of depression, I chose a pen and a notebook to tunnel my way out, to really see myself in order to heal myself. I thought that my "self" had just slipped away somewhere and that through writing, I could find myself. The journal was a container of my identity where I could look at my life choices to become more self-aware. I had been filling in the template of a life and career that effaced my individuality and my personal needs for fulfillment, and I was starting over again from scratch.

However, rather than a spyglass, writing was a mirror. My entrance into journal writing meant writing was a means of control, something that collected "things" and bundled/categorized them in order for me to understand them. I tried to ensnare meaning as I wrote, to make friends with myself in an intimate me-to-me conversation. I was rebuilding myself and that self was a writer. With the gift of time, I learned that through seeking I didn't find, I created. The searching for something actually had me creating that something. And this new creation is a perpetual recreation with every entry.

Because I have kept my notebooks, I have a permanent record of a certain then-self that now-changes every time I read them. The record of time, the notebooks and notebooks full of "these fragments I have shored against my ruins"[1] is also the birthplace of Teri the "writer." With every new entry, I am writing and creating who I am.

In my beginning was the Word.

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Teacher as Technician

I know telling the origin story of a walking dead, technicist writing teacher is perhaps a weary trope in educational circles, but the reality that it *is* a weary trope suggests that it is such a prevalent and repeated account, it borders on an archetype. To not speak out against it is to shrug our shoulders with a glib acceptance that it's just "part of the job." There are literally life and death consequences of this passive acceptance and this is horrifying.

There is a special kind of squeeze that the Copernican model (4x4 block schedule) of timetabling has on teachers. Even though courses are still scheduled to have the same 125 instructional hours as our semestered cousins, the same number of hours does not equal the same quality of time. Carroll (1990), father of the Copernican school model, argues that it "tries to organize a high school around what is known as more effective teaching" (p. 358). High school performance in the United States was fiercely criticized in *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and school reformers tried to come up with solutions at the high school level that contributed positively to "the character and competence of [their] citizenry, [and]...the quality of [their] work force" (Carroll, 1990, p. 359). "Improved performance" was the catch phrase and for Carroll, "[t]he only way to improve instruction significantly without greatly increasing resources is to become

[1] Eliot, T.S. (n.d). The waste land. Retrieved from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land

much more efficient" (p. 360). While the explanation of the Copernican model assumes that longer class periods mean a better educational experience, the teacher's experience and the students' post high school experience is often left out. The research surrounding the effectiveness of this block scheduling focuses on "student achievement" (Gullat, 2006; Nichols, 2005; Reid, 1995)—what the data says about graduation rates and GPA—and misses the bigger picture.

In Alberta, we are tasked with "covering" the same curriculum as other high schools in a much more condensed experience. As Carroll (1990) deliberately alluded to, it becomes the essence of education under an efficiency model (Friesen & Jardine, 2009). Students and teachers are hyper-focused on courses in eight-week bursts, yet the same standard of learning (and the same "coverage" of curriculum) is expected. Although the Alberta Program of Studies (2003) purports to inspire students to be "lifelong learners" (p. 1), my 17-year teaching experience in the quarter system in high school has taught me that, at least for ELA, this is overwhelmingly not the case. If lifelong learning is the ideal product of education, then the very nature of the quarter system is anti-educational. Students talk about cramming for exams at the end of the first quarter, and then a few months into the school year, already in the third quarter, they have forgotten the bulk of what they "learned" previously. The phrase "get them through" is thrown around very frequently for those that are struggling, and the students adopt this same attitude (that a course is just something to get through). When I am pressed to develop sophisticated writing skills in approximately 40 days, efficiency rules. At the beginning of my career at my school, this meant repetition of the same writing tasks. With this technicist attitude often perpetuated by teachers, we can expect that "once top-down technical standards are imposed, students become progressively disengaged from the process of learning" (Kincheloe, 2016, p. 615). By reducing course content down to an eight-week cramming session, we are violating principles of good

pedagogy and the very heart of education by ignoring that educational experience must involve the individual, contextualized, social and psychological engagement of the learner (Kincheloe, 2016). Meanwhile, in 2022, my school's slogan is "Rigor, Relevance, Relationships." It has a nice ring to it in terms of its usage of alliteration and an increasing rhythm of syllables, but it is not lost on me that "rigor" is the first word on the list.

This pressure (and in my case, disengagement at the end of exhaustion) is absorbed by teachers to "get them through" all the while trying to dismantle any limiting beliefs students may have about their abilities or about the very constructs that are foundational to the discipline. As an illustrative example, the five-paragraph essay that is often introduced to students in earlier grades becomes the go-to formula imposed on nearly all types of writing because "it works." Truncated and tidy, the form is emblematic of the rigid, siloed experience of teaching ELA in a quartered timetable, and every quarter, students come to their written work in my class with this formulaic mindset. Despite my efforts, how much can I really expand students' understanding about the value of writing in eight weeks, among all of the other curricular demands?

The grades 10-12 ELA Alberta program of studies is a hefty document, and the text study demands alone are ambitious for a 125-hour course. For example, in my context of (on average) 40 days of classes, English 30-1 students are required to study a book-length non/fiction; a feature film or play; a Shakespearean play, and a variety of poetry, short fiction, visual and multimedia texts, essays and popular nonfiction (Alberta Learning, 2003). On top of that are the text creation requirements which include a variety of personal responses to text and context (separately); critical responses to literary texts, other print and nonprint texts, and to context (separately); a variety of narrative, informative and persuasive forms, and oral/visual/multimedia presentations (Alberta Education, 2003). These text study and text creation requirements are

essentially only two-thirds of the program of studies. With nearly 140 specific learning outcomes, and folding in the other language arts strands of listening, speaking, viewing and representing, and the exploring of thoughts, feelings and experiences through metacognition and building information management and collaboration skills, something gets neglected in order to be efficient.

All too frequently, "'success' in writing instruction is almost always narrowly defined in terms of students' ability to produce texts that exhibit a rather narrow set of textual characteristics" (Yagelski, 2011, p. 169), validated by standardized assessments, rather than seeing students approach writing as an activity for their own growth and development that "lifelong learning" promises. Even if we were to accept the validation of the standardized exams as measures of student writing achievement, in a quartered timetable, the scaffolding for such writing tasks gives less time for the students to grasp different possibilities.

Even though research literature focuses on the effectiveness of block scheduling on student academic achievement, it's the *texture* of student achievement (at the expense of teacher wellness) that this narrative is exploring. Referring back to the list of assessment demands I was required to do, a teacher in a 4x4 timetable is teaching all day for three out of the four quarters in the school year. If I have a full class of ELA in the morning, and then another full class of ELA in the afternoon, where in "time" am I to complete curriculum planning and assessment demands? My out-of-school hours.

As a young and fairly new teacher, I did not have the experience or critical capacity to challenge the way things were done. This lack of confidence and blind acceptance of the institution's expectations meant that I could not expect myself to inspire the students to think of writing any differently:

> If the teacher agrees to submerge himself into the system, if he consents to being defined by others' views of what he is supposed to be, he gives up his freedom to see, to understand, and to signify himself. If he is immersed and impermeable, he can hardly stir others to define themselves as individuals. (Greene, 1973, p. 270)

The amount of repetitive training for the standardized writing exam was a part of the school's milieu which contained "pressures that [worked] against [my] authenticity" (Gutek, 2014, p. 123), especially in contrast to the type of writing I was practicing myself to help construct my authenticity.

Seeing the Mechanism

However, I don't want to spend too much time exploring the working conditions of my specific school as contributing to my mental illness because to totally blame one factor is too isolated. My story is a symptom of a much bigger, social problem that we can examine through the beliefs and values we experience and promulgate in schools about writing. Even though this particular structure of our school was a major contributor to my stress and exhaustion, in a way, this narrative is a magnified vision of harmful beliefs about curriculum, teaching, schools, and writing. "Anguish is the way freedom reveals itself" (Greene, 1973, p. 279) and my story is one example of a moment of existential crisis about curriculum, assessment, writing values and beliefs. The crisis doubled down when I acknowledged that I was part of the problem; this unnecessary and harmful burden I perpetuated in my classroom (that my students must continually crank out exam paper after exam paper that I then must continually process, score, and return) created a very factory-like treatment of writing. Not only is this a reductionist view of writing (and one that kills the soul), it is also physically taxing as the number of students, the number of essays, and the short number of days has you, the teacher, scrambling to find more "efficient" ways to reach the same academic standard. Unfortunately, for the sake of efficiency, "[s]uch an orientation...tends to force teachers to direct their attention to isolated skills and

quantifiable entities that render the entire process inauthentic and inert" (Kincheloe, 2016, p. 625).

As Greene (1978) states, this isn't a new problem: "teachers, (artlessly, wearily) become accomplices in mystification" (p. 38). That culpability in my own deadening, in shaping my students' experiences with writing as a dead, lifeless object at the end of a conveyor belt of unthinking, is a bitter pill to swallow. My existential guilt comes in from acknowledging that I am acting in bad faith. Knowing I want to choose another way to conceive and pursue writing in the classroom (which I *was* doing in my personal life) while participating in standardized practices, means I am not taking responsibility. To overcome such passivity is to overcome my own ennui (Greene, 1978).

My awakening came at the bottoming out of wellness. The more I came to know writing as something different in my personal life, the more I felt split and alienated from the person in the classroom who "taught" her students how to write. In this case, "curriculum existed apart from my lived experience" (Kincheloe, 2016, p. 621).

This sense of alienation put me directly in the position of what Greene (1973) calls the "teacher as stranger." The mechanistic and overwhelming amount of product that came from the expected treatment of writing in my classroom was the very thing that brought me to the edge. My personal writing practice expanded my understanding of writing and this conception of my own project was "at odds with what [my] school [demanded]" (Greene, 1978, p. 48). Here, the "why" arose, and "everything [began] in that weariness tinged with amazement" (Camus, 1955, p. 13). This amazement was the affirmation that I was living in cognitive dissonance and that, perhaps, reconfiguring what writing could be, for myself, could be an exercise in flexing my agency. I chose journaling as a way out. Journaling, writing for myself, was the awed and

frustrated questioning, the "doing philosophy" that Greene encourages all teachers to do. If I did not want my students to make the same deleterious non-choices that I was making, I had to experience my own "breaks with what has been established in [my own life]" (Greene, 1995, p. 109).

The conflict presented in the narrative, through the lens of the writing construct, is the adoption of a role of teacher as merely technician (Apple & Teitelbaum, 1985), and not as someone devoted to helping her students (nor herself) stretch towards self-development. Ultimately, this new awareness was an opening in my consciousness. As Greene predicted, once I recognized the role that I had played, I had "intensely personal reasons for clearing up ambiguities and for raising questions about what 'reality' means" (Greene, 1973, p. 10). If I were to truly adopt a position as an awakened teacher, I needed "to redefine writing itself: not as the grounds for truth or the expression of truth...but as *part of the process of truth-seeking*" (Yagelski, 2011, p. 92).

Taking a critical view of writing instruction in my school context meant that I had to take a step back from the routines demanded from my department, to not just ask "questions *within* the framework [but to ask] questions *about* the framework" (Kincheloe, 2016, p. 621). Why did volume and repetition of formulas equate to student success in writing? Why was success only measured by performance on standardized exams? What is writing "success"?

These questions led to me being "dreadfully free" (Greene, 1973, p. 183). As much as I could blame my health crisis on other factors, I was participating in it by acting within and for those structures. For existentialists, everything comes down to the individual, and as I saw it I was left with two choices: I either could continue the same activity, "thrust back into reliance of precedent" (Greene, 1973, p. 183) and risk becoming an automaton, or I could not accept the

"ready-made standardized scheme at face value" (Greene, 1973, p. 183) because that would mean I was not practicing any critical, independent thinking for my benefit. This is dreadful freedom because the resolution rested on me alone.

For one, I began to include daily "journal" writing with my students. We now begin class with 10 minutes of quiet, personalized writing for exploration that does not have the pressure of being a piece of a larger "formal" composition later on. These are not graded or even read by me unless the student wishes it. It has become an exercise in employing "writing as an ontological act" (Yagelski, 2011, ix). Our acts of writing become not on purposeful text creation, but of simple exploration of ideas and identity, the ultimate existential activity. Yagelski (2011) argues that "writing continues to be understood by most people, including most educators, in relatively simple terms as a technology for communication and a straightforward, rule-governed process" (p. 3), but this sense of writing, duplicated in vast quantities, shuts students (and myself) off from *real* meaning-making, thereby making it an activity that no one would want to continue "lifelong."

If I was fighting for my life through my own writing project outside of my classroom, I had to take an honest look at the harm I was creating for myself and my students in my classroom writing practices. While a person could easily be frightened by the possibility of nihilistic despair, for existentialist teachers, "[c]risis situations thrust open new horizons" (Morris, 1998, p. 131).

Openings: Writing as an Existential Project

While it may seem like an implausible stretch to say that writing in school versus writing for myself was what sparked my awakened consciousness, that is the way it happened. In my personal life I was cultivating my own personal meaning through writing, and this

"consciousness [that] is perceptual, embodied and situated" (Morris, 1998, p. 131) meant that the construct of writing was much bigger because it aided in creating my own meaning. Rather than live as a writing hypocrite, I took my professionalism more seriously, and broadened what writing means in my classroom.

Like the title of this chapter suggests, the sort of "beginning" that is offered as an alternative writing theory can be a profoundly spiritual practice, a way to have an individual "do philosophy" using writing as a tool. This involves intense questioning and building self-awareness to then *also* see themselves as connected to everything around them.

This first narrative I have offered is about the temporality of self and how this truth became clear to me in my personal journaling practice. In order to justify the changes I have made to writing in my classroom, I must hold this belief about writing to the light. By encouraging my students "to explore consciousness and the life-world" (Greene, 1973, p. 139) through daily writing they may see themselves as different people coming to the page every day. This is incredibly freeing. Yes, we still participate in writing for textual production, but we also write as a way of being. This type of writing is "a potentially powerful vehicle for transformation, for it opens up possibilities for reflection and awareness that writing as an act of textual production does not necessarily do" (Yagelski, 2011, p. 139). If we are to accept writing as an existential project, we must give students the opportunity "to learn *from* and *while* writing" (Yagelski, 2011, p. 147), rather than repeated exercises overwhelmed with features of quality control.

The more experience I gained in my career, the more I saw myself as a "curriculum developer" (Kincheloe, 2016, p. 627). Therefore, I could shape my classroom curriculum and writing instruction where writing could be seen as an ontological practice (Yagelski, 2011), and I

could live and teach it also as an existential project. By accepting my personal writing project as an existential practice, I then am able to enact this reality in my classroom. Rather than be a technicist teacher, I have to conceive of myself as a teacher differently: to "let [my] consciousness take over, to enable [me]—in the face of mechanization and controls—to create [my]self as a human being" (Greene, 1973, p. 21). Not only was my awakening happening in my personal life through writing, my teaching life was experiencing an awakening through writing in my classroom. The parallel exists in that crux of every existential encounter: choice. I could blindly accept the routines set down by my department leads from the past or I could see writing as "a powerful and essential means for individuals to claim agency and thus gain greater control over their lives" (Yagelski, 2011, xi). This is exactly what my personal experience with writing has taught me.

This is why I believe writing (and the teaching of writing) is an existential project. "This moment of meaning-making—the act of writing—underscores, indeed, *enacts*, the deeper relationship between our consciousness and the world around us" (Yagelski, 2011, p. 115). Accepting the mantle of being a teacher of writing who wants her students to experience writing as an existential project is to make the leap to uncertainty; this type of writing is not formulaic as it is rooted in an individual's experience in reciprocal relationship to personal and external conditions. However, "[t]he ultimate justification for such scholarly activity is empowerment" (Kincheloe, 2016, p. 627), as it enacts personalized, individual choice, void of external pressures, both for myself and for my students.

CHAPTER 4: Writing Wide Open

Sometimes it Counts (Narrative Vignette #2)

One of my favourite moments of my school day is the time I have dedicated to silent freewriting to start every class. Right after prayer, students collect their writer's notebooks and I introduce the daily prompt. Sometimes these are thought-provoking statements or questions to answer; sometimes the students are given a fictional context and they assume a character voice to continue the narrative; sometimes the prompts are directly related to the text(s) we are studying at the moment. Ten minutes. Every day. In our first week of classes together, we practice what this personal writing time sounds like, looks like, and feels like, until it becomes so normal to engage in this parallel play that it's as ordinary as making a to-do list.

It's quiet. We write in our own notebooks, explore our own ideas, and there are no expectations about structure or spelling. We are given the space and time to activate our imagination, listen to emotions, and give silent words to thoughts without social interruption. And we don't quit on ourselves; we fill in that time with as much writing as we can.

I started this practice because of a glaring juxtaposition; there is an easy satisfaction and freedom I experience with writing for myself, whereas there was a stiff anxiety and fear my students conveyed when writing for school. They would sit frozen at the start of a writing task, the empty screen's cursor would blink in time to the second hands moving on the classroom clock. When I would slide over to check on them, they would always say the same thing: "I don't know how to start," and this was despite having a plan sketched out for themselves. And my advice would always be the same: "Start anywhere." Over time, their questions of "Is this for marks?" and "Mrs. Hartman, is this what you want?" have been replaced with me, asking them, "What do *you* think about ____?"

When we write in our writer's notebooks, sometimes we share our responses with each other. Sometimes it's for peer coaching; sometimes it's for entertainment; sometimes it's for building community. And sometimes they just close their notebooks and what they wrote in the silence stays in the silence, unless they ask me to read it and respond to it. All of this is good.

I always write alongside my students. My personal journal travels with me to school every day. I mostly do this to model that writing can *mean something* outside of school assignments, but it's also because it gives me a chance to write every day. After all, "[a]ttention is the beginning of devotion."[2] This devotion is to writing, to ourselves, to stillness. It's a settled feeling, like meditative breathwork. A finished sigh. Sacred space, not so unlike prayer.

During this time, I sneak looks at my students every now and then. I try not to let my teacher joy disrupt my own freewriting, but sometimes it gets the better of me. Sometimes they are miming their words with their lips. Sometimes I'll catch them just as they tilt their head, and they shift into another gear so the pen accelerates. Sometimes they're staring at a random dot on the wall before they collect themselves in momentum, sit forward, and begin. All of this is good.

On the last day of classes, I once caught one of my grade 12 students flipping through her writer's notebook. She was skimming with wide eyes as her fingertips grazed the ink-bubbled paper. She kept flipping to another page, and then another. "Look at all of that writing you did!" I said.

She nodded and smiled, eyes never leaving the pages. "Yeah, I was just thinking that," she said, and blushed with pride.

I consider it a victory when even just a few students look forward to our daily writing. Most students play the game of "Mrs. Hartman's English class" politely, but I am never really

[2] Oliver, M. (2016). *Upstream.* Penguin Publishing Group.

sure if this daily practice makes much of a difference in their attitudes about writing unless I explicitly ask them. When I take the notebooks in for formative assessment, sometimes the students will dog-ear certain prompts for me to read and give feedback on—usually ones that they are proud of—and you can tell by the length of the responses how invested they are in our daily writing process.

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Ryan[3] was one of those students that was in class every day, but you weren't really sure why. Although he did his schoolwork, you could sense an overall malaise in his motivation. He struggled to stay awake some days and didn't interact with his peers very much. It was the last quarter of the school year, and graduation loomed near all of us.

I had never taught him before, and if I am to speak frankly of his academic status, he was "below average" with his grades. I asked around about Ryan: how he was doing in other classes, what was life like for him outside of school. I learned that his engagement in his other courses had the same pallor. I also learned that his mother suffered from schizophrenia, that he had a younger brother, and often he was the one to take care of both of them.

Just like every other student in my classroom, Ryan participated in daily writing. One morning, five minutes past the "stop" time, and after I got the students initiated on another activity, I saw that Ryan was still feverishly writing in his notebook. As I passed by I said, "Wow, someone is going to *town*, today" and kept walking. I wanted him to know that I noticed (as a way to encourage him), and that I was not about to interrupt or ask him to stop doing something that was obviously meaningful to him. Besides, technically he was still engaged in

[3] "Ryan" is a composite character of experiences I have had with former students' writing. Several identifiable features have been altered to protect identity: names and other specific details in the character's context have been modified as to not represent any one student in particular.

curriculum work. In the preamble of General Outcome #1, it states: “Through exploration, students begin to formulate their thoughts and ideas, organize and make sense of their experiences, and acknowledge and express their feelings” (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 15). The only reason I put the ten-minute time limit on these prompts is because of the list of other demands that need to be accomplished in terms of curriculum, diploma exam preparation, etc. If Ryan wanted to write beyond the ten minutes even when we have shifted attention to other curricular demands, I’m not about to ask him to stop or attempt to convince him that what we are doing next is more important than what he was engrossed in then. If he was enraptured with his pen and a notebook on a random Tuesday morning, who am I to ask him to stop so he could attend to Tim O’Brien’s breaking of the fourth wall in “On the Rainy River”?

As it turns out, the prompt he so fervently wrote about was flagged for me to take a look at for feedback when the notebooks were handed in a week later.

Ryan’s freewriting, far from what one might describe as “polished,” was wild talent. It was a rendering of his daily life wrapped in anger and frustration at his mother for not being well, wrapped in *more* anger and frustration *at himself* for being angry and frustrated with his mother for not being well. There were fragmented scenes of violence, hiding, worry, and tenderness, and the diction crackled and hummed in all of the right places. The only time I was in my own consciousness while reading his writing was when it was over, in a tight exhale and a flashing dread.

When I read or hear a student’s thoughts and they surprise me with their level of insight or skill, it brings me great joy. I love reading great writing. However, the content of this particular response was obviously emotionally difficult to read and this comes with a tension I imagine many writing teachers face: it’s pleasurable to read because of its skill, but it’s awful to

read because of its content. More importantly, what amplifies both the enjoyment and the pain is that you personally know the author, for you see them in your classroom every day, having come straight from the hellscape that they just wrote about and asked you to read.

Reading such writing always makes me question the purpose of my job. What sort of meaninglessness was school for Ryan? He was there every day, albeit begrudgingly, but he was there every day. Why? What was the English 30-1 program offering him to help him navigate through these sorts of experiences?

He didn't ask for this "permission," but I guessed that he wanted some sort of acknowledgment from me for the weight of his response. What that meant for me was an inexhaustible depth of ignorance, not knowing where the weight of his response housed itself. Was its weight a cry for help? Was the weight its artistic merit? What was its weight in gravitas?

If I knew the intention behind why he flagged it to be read, I might have known better how to craft a response. While there were no signs in his writing that indicated he was in immediate danger, I couldn't be sure. What were the rhetorical "demands" this writer-reader relationship was creating? Was it a sort of litmus test of who I am as a teacher? How would Mrs. Hartman respond to this writing, and what does this say about her? Or maybe my impulse to make it an "it," a product with one intention, underlies all of my writing-teacher impulses to objectify something in order to understand it, to classify it and evaluate it. To score it. To measure it. But what if it doesn't have an "it"? What if it just is? Wasn't that my intention behind instituting these daily writing prompts? To let students write without needing it to *be* something?

What was behind his willful disregard of my time stamp? To excise his language? To exorcise his personal demon? To exercise his writing muscle? What fleeting emotion or thought was he hell-bent on recording over anything else, and with such vulnerability?

I didn't ask Ryan what his reasons were for flagging it and I will admit now, with shame, that it is mainly because I felt embarrassed and inadequate at not knowing how to respond. What did he want from me?

Ryan's writing disrupted the flow of my grading process. I expected that this round of writer's notebooks would be just like the many others I had taken in: quick scans followed by checkmarks for completion, pausing to read the odd flagged passage and then jotting some encouraging feedback about "engaging imagery" or "powerful diction or syntax." I needed to return these to the students the next day so they would have them back for round #2 (the last half of the quarter). I didn't know what to do and I didn't have the luxury of time to think it over carefully.

I don't remember what I wrote regarding the content of the response (if I even commented on the content at all), but I did write a lengthy reply—a letter on a separate sheet of paper tucked in between the pages of this response and the next—telling him that he could make a go of this writing thing, that his wild talent was something to be taken seriously. Whatever I wrote, the words felt stale and stupid because I defaulted to talking about writing and avoided what he wrote about. I chose to respond as a distanced reader via a lame stab at being a career counsellor. I wasn't a young or new teacher when I did this either. I should have known better.

The pressures I feel in my other, more intimate relationships are felt with the same intensity in my teacher-student relationships; there are many "should haves"' that I belabour over, and I wish I could ask Ryan about this moment in our student-writing-teacher relationship. I am pained over how badly I failed him. I have tried to justify my choices by telling myself that we didn't really know each other well, that I would have probably embarrassed him if I pulled

him aside for a one-on-one chat and asked him about the content of his response, and what he needed from me. He was there to pass English 30-1 so he could get his high school diploma.

With even more shame, this narrative ends here. The story of Ryan and I goes no further. Ryan graduated and I haven't heard about him since.

* * * * *

Naive Good Will

As illustrated in the previous chapter, I instituted expressive writing into my classroom routines after having my own personal experience of the many benefits it offers. Aside from the benefit of having a broader experience of the possibilities of what writing is outside of typical school writing, students could use it as a way to have a one-on-one conversation with their own consciousness. I wanted my English class to be a meaning-making encounter, what Greene (1995) would describe as "teaching for openings." As a curriculum developer, this means reconfiguring the content of the discipline into an encounter: "the curriculum, the structures of knowledge, must be presented to such a consciousness as possibility...it can only *be* disclosed at the learner, himself engaged in generating the structures, lends the curriculum his life." (Greene, 2017, p. 153). This also comes from the desire to want to make writing into a truly aesthetic experience for my students (Greene, 1995), a counter-aim to the repetitive, formulaic exam-preparation approaches that we are used to. Expressive writing offers the students a place to "play" with the written word, to work through whatever they are thinking, and an opportunity to quiet the inner critic.

However, I did not fully anticipate the degree to which "teaching always signifies a type of intervention into someone else's life" (Greene, 1973, p. 175). I wanted to incorporate expressive writing practices because of its possibilities for inspiration, to make writing a

personally meaningful pursuit for my students, much like it has been in my own life. I did not necessarily prepare for (or want) the pain and mess that students may bring in, that I don't know what to do with.

Teacher as Stranger

This narrative makes me feel the most inadequate and ill-equipped as a writer-teacher out of all four narratives in this thesis. It's the most disorienting because it is the moment where the "teacher as stranger" is felt most viscerally. In this context, I don't mean the teacher as stranger as a distanced, detached adult providing wisdom and concern like the archetypal God-teacher, but as a stranger to the naivete of my own beliefs, to my*self*, and to the supposed "good" that I am working in my students' lives. It is an isolated "thrownness" brought about by my own ignorance, where I painfully "[became] aware of [my] possibility unchosen or unrealized" (Greene, 1967, p. 29).

Yes, I chose to institute expressive writing in the classroom, but I did not intend to be brought up against my own ethical inadequacy that does not account for the consequences of my choice to "intervene" in this student's life in this way. Because Ryan's writing did not conform to what I was expecting it to be—like all the other typical writer's notebook assessments that involved student writing that "play[ed] the game of 'Mrs. Hartman's English class' politely"—I was confronted by own naivete. In truth, most of my personal writing is mundane, and our classroom work with the writer's notebooks is characterized as "play," so to face writing that may be experimental but is not necessarily light, disrupted my expectations of how the students would use this writing time. I was reminded that "reality does not exist for anyone as given, as independently *there*" (Greene, 1973, p. 10), but rather, in the teacher-as-stranger position, I will

be repeatedly confronted with the "contingency of the real" (Greene, 1973, p. 10). This rude awakening was bound to happen sometime.

To put it bluntly, in this narrative, I am the site of my cognitive dissonance and it makes me angry at myself. Making the choice to include expressive writing in my classroom comes with the responsibility to handle the possible ethical ramifications that expressive writing in a classroom brings—I am encouraging kids to write about their experiences, their honest thoughts and feelings, but am not equipped (whether by psychological training or willingness) to adequately process the very humane realities that comes with it. If I were to just train students to write dispassionately and with the surface certainty that is assured in more formulaic approaches, I would not have to do the sort of messy work that is possible in an open, expressive approach. It may be safer to treat writing this way, but it is also very incomplete, and in my opinion, meaningless.

There is a significant amount of attempted justification at the second part of the narrative as though I am talking to a silent administrator that has snuck into the room and is watching me "ignore" that Ryan is not engaged in the same way as the rest of the class. Even though he was engrossed in deeply personal writing and the rest of the class had moved onto other things, I still found it necessary to use the curriculum to justify what he was doing, and what *I* was doing in "ignoring" his non-participation in another part of the lesson. And in this regard, curriculum (as in the lawfully mandated program of studies) can be used as a shield, a way to continue the mystification or as justification for falling back onto the surface-level givens of ELA education. Treating Ryan's "rebellion" as a secret "thrust [me] back into reliance on precedent" (Greene, 1973, p. 183). The teacher as technician/automaton is a seductive certainty in existential encounters such as these.

Because of the participation in meaning-making, being an ELA teacher comes with potentially blurred lines in roles: I can be a public servant teaching the curriculum and/or I can be a life coach. Reading and writing have been a source of "life coaching" for myself, and so my hope is that students find that meaning-making potential as well, and it is embedded in how I structure my classes. In wanting to teach for openings, for "going beyond" (Greene, 2017, p. 149), writing to awaken consciousness is a wonderful modality for that.

My own dive into expressive writing was (and still is) a very isolated practice. I admit that this is out of protection. I don't want anyone to get too close. While I want my students to like me, I also purposefully keep them at a distance. I can hide behind the professional reasons for this that are made clear in Ryan's situation—I do not feel equipped to handle these properly and with good care—but there are also personal reasons. I am not sure I can handle the emotional labour that comes with it. As much as I may want students to use their own life experience as their classroom, I also do not have the courage or know-how to help them process the very difficult things in the ways that I should.

This is what makes literacy both wonderful and terrifying. Stories, whether reading them or writing them, help us ponder those big life questions, and help us make meaning. How can I both love and fear the same thing at the same time?

Kamler's (2001) criticism of how personal writing is treated in schools circles around this very tension:

> If the teacher treats the text as truth, as the *real* expression of the individual writer (whose identity is received, unitary and stable), then she is loathe to touch it. She can create no space to intervene and no rationale for why she should meddle with 'you'. After all, she is not your therapist, nor is she qualified to be so. But if she understands that the text is not 'you'—that it is from you but is not the same as 'you'—that it represents a particular way of telling your experience—a representation—a construct—then a different curiosity can be aroused in the conference. (p. 64)

My discomfort in Ryan's writing, and in the disappointment I share in how I responded to it, demonstrates the inability to reconcile my own interpretation and values of expressive writing with the lack of confidence I have in myself when I am confronted with my student's engagement with it in the same way. The space created between the student→their writing→their teacher (me) strikes me as a very cold place: a place for teachers to retreat to avoid the messy, emotional space that comes with personal writing. Asking Ryan to "treat the experience written on the page as a representation" (Kamler, 2001, p. 59) and for me to assume a "critical pedagogy that creates distance" (Kamler, 2001, p. 36) seems decidedly insensitive. For one, it would have to assume that Ryan *knows* that his writing is being treated this way so he can expect a distanced, technical response from me. I did not deliberately set those boundaries, which would have established an explicit rhetorical aim for the writing encounter. Expressive writing, as it is practiced in my classroom, has an insubstantial rhetorical aim because explicit goals or writerly intentions do not exist other than to put words to emotions and thoughts on paper. The degree that the writing is "purposive" (Hillocks Jr., 1995, p. 79) is in the moment of writing, not in its written form. Furthermore, in order to be able to treat Ryan's writing at the distance that Kamler suggests, I would also have to expect that Ryan accepts a poststructuralist view of the individual writer-student, and that even though he is writing about something very personal from his own experience, it isn't really his self or his identity echoed on the page, therefore a distanced response from me would make sense. Like Tobin (2001) alluded to, I am not sure this is helpful or fair for seventeen-year-olds. By practicing this form of expressive writing, and for Ryan to write so poignantly about his own experiences to then share them with his teacher, he and I both have to accept that he is a writer with his own agency and voice in order for me to respond. In fact, it is also in this awareness of the writer's "self" and both of our

own philosophy of what that "self" means that influences how I respond. At least I chose to respond by acknowledging his individuality and sense of a unified "self," even though I didn't know what Ryan believed.

Nonetheless, it still was not enough. This is why this narrative reflects a lot of shame, and the shame comes from a deep, deep fear that I am not altruistic enough for this job; it comes from knowing I did not do enough (or anything) at all about the ethical imperative that existed in reading Ryan's writing. I defaulted to acknowledging Ryan's talent because it was the easier thing to respond to knowing that there is so much more I could/should have responded to. The "tight exhale and…flashing dread" was not unlike what Greene (1978) calls "the strange and wordless anxiety that occurs when individuals feel they are not acting on their freedom, not realizing possibility, not…elevating their lives" (p. 43). To elevate my life as a teacher to one of "reflectiveness and care" (Greene, 1978, p. 152) in this instance, to stand aright within my beliefs about expressive writing, would have required me to acknowledge the pain in another and to reach out in empathy and care. That feeling of dread came from knowing this is what the situation called for but I was not comfortable in following through. The facts I have used to rationalize my choice are that there were only four weeks left of classes after I read this entry, I did not know Ryan well as I had never taught him before, and he wasn't necessarily gregarious or outgoing, or what I might call "open." For Ryan, I turned a pivotal moment of his life he wrote about "into a matter of textual production" (Yagelski, 2011, p. 157) and thus decreased the meaning of the experience he wrote about.

In order to make things more comfortable for me (in the moment) I resorted to objectifying the student and his writing, placing his words at arm's length, detached from his being. By commenting on the skill of how he strung words together, I treated his writing as a

product (which is what a teacher as technician would do) as I have been trained to teach and assess "measurable learner behavior" (Popham, 2017, p. 115). However, as explored in the first narrative, when "teaching is construed as an instrumental activity, the student is treated as material to be molded, as a problem...that must be solved" (Lefstein, 2005, p. 347), rather than as an individual with feelings, imagination, creativity, and an embodied history outside of their schooling experience. In Ryan's case, his writing (and his life experience) became a problem for me to solve that interrupted my naive good will, and I chose to respond to it as a form "problem," rather than a "problem" of being. This was a one-off piece of writing and not an assignment to be workshopped. Ryan was using freewriting as it was intended—to write freely.

Reaching this awareness is the first step; it has made me "alert to the models and paradigms affecting [my] vision" (Greene, 1973, p. 80). This "paradigm alert" came right down to questioning the nature of my role as a writing teacher. I flat out stated, "Reading such writing always makes me question the purpose of my job" and this is a foundational question about my sense of being as not only a classroom teacher, but as a human. Both for Ryan and for me, "we have to be articulate enough and able to exert ourselves to *name* what we see around us—the hunger, the passivity, the homelessness, the 'silences'" (Greene, 1995, p. 111). As such, this existential encounter is an intersubjective consciousness: Ryan used writing to explore his own existence and what it means, and by reading Ryan's writing, it made me question my existence as a teacher and what it means.

Teaching for Freedom

As a teacher for freedom, this teaching moment and "doing philosophy" is forcing me to confront a very real existential problem: I want students to practice writing as an existential project, but am taken aback when they do. According to Greene (1973), "[t]he teacher who

wishes to be more than a functionary cannot escape the value problem or the difficult matter of moral choice" (p. 181); furthermore, for an existential teacher, "the individual who lives ethically cannot be indifferent" (Greene, 1967, p. 125). Everything is a choice, and each choice comes with an existential, ethical encounter which then leads to another choice and existential, ethical encounter, etc.

This is fondly referred to as a "dreadful freedom" (Greene, 1967, p. 8). The terror of being an existentialist comes from everything boiling down to your individual responsibility. Block (1998) states, "The terror I experience in the classroom is the experience of freedom and not of inadequacy" (p. 15), whereas I would argue that I have terror for both. In realizing this, I am faced with another choice: whether or not to fully embrace this terror in how I treat writing in my classroom, or to retreat from that opening for the purposes of self-preservation, "willing to sacrifice freedom for the security of belief" (Greene, 1973, p. 223). In ironic contrast to the first narrative, the time pressure of the quarter system (my marking turnaround for these writer's notebooks) became an issue wherein I had to decide, "because I didn't have the luxury of time," of how to act on my freedom in response to Ryan's writing. In the first narrative, I fiercely objected to the time pressure because it tends to narrow our writing pursuits, and yet it became the excuse in this second narrative to choose against my own values. I cannot expect to inspire students to make the choices towards their authenticity if I fail to do so myself.

My default response to Ryan—to talk *about* writing and not of our mutual consciousness awakening of what he has written—ultimately illustrates the suffering that Greene (1973) predicts for a teacher-as-stranger: the "nagging guilt if [the teacher] did not or could not act" (p. 257). According to Greene (1973), I did not make a meaningful choice in how I responded because "[t]he only meaningful choices are those for which [the teacher] takes full

responsibility...his authenticity depends on his capacity (or his courage) to cope with the anxiety of the human condition" (p. 256). It is the shame in hindsight, the very fact that I have held on to such moments in my psyche for some years, that bears the proof that I did not make a meaningful choice, because "[a]nguish is the way freedom reveals itself" (Greene, 1973, p. 279).

This anguish, although painful, does at least alert me to a prime example of bad faith: a failure to "coincide with [myself] that is the basis both of [my] freedom and of [my] capacity for self-deception" (Flynn, 2006, p. 69). If I have identified that one of my values about writing and teaching writing is to give space for students to explore their own thoughts and experiences, then I should have attended to that life experience that Ryan brought in. The writing culture I have tried to cultivate in my classroom, while well-intentioned, is bound for friction, as it is asking students to bring their "everyday" into the classroom. "Lived space"—both mine and Ryan's—"is personal…How I deal with my meaningful 'spaces' depends on how I choose to order my life" (Flynn, 2006, pp. 6-7). By asking myself the multiple questions about what Ryan wanted from me, I was trying to "locate [myself] so that freedom can appear" (Greene, 1988, p. 122). In this scenario, it is indeed a "dreadful freedom" because I did not act in alignment with my capital "c" Choice which is "a person's signature way of trying to coincide with themselves" (Flynn, 2006, p. 77). I hid my story about personal writing when confronted with a student's personal writing. In order to properly treat writing as an existential project and as a way to teach for freedom, I should have instigated a conversation with Ryan about what he wrote, that I saw the difficulty first (rather than the writing tricks), even perhaps sharing how writing about the hard stuff has helped me reconstitute my own life. If "[a]n education for freedom must move beyond function…it must move beyond mere performance to action, which entails the taking of initiatives" (Greene, 1988, pp. 132-133). It is the executing of initiatives that I am wary of: the

extent they may dissolve the line between educational professional and an intimate confidante. What I am acknowledging now, especially based on Kamler's (2001) argument, is the tension I feel with the degree that my personal life outside of the classroom has any place in my student's lives. What vision of myself as a writing teacher—my "project"—am I trying to work towards? Does my project need revising if I am unwilling to make the risky, ethical choices necessary to act in alignment with this vision?

This is why teaching writing as an existential project is a powerful context to understand what *praxis* really means. The choice to treat such moments as ethical is not enough to *think* about what could/should be done, but involves *action* (Greene, 1978). Greene's (1978) definition:

> Praxis involves critical reflection—and action upon—a situation to some degree shared by persons with common interests and common needs. Of equal moment is the fact that praxis involves a transformation of that situation to the end of overcoming oppressiveness and domination. There must be collective self-reflection; there must be an interpretation of present and emergent needs; there must be a type of realization. (p. 100)

While one may think that my critical reflection of this event in the present moment is a type of praxis, it fails to be because it is totally removed from the event, and does not involve Ryan's reaction to my inaction. This marks the difference between phronesis and praxis. I may have gained practical wisdom (what phronesis describes) but it is in the practical doing (praxis) that phronesis is even realized. It is in the "[d]oing, watching, choosing...[that] are the watchwords of existential thinking and existential education" (Greene, 1967, p. 152). Can I learn something from this critical reflection? Sure, but that does not mean that the lesson I take away from Ryan's story—about what it means to be a teacher for freedom—will guarantee that I will respond appropriately in another ethical, existential encounter in a student's writing. What was not a "free" choice was that he flagged it for me to read. I was pulled into the intervention. This is the

kind of emotional labour that teachers face every day: the vulnerable lives that they carry of so many others, and this is amplified even more when we/I invite the possibility of confronting these in the classroom practices we/I choose. However, it is "the teacher's obligation...to choose and to act" anew, again and again and again, "even in the face of uncertainty" (Greene, 1973, p. 86). What Ryan's example has brought to the foreground is how very much existential choices in teaching (and achieving freedom) are ultimately moral choices. The uncertainty of the consequences of our moral choices is the only certainty there is. And if I am to reimagine my project, rather than freezing and/or deflecting responsibility, I need to start anywhere.

CHAPTER 5: Writing Flatlined

The Outsider (Narrative Vignette #3)

It's Day 5 of marking English 30-1 written diploma exams.

This means a variety of things. There are nearly 250 high school English teachers from across the province on their fifth consecutive day sitting in uncomfortable chairs, sacrificing their spines to kyphosis for the good of Alberta's standards, eating bland, mass-produced computer food, and reading paper after paper after paper of largely uninspired, computer writing.

For me, specifically, it also means regularly getting the stink eye from the bastion of a woman across from me for snickering a little too loudly at the sarcastic comments of my tablemate. The air is dry and thin, with peak CO_2 levels from all of the exasperated sighing, which I suspect has also made me giddier. Watching myself lose grip on normalcy is, ironically, normal around Day 5, as the absurdity of the whole operation loses its elitist cutesiness. It doesn't help matters that we are in the dead of winter, in late January. Dormancy takes on a new meaning: passion is numbed; darkness is full; fatigue is thick.

We have switched from the Critical/Analytical Response to Text(s) assignment to the Personal Response to Text(s) assignment, wherein students respond to a given topic and three possible prompting texts (a poem, a prose excerpt, and a visual) that they've never seen before. They can write in whichever prose format they want— creative, personal, analytical—or a new hybrid genre they've invented on the spot.

We just finished our training for this task; this involves reading pre-selected exemplar papers along with the rationales for their scoring categories according to the "standards."[4] There

[4] Prior to the first day of marking, a small team of experienced diploma exam markers and English teachers arrive on site to select, study, score, and write scoring rationales for these sample papers. This team is called the "Standards Confirmers."

is conversation about why these papers were chosen as exemplars for the categories they scored, complete with a lot of head bobbing and chin stroking. We individually score two training papers and discuss what the standards confirmers gave them as a sort of test to confirm that we've absorbed the standards. Everyone at my table is an experienced diploma exam marker, so this process goes by swiftly and with great confidence. Thus, we plunge headlong into the breach, bringing back new stacks of booklets.

The first two responses I read are fantastic: insightful, well-crafted, engaging reflections. I have no reservations in scoring these with "Es."[5]

The third one I read is a creative piece. It is riveting. The narrator is the main character in the story, but is also describing themselves as if they're outside the character, like a disassociated, out-of-body experience, written in a second person point-of-view voice. On their planning page, the student has written that their intent is to examine how a separation from the self leads to self-destruction, and I watch this narrator comment and criticize their own damaging choices as though they're an observer with no control. There are details throughout the response that align with this intention, and the thesis statement the student provided on the planning page supports this interpretation.

I pause and question my first judgment. I'm immediately drawn in as I read it, but perhaps I'm "reading into" this student's response too much. Is what I'm seeing *really* there? There's enough subtlety to raise some questions and I find myself doing some intellectual gymnastics to connect-the-dots of the student's stated intent with their performance. I only have what's in front of me to work with. Also, and perhaps more notably, I just gave two Excellents.

[5] An "E" stands for "Excellent" which numerically equates to a 5/5 for a particular category. In the Personal Response to Text(s) assignment, there are two categories to be scored, both out of 5 points: Ideas and Impressions, and Presentation. In this case, I scored both of these papers 5/5 for each category, thereby granting the writers a perfect score for this assignment.

Statistically, scoring a third Excellent paper immediately after the prior two is highly unlikely. What if I had read this paper first, prior to the other two? What would I have scored it then? Were my scores for the previous two papers accurate? Alongside assessing student writing, we are also reminded to be cognizant of the numbers game and the potential "halo effect" that can influence our evaluations. The training papers and the daily "reliability reviews" imply that there *is* a right answer of how to score this paper both on its own and in the grand scheme of this enterprise. It's about finding a solution to a puzzle.

I chew on the inside of my lip for a few moments and sigh.

My table leader looks up from the paper he's reading.

"I think I just read something brilliant, but I may be reading into it too much." I pass it over to him for a second opinion.

He reads it. When he's done he looks at me and says, "What the hell did I just read?"

I sit beside him and listen carefully. He puts the rubric in front of us and while pointing at various phrases on the paper with the eraser of his pencil, argues that, overall, the piece is so ambiguous in its intended ideas, it's probably a "Limited" (= 2/5) for Ideas and Impressions, and the voice is so obscure it's likely a "Poor" (= 1/5) in Presentation. He believes the student is relying too much on us to do the interpretive work for them, trying so hard to be "artistic" that they sacrifice clarity.

He raises some excellent objections, similar to what caused me to pause and second guess my gut reaction. Furthermore, he is part of the "Standards Confirmers," so I can't dismiss his ideas too quickly.

I say nothing, and I take it back to my seat. The other marker beside me is now curious. I pass it to her to read. She wants to give it an "Excellent" as well because she says, "This kid had

me, right away," and according to the rubric, this response, then, has a skillful "aesthetic effect." I told her my theory about the disassociated narrator and the second person point-of-view as a rhetorical choice to develop the thesis, and she could also see it.

My table leader then continues his argument for the paper to be scored a Limited/Poor. He's mildly bitter at the student's pomposity, gently mocking their (assumed) presumptive brilliance. At one point he says, "As a writer-artist, the ambiguity is awesome and engaging, but as a student, who is required to complete an assignment, they're missing the mark."

I freeze and hold my breath. So, what is this kid? A writer-artist, or a student? Why are these exclusive of each other? As soon as a grade/score is attached to the task, one identity must supersede the other? Why *shouldn't* a student write a nuanced, artistic piece for a standardized exam?

In my mind's eye, I am preaching to this student with the same advice I've given to some of my own in preparation for their diploma exams: *You need to wrap your writing in cotton wool. Better to be safe than sorry. Check yourself before you wreck yourself.* In parallel with the perspective that the student created in their story, I am criticizing their self-destructive choices, but this time *I* am the observer *with* the control.

In this moment, it's the clichés and the fascism that catch me. This is lazy thinking. This student had the initiative and courage to let creativity and risk-taking win over the satisfactory, safer approach to the assignment, and if I choose to see in it what I think is there, it's bloody brilliant.

I can sense my table leader sees my disagreement although I have said very little. He shrugs. "But score it," he says. "Go with your gut." He pops his earbuds back in and goes back to reading another paper.

This story will likely go to a "fifth" read because clearly, there are two *very* different ways to interpret and score this response: a third set of scoring eyes would determine which one of us is wrong. This is what the marking floor calls a "problematic" paper; however, it's becoming clearer to me that where the problem is located and with whom does not sit in the ink on the page, nor in the unnamed student's writing skills.

Even though I have it memorized from many diploma exam marking sessions, along with the adoption of the criteria in my own classroom practice, I stare at the rubric and read this side-bar quotation from Louise Rosenblatt:

> ...the evaluation of the answer would be in terms of the amount of evidence that the youngster has actually read something and thought about it, not a question of whether, necessarily, he has thought about it in the way an adult would, or given an adult's 'correct answer.' (Wilson, 1981, p. 11)

Also on the rubric is this quotation from Wiggins (1993): "…[we should assess students' writing] with the tact of Socrates; tact to respect the student's ideas enough to enter them fully—even more fully than the thinker sometimes—and thus the tact to accept apt but unanticipatable or unique responses" (p. 40).

My table leader could argue for the descriptors in the "Limited" range, but I could argue for the descriptors in the "Excellent" range. I could also use the numbers game to an advantage because I care more about the student's chances at receiving a score that acknowledges their creativity and sophisticated writing knowledge and skill than about having the "right" answer for the standards.

I fill in the two "E" circles and add it to the pile to be processed.

* * * * *

While this narrative certainly explores a distinct moment in my experience marking diploma exams, it can stand alone as a representation of the many crises of conscience and

moments of cognitive dissonance that I have experienced as I work to be a writer-teacher for freedom. There are multiple avenues and constructs to unpack in this narrative, but my focus will be on what the standardized writing exam enterprise *does* to my sensibilities about curriculum and assessment constructs and writing constructs. It explores aesthetic experience in ELA with specific regard to Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory and Greene's (1973) existential ethics for teachers: those actions that stem from struggling "against unthinking submergence in the social reality that presents itself" (p. 269).

Standardized Writing

Overall, standardized assessment brings a lot of baggage; however, standardized writing exams for the language arts feels especially noxious. What I value about writing, and what I communicate about writing by how I teach writing, was what set off the bells of cognitive dissonance in this narrative. My thoughts were filled with clashing voices: admiration for the student's ingenuity coupled with my recalled, clichéd directives. The impulse to *train* students for an exam is why teachers often fall into formulas and fascism. The "right" way to score that problematic paper is the way the "Standards Confirmers" would score it and it was up to me to figure out that puzzling "right" answer. Feeling like I rewarded the student by giving them the score I did plays into this as well. In the context of a standardized exam, there is no reverence for ambiguity, no way to let the paper just be what it is, because each paper needs a numerical score within the system.

The ringer in the narrative that brought my misgivings to the forefront was the statement from my table leader about the student "missing the mark" because, while their writing was engaging, it did not comply with the test's expectations. This broaches a whole host of questions

about our curriculum and assessment culture and the epistemological perspectives surrounding our approach to schooling, and in this context, writing.

The standardized, testable view of writing that is implicitly communicated in these exams does not align with a contemporary understanding of literacy. According to Eryaman (2008)

> the natural and static definitions and understandings of writing practice have changed as we move away from a view of literacy as an autonomous, individually acquired skill toward a view in which literacy is seen as culturally bound, dynamic, meaning-making practice. (p. 2)

Even though the rationale of the senior high ELA program of studies espouses a potential for a meaning-making model of literacy, to the extent that it is an opportunity to "develop self-understanding" (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 1), the standardized exam mainly represents a traditional, rhetorical model. It rests on objective and quantifiable views of knowledge and curriculum that shapes classrooms and school systems into a positivistic mill where students and teachers alike are mere tools. As I will explore later, literary interpretation and communication is dependent upon context. Furthermore, writing and reading (just two modes of literacy) are so interconnected that to separate them as different outcomes (as practiced in the diploma exam marker experience) is to first compartmentalize, and then shrink the literary experience. What Neel (1988) referred to as 'psophistry,' the standardized writing exam treats writing teachers and evaluators as "nothing more than [instructors/evaluators of] reinvention, or repetition of structure" (p. 43). Greene (1973) reminds us that this type of "pragmatic rationality and cultivation of objectivity too often have led to depersonalization. They have permitted people to quantify, to separate ends from means" (p. 159). The individualization of the student and the individualization of the marker are removed in these exam settings, and because of this, evaluating writing and student learning becomes a disembodied and finalized operation where single numbers represent certain desirable traits in a writing task.

When looking at the language used by Alberta Education's Provincial Assessment Sector, the ideological positioning that is communicated in standardized writing exams is clear. One of the main purposes of Alberta Education's (2022) diploma examinations is to "report individual and group results" which affirms the presumption that the exams are a way to ensure that students are learning the appropriate things in their ELA classes. So, the ritual involved in training for the exam—learning about and practicing the specific writing tasks the students are required to do—communicates a certain perspective about the writing construct, amplified to the extent that students often interpret their skills at writing in congruence with the score they earn on their final exam. This perspective includes a belief in the distinct knowledge of how to write, and the very reality of an entity called the "Standards Confirmers" projects that there is a stable and definitive right/wrong way to write. While the Provincial Assessment Sector (2022a) admits that "[t]he scope of what the diploma exams and teachers measure are not the same," they believe that the exam score and the school-awarded mark "should be reasonably close since both are assessing the program of studies." Implied here is the sense that the exam is a direct measure of Alberta's ELA curriculum and equal to the efforts of Alberta's teachers in the specific outcomes it says to measure. What confounds the issue is that the Provincial Assessment Sector (2022a) argues that Alberta teachers "help set the standards of achievement" by having a representative contingent participate in marking these exams. And yet, while these markers are at these sessions, as is illustrated in the narrative, the Standards Confirmers and the daily reliability reviews dictate that standard prior to the majority of the teachers' arrival. It's akin to a chicken-and-the-egg origin argument about who creates and maintains the standard that we are assessing student written work against. And this is, in spite of curricular attempts to be more progressive, still the end game for Alberta's high school graduates. The test for "writing" in grade 12 is this

exam, and if this is a final exam, then this can easily be seen as the final say on what students "know" about writing as a "measure of achievement" (Alberta Education, 2022).

Furthermore, in the guide to students written by the Provincial Assessment Sector (2022b), the first practical advice given is to "become familiar with the format of the ELA 30-1 Diploma Examination" and to "practice the sample assignments" (p. 4). Rather than encouraging students to explore a variety of textual responses, students are encouraged to "make sure [they] are familiar with the scoring categories and scoring criteria" (Provincial Assessment Sector, 2022b, p. 8). Putting the exam requirements ahead of even curricular requirements in this document is telling. As stated in the program of studies, students are required to "create a variety of responses…using a variety of print and nonprint forms" in their coursework (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 11), but the written exam for ELA 30-1/30-2 only allows prose forms, for example. Encouraging the students to view the sample assignments can further narrow their understanding of the accepted genres on the exam. A final assessment for writing becomes the writing for *this* exam.

Scoring an art form like writing, the mere acceptance that numerical measurement is somehow relevant, is another act of cognitive dissonance, but we accept it because that is embedded in our schooling practices. Students earn percentage points in their ELA classes as some sort of testament to "their level of achievement" about ELA. Knowing that a student's public school journey's end is a standardized exam, it is no wonder that teachers "train" students when "[m]easurability... takes precedence over substance and significance" (Kincheloe, 2016, p. 625). Even having said that, this epistemology—believing in the reality of objectivity in literacy—is so contrary to the boundless nature of writing: its purpose, function, and practice both in and out of the classroom. To use my own life example to illustrate, my daily writing

practice serves a completely different purpose and it would be egregious to treat it as even a text to be read for aesthetic or efferent purposes. This is because it is writing that matters to me mostly in the writing of it, not in the product. But *because* the purpose for this writing is antithetical to how writing is often taught and subsequently assessed, it is not given much value in school.

As Eisner and Freeman (2013) explain, "one of the precious features of the arts is [its] attention to nuance" (p. 6), and it is this "precious feature" that is sacrificed on the altar of measurability. My love for the literary arts and of writing is reliant on its distinctiveness and creative expression, not on its sameness, and yet I am required to separate, categorize, and compare students' artistry with language, and somehow evaluate it with a numerical worth.

While the opportunity "to develop self-understanding" is a noble end in the secondary ELA curriculum, this sentiment is negated in an efficiency-model styled assessment system. If we are to accept and promote that ELA is indeed an "arts" class, aesthetic appreciation, meaning-making, and highly personally contextual approaches to writing—"our 'being' in the world as moral-political, self-interpreting, meaning-making human agents" (Eryaman, 2008, p. 5)—must be realized. Our assessment frameworks and practices (even beyond literacy) send contradictory messages to both teachers and students: to be "lifelong learners" (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 1) while participating in a mandatory, terminal exam designed to have a final say on their aptitudes.

Writer-Teacher as Disembodied Evaluator

The standardized exam is dehumanizing on the whole as a non-human "system" that requires humans to be its operators. What this narrative pushes to the spotlight are these subtle, dehumanizing givens that are part of the routine from the perspective of a teacher/writing evaluator in tension.

Standardized assessment, in order for it to operate as itself, privileges reliability over and above other assessment constructs (e.g., validity, fairness). Reliability functions on the accuracy and consistency of the instrument. The daily reliability reviews during a marking session demonstrate this preference, and therefore, these exams are "objective [tests] of writing ability [as] produced by psychometricians" (Broad, 2000, p. 215). Broad (2000) also argues that this "psychometric paradigm" (with which our style of standardized exams in Alberta follows) requires a "flattening [of] rhetorical dynamics" (p. 242). This was seen in the narrative with the table leader's assertion that the student's text "missed the mark" of the exam's expectations, even though myself and another tablemate valued it for other writerly qualities. Where most would argue that the exam is the instrument, the instrumentalization of the teacher evaluators in this scenario also occurs by way of a one-sided definition of "fairness." (Fairness *for whom* is another issue.) This instrumentalization takes place in the daily calibration of the human beings reading and scoring student writing (metonymized by the cultural term "marking floor") to the provincial standard set in place for that session by the Standards Confirmers, and by other anaesthetizing measures.

I use the term anaesthetic purposefully to highlight the contrarian nature this operation has when held in correlation with literacy constructs. To outline this, we must first delineate Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading in order to see that what is being asked of teacher evaluators in this scenario is in opposition to the very literacy constructs we revere in our program of studies and, ironically, on the diploma exam rubric itself.

Rosenblatt's theory of aesthetic and efferent reading explains "reading stances." At its most basic expression, Rosenblatt (1982) describes reading as "a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances" (p. 268).

Reading stances refers to the consciousness of the reading event, which Rosenblatt (1982) broadly categorizes efferent or aesthetic reading as two opposite poles on a spectrum; in efferent reading we "focus on extracting the public meaning of the text" (p. 271), and in aesthetic reading, our attention is shifted "inward…[centered] on what is being created *during* the actual reading" as the text "[stirs] up...personal feelings, ideas, and attitudes" (p. 269). Because this kind of reading stirs up *personal* feelings and attitudes, we recognize that the reader draws on their own "reservoir of past experiences with people and the world" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 270). Any text can be read with a predominance in either stance, but ultimately what this theory lays out is that the reader is not merely a "passive recipient" of the written work (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 4).

The student response at issue in the narrative had a notable "aesthetic effect" (response) from not only me, but from another participating marker at my table. While my table leader put the rubric in front of us as a neutral, objective buffer, the interpretive possibility within the rubric itself became apparent. What he saw as "obscure," I saw as "precise". Used in this way, the rubric "[describes] textual features without ever describing the individuals or the community within which [these] texts will be evaluated" (Broad, 2000, p. 247) and so the rhetorical aim of the text—the ability to "enact rhetorical moves that support achieving one's intentions for a text one is crafting for a community" (Corrigan & Slomp, 2021, p.156)—is effectively suppressed. These qualitative words on the rubric's criteria, set to distinguish types of writing from each other, are inherently value-laden and these "varying valuations of the same work may result...from the *different hierarchies of values within any one category* [emphasis added]" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 156). While Rosenblatt (1978) recognizes that "[p]ersonal meaningfulness should be recognized as at least *one* of the possible criteria to be applied by a reader assessing

the reading-event" (p. 157), the daily reliability reviews, the caution against personal bias, the act of "training" and norming, and the smug comment that the student committed sin (read: hamartia) by "missing the mark" demonstrates otherwise.

I find it remarkably odd that so much time and money is spent on a substantial number of teacher professionals reading and evaluating these written exams because, so far, a computer program cannot fairly or accurately assess the "level of achievement" of these young writers; meanwhile, the contextual humanity of the individual teacher-marker is removed and "trained out" of them as markers are repeatedly told to mark with the "provincial classroom" in mind. In essence, this is the provincial standard: a nameless and faceless contingent of well-read adults who have trained their own students for this occasion. An unnamed writer (an Alberta ELA 30-1 student with a six-digit ID number) and an unnamed marker (an Alberta ELA 30-1 teacher with a three-digit ID number) are awkwardly forced into a hermeneutical moment while blind to each other's context. Hermeneutic theories of writing assessment do exist (Broad, 2000; Eryaman, 2008; Petruzzi, 2008) but the Alberta's ELA 30-1/30-2 diploma exams have changed very little since I have been a marker (over 10 years). A more humane provincial assessment system does not seem likely, at least any time soon.

While I don't want to speak for Rosenblatt, I am sure she would strongly disapprove of how her name and legacy is being treated in this whole program. To "Rosenblatt the kid" (as a sort of solution to the difficulty in interpretation that this narrative illustrates) is a phrase I have heard several times at marking tables which I take to mean we give the student the benefit of the doubt; this echoes the heavily ironic advice from Rosenblatt herself who is quoted on the same rubric that we are to "enter into [the student's] ideas" and assess the degree to which they have "read something and thought about it". To "Rosenblatt the kid" while denying the same

beneficence to “Rosenblatt the marker” is peak irony. If my engagement with the written text is also transactional—that I bring to it my own experiences, perspectives, background knowledge and biases—I *should* be honouring the meaning I am drawing from their writing as well, but I’m forced to ignore that and only respond by way of a score from a flimsy rubric. From the same interview that houses this lifted quotation, Rosenblatt says “if I had my way, I’d say, ‘Let’s not test’. But I know that’s a Utopian answer” (Wilson, 1981, p. 11). Even she knew, back in 1982 that “[w]hat can be quantified—the most public of efferent modes—becomes often the guide to what is taught, tested, or researched” (Rosenblatt, p. 274). As a diploma exam marker, I am to adopt only the efferent response while also assessing the degree to which a student’s writing creates a notable aesthetic response. How am I supposed to assess the aesthetic effect if the task I am embarking on (and I have been “trained” to do) is geared towards an efferent response: what do I “carry away” from the text towards the rubric in order to score it?

Writer-Teacher as Absurd Hero

What is an existentialist writing teacher to make of the blatant and nauseating irony of the diploma exam marking experience? Before turning this crisis into an opening as Greene challenges me to do, I would like to suggest we conceptualize the existentialist writing teacher as an absurd hero and how the streamlined enterprise of standardized writing assessment is the prime context to explore this matter.

The concept of the absurd hero comes from existentialist philosopher Camus’ (1955) essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* wherein he reimagines the Greek myth of Sisyphus’ plight as a metaphor for a person’s awareness of the “mechanical aspects of their gestures, [and] their meaningless pantomime [that] makes silly everything that surrounds them” (p. 15). The myth of Sisyphus tells the story of a deceitful human who tricks the gods on more than one occasion to

escape death. As punishment, he is doomed to roll a massive boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down over and over again, and he has to continue to perform this task in perpetuity. Although Camus calls Sisyphus a "hero" it does not mean that Sisyphus had particular qualities that we should aspire to; rather, that Sisyphus stands for all of humanity, plagued with impetuous confidence, who is finally forced to live out the impossible, fruitless and repetitive search for meaning in a meaningless universe. While it may be dramatic, it is not totally outside the metaphor to imagine provincial assessment markers as similar to Sisyphus.

As this chapter's opening narrative illustrates, the whole premise of the diploma exam marking floor, and what we are actually *doing* there, strikes me as remarkably absurd. At one June session, a tablemate and I had actually dreamed up a premise for a musical titled *SatisFACTORY* that would tell the tale of a diploma exam marker that goes mad during a marking session. Over lunch, we designed brief mockups of the playbill, but we eventually settled on letting Broadway figure that out.

The reason I include this brief anecdote is to illustrate the unspoken understanding many of the diploma exam markers have that it *is* absolutely absurd what we're doing. We know it, and we still sign up to do it anyway, as though we laugh in self-deprecation at our condition to contribute to that condition. That is the dark humour in signing up to evaluate voiceless essays with swift, mechanical cognition and pencils.

However, there comes a time when a diploma exam marker will ask themselves the ultimate existential question, "Why am I here?" and depending on the day, the answer will vary. The answers may range from wanting to support your own students by taking in the experience of the diploma exam marking floor in order to "demystify" it for both yourself and them. It may be because you need the monetary compensation that is given. It may be because it's a school or

divisional mandate that you attend, or it may be because you honestly hope to learn more about how to teach your students to write well.

On the surface, all of these reasons are logical. And yet, all of these reasons also give you the potential to entrench yourself into a nihilistic stupor. By participating in the experience for the purpose of demystifying it, you subsequently give the experience power as it is now a part of your consciousness. By participating in it for the paycheck, you are paid for and effectively numb the ramifications of your disloyalty. By not resisting bureaucratic mandates you are giving up your own agency, and by hoping you learn more about how to teach writing, you are shrinking the writing construct by training yourself how to train your students.

Absurdity, in Camus' orientation to life, meant "he lived in a state of tension, refusing to give way to nihilism but quite aware that he could never know all he wanted to know" (Greene, 1973, p. 108). We learn this from Camus' (1955) description of the myth of Sisyphus as a cautionary tale of "the plight of the ordinary worker...who toils every day in oppressive conditions repeating the same mundane tasks with no apparent purpose" (Gordon, 2016, p. 590). This "no apparent purpose" is what makes the turn to passive nihilism almost seductive as it requires no courage or thinking, and this capitulating, the giving into the machine, is the constant battle a writer-teacher faces. In the climate of standardized writing assessment, and in the many conversations I have had with teachers who frequently go marking, it is a battle most of us are losing.

Passive nihilism, in this context, can equate to an English teacher using the standardized exam as the model for writing instruction in their own classroom. It is an acceptance that it is "useless" to treat writing in any other way outside of the specific tasks on the exam. I am guilty of this.

I think we do this because it takes less courage and fortitude. It makes "sense." It has an impression of a work-for-a-reward because the reasoning goes that the more I prepare my students for the exam, the more likely they are to find success on the exam. Where the absurdity comes in is that, within this process, we are fashioning a template for writing that does not fit the open-ended nature of writing, seen in the technocentric application of the exam on a subjective art form: it is in our desire to impose order, and infuse a concrete meaning in that order, within the ineffable quality of aesthetic experience. In this

> teachers find themselves having to negotiate an absurd existential conflict: when they realize that their desire to cultivate their students' creativity and critical thinking is at odds with the performance and accountability targets of the institutions in which they are working. (Gordon, 2016, p. 603)

For Camus, "the absurd lies in the clash between human beings' longing for clarity, order and consistency and the apparent uncertainty, messiness and irrationality that characterize our existence" (Gordon, 2016, p. 592). The unresolvable conflict that I face as a writing teacher is that my "world" (public school) has systems in place where knowledge acquisition is the ultimate purpose for education; as such, this sets up curriculum content, regardless of discipline, as measurable. However, I am also responsible for introducing and engaging with my students in a discipline that is ripe for open spaces, a place where one has to get comfortable living in ambiguity. The burden of rolling that heavy boulder up the hill—trying to leave room for the sublime (appreciating art for what it stirs in us and writing for self-awareness) while trudging through numerous and petty distractions (reading comprehension multiple choice tests and formulaic essays)—to only suffer the tedium of watching all of our strenuous efforts spoil with the ease of gravity, is enough to make one want to give up. The recognition of the absurdity, however, is the moment of recognizing that weariness; it's consciousness. In awakening consciousness, it "provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it

is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery" (Camus, 1955, p. 13).

To harken back to the first narrative vignette of this thesis, the options of suicide or recovery at the moment of awakened consciousness that Camus speaks of can be taken quite literally. In the context of the writer-teacher teaching writing within a mechanistic system of standardized assessment, it can be taken as the individual decision, the choice to fill in the two "E" circles. It is not unlike the concluding moment where Sisyphus turns towards his rock, that brief "return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep [that represents] the first steps of absurd freedom" (Camus, 1955, p. 59). It is the individual discretion within the machine, however minute, that helps me believe that I am not punching at the air. If "[a] man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses" (Camus, 1955, p. 11), then the make-believe that I accept is plunging into the effort I exert never knowing the outcome. I have to. It is in this spirit of rebellion that the writing teacher as absurd hero (within the standardized writing machine) enacts their existentialist stance. What Camus (1955) finds inspiring about Sisyphus is his individual action *within* a meaningless universe, that "his struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (p. 123). This is because "[h]is fate belongs to him" (Camus, 1955, p. 123).

Writer-Teacher for Freedom

For the writing teacher in the climate of standardized writing, there is another alternative: rebellion. It can be the small rebellion of choosing how to score a paper, or it can be a grander gesture in shaping all of their courses to defy standardized writing expectations and writing a thesis about the journey to do so. What I want to focus on here is the existentialist's foundational principle—freedom, by way of exercising choice—and what this means for me in my context.

What I most appreciate about Greene's conceptualization of freedom is that it is not a concept of blank and endless possibility. While there are certainly myriad opportunities from which to choose in every situation, choice and freedom are really only appropriately exercised within the boundaries of our direct context. In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Greene (1988) describes a free act as "a particularized one. It is undertaken from the standpoint of a particular situated person trying to bring into existence something contingent on his/her hopes, expectations, and capacities" (p. 70). It is a push towards an opening in our own situatedness within "a matrix of social, economic, cultural, and psychological conditions" (Greene, 1988, p. 80), and as such it is actually more possible and less overwhelming than a view of freedom as a total social revolution at the hands of an autonomous individual:

> No great heroism or self-sacrifice is asked of us who view ourselves as ordinary people. But we do have the capacity to refuse and to strive in this way and to do so by seeing clearly through our own eyes and speaking clearly in our own voices. (Greene, 1995, p. 111)

We do this by teaching for "self-reflectiveness originating in situated life" (Greene, 1995, p. 126). What is true for teachers, is also true for our students. If I want to be a teacher for freedom—my own *and* my students'—I need to always keep open to the possible, and my classroom can be the place for my students to engage with this as well. It has everything to do with imagination, and, according to Greene (1995), "resistance can best be evoked when imagination is released" (p. 124).

Learning *while* writing (Yagelski, 2011) in ELA is a fruitful modality for releasing the imagination. Greene was a strong advocate for providing students with rich, aesthetic experiences because these tap possibilities of seeing things, even from our own situatedness, as a "going beyond" (Greene, 2017, p. 149). "Aesthetic experiences require conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy, an ability to notice what is there to be noticed in the play, the

poem" (Greene, 1995, p. 125) or whatever the students are crafting for themselves. How much more powerful would it be to treat students as authors of their *own* aesthetic experiences? To look at their own thinking, memories, and stories as an opening? Exclusively providing students with essay templates and canned topics as "preparation" is preparing *them* to wearily accept the boulder without thinking. Giving students a notebook and a pen and space to write *just because* is a confidently raised middle finger to the absurdity of standardized writing, not unlike Sisyphus "cheerfully [rebelling] against his fate" (Gordon, 2016, p. 602). The exam is still in our lives, but how we choose to revere it in our daily curriculum, is the determinant of whether or not we accept that "poisoned peace" (Camus, 1955, p. 20) of writing conceived only within the realm of certainty.

CHAPTER 6: Writing to Belong; Writing as Becoming

The Known Unknowns (Narrative Vignette #4)

It's the second weekend of the second summer of graduate school and the imposter syndrome and stress that comes with it has worsened. In fact, I feel more alone and isolated this summer than in the previous summer, and my husband doesn't get it. Earlier this week, after class was over, I came home to an upside-down bedroom because he wanted to paint it. The chaos in my head met chaos in my home. My chest and jaw clenched, I turned right around, and I left the house. I'm spending a lot of time at the school because it's empty.

Right now, I'm sitting in the teacher workroom, on a Saturday, crying and rage-writing in my journal. Thank God I'm alone, because this is so embarrassing. I'm quite literally falling apart, and I don't want to drag anyone down with me. I was lovingly called "intense" by one of my cohort friends, and I took the hint that my anxious energy was sucking the fun out of this experience for the others, so I'm stepping back. It's one of those times when I'm too much. I'm too much even for myself to handle.

I just finished eating some convenient garbage food I bought at the grocery store nearby so I don't have to put any effort into the calories keeping me alive. I'm supposed to be writing another paper for David's class. I've written about 400 words in the

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There's an old adage in the writing world for those that are trying to break into the field:

last five hours and I keep cutting and pasting and moving them around like magnetic poetry, although there's nothing magnetic or poetic about them.

What a formidable foe, my mind. The power that it has to immobilize me is frightening. If I could cut open my skull, you could see it: red, inflamed, and swollen from the pressure I'm putting on myself to perform, and the words won't fucking come. For all of my soft preaching at my students to "just write and don't worry about how it sounds," that stupid advice isn't working for me right now. I thought I had built some confidence over the first year of classes, but now I am forced to face myself and my weaknesses and my own unfair expectations, and I have to do it alone. And this current episode of crumbling is because I earned an A+ this week.

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On Tuesday, a cohort member stormed out of class when they received a grade from David they didn't like. For that same assignment, David had given my paper an A+, after I was convinced A+s were impossible. Because of the upheaval, during Wednesday's class David spoke to all of us about what the grades mean. While I was listening to his explanation, I felt a burning shame for that A+, just sitting there in my A+ness. I refused to make eye contact with him as he clarified what an A+ meant because I was deeply embarrassed over the nice things he was

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indirectly implying about the work I did. If I had earned an A or A-, I would have been more comfortable and capable of making eye contact, but because I earned an A+, I couldn't. I was keeping that a secret, and there was no way I was going to participate in some sort of accidental revelation that David might make to the others with his body language that that was the grade I earned. I imagined my A+ to be a scalding scarlet letter pinned to my chest and so I crossed my arms to hide it. I wanted to be invisible. Part of it was due to my compulsive revulsion at showing any pride in myself, and part of it was because my friend had received a grade they didn't like, and if they knew I had earned an A+, perhaps their feelings would have been hurt even more. Even after David's explanation, though he categorized the difference between an A-, an A, and an A+, I still don't understand *how* I earned that A+, only that my paper earned the score as "something unique."

Normal people would take the A+ and be happy with themselves. Even though I crave this sort of positive external recognition, I also, however, never quite believe I "earn" it. And because writing means so much to me, I tiptoe around these products and grades. They're a minefield ready to blow apart my worldview and my place in it.

I'm aware of the dense irony that as an assessment graduate student, I can't conceptualize what the grades I earn in graduate

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school even mean. What are the edges of the "box"? I've never done graduate school before so I don't get it.

How do I create "something unique" again?

and it also comes with a tense, awkward paradox: the need to belong alongside the

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It's lunch time. We are sitting under a tree outside for some sun and for a more open space to ease the internal combustion of philosophy, big constructs, our own school realities, and deadlines. Even during break time, we spend it together. We laugh hard and loud.

I don't bring up my puzzling A+ or the recent awkward lecture from David, even though it's still weighing so heavily that my breath feels short. I pause before speaking (after all, I don't want to be too much again), then at a natural bend in the conversation I ask how everyone is feeling about their writing at this stage of the course. Last year was an awkward experiment for all of us, mainly writing just to hand something in, unknowing what the expectations were. We all wanted to perform well but had no idea what that looked like in graduate school. After all, even at the undergraduate level, our writing was focused on a particular requirement for a particular instructor. This is a different experience, and I'm finding it unsettling. More freedom means less clarity.

Christine learned from a mediocre performance in one class that she *has* to follow her own interests rather than follow a topic

There's an old adage in the writing world for those that are trying to break into the field: "write what you know." It's sensible advice; a solid awareness of who you are, where you come from, and what you know, affords a certain expertise and language, an agility that simultaneously helps you blend in and leave a mark. This scenario isn't just true for the writing world, though. It's a part of any distinct community of people, and it also comes with a tense, awkward paradox: the need to belong alongside the desire to stand out.

There's an old adage

recommended by others. She put hours into researching a topic that was laterally related to what she was actually interested in and ended up hating what she was writing. She says, “I think my writing is getting better because I stopped worrying about what they wanted and I’ve started writing for me.”

Jen jumps in: “But even when we’re supposed to know better at this stage, it’s hard to not care about a grade when we *do* care, because we’ve never really been asked to write for ourselves before.” There is a compressed, higher pitch in her voice. “We’re used to weighing and measuring and wrestling with boundaries. I didn’t adopt my own voice until this year because of that article that Dawn shared with me. It haunts me. But it has also helped me break away from what I thought academic writing was.”

Naoko never really considered the specific expectations of what writing in graduate school is supposed to be. She shrugs. “I’m just writing in the only way I know how. I have to trust that the grades I’m earning are fair and that our instructors know what good writing at this level is. Of course, I worry if the language is too simple or if I’m not being deep enough, but I seriously don’t know any better. Because I trust them, as I’m writing more, I realize I can trust myself and have confidence in the process. I mean, it's still hard, but I know that I can write something worth reading by myself and others in the end.”

in the writing world for those that are trying to break into the field: “write what you know.” It’s sensible advice; a solid awareness of who you are, where you come from, and what you know, affords a certain expertise and language, an agility that simultaneously helps you blend in and leave a mark. This scenario isn’t just true for the writing world, though. It’s a part of any distinct community of people, and it also comes with a tense, awkward paradox: the need to belong alongside the desire to stand out.

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My writing is getting better because I've started writing for myself.

It helped me break away from what I thought academic writing was.

I'm just writing in the only way I know how.

It's relaxing under this tree and with this company. I envy their drive to just keep moving forward: their assurance that all they can do is follow their own instincts. They all agree that there is some work that may not have earned the better of their grades, but they are still proud of it and actually enjoyed writing it. The exhaustion and the deadlines definitely play a part in the ability to let go until the next one.

Still, they just started writing how they felt most comfortable because there comes a time when done is better than perfect.

from, and what you know, affords a certain expertise and language, an agility that simultaneously helps you blend in and leave a mark. This scenario isn't just true for the writing world, though. It's a part of any distinct community of people, and it also comes with a tense, awkward paradox: the need to belong alongside the desire to stand out.

There's an old adage in the writing world for

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It's the last day of classes and we're all grinding to finish our final papers. I'm sitting in the larger classroom adjacent to ours, adrift from the cohort. I tell myself that my isolation is to help me focus, but it's really because I don't want anyone to see me cry as it comes and goes in waves. One by one my friends leave, some saying a brief goodbye, while others don't. Meanwhile, I want to scratch myself out of my own skin. I'm terrified of what I've come up with for my final paper, and I'm panicking knowing that it's too late and I'm too far in to turn back and start over. The topics of this summer's courses—research methods and discourse communities—are mocking me. Despite understanding what "saturation" means and knowing

how to find the big voices and publications in a particular field, I don't know which Venn diagram or felt-tipped arrow I can write my own name on. Not even in pencil.

I'm coming close to the end of a completed draft, and I re-read the first paragraph for the millionth time:

> *There's an old adage in the writing world for those that are trying to break into the field: "write what you know." It's sensible advice; a solid awareness of who you are, where you come from, and what you know, affords a certain expertise and language, an agility that simultaneously helps you blend in and leave a mark. This scenario isn't just true for the writing world, though. It's a part of any distinct community of people, and it also comes with a tense, awkward paradox: the need to belong alongside the desire to stand out.*

There. There is the bright, hot tightness I'm feeling about my writing. There is where I can write in my name: wanting to "belong" but also wanting to "stand out." So, I move forward, using my biting self-doubt as a framing metaphor to examine the nature of educational research methods. It is all I know to do because it is all I know.

* * * * *

Following the invigorating spirit of defiance at the end of Chapter 5, I have plunged back into frustration and agony and rumination. Writing as a student—to have my writing evaluated and graded with standards and criteria I do not understand—has shaken my pledge to promote writing as a meaning-making pursuit. Suddenly, the final product matters to me in a different way when grades are attached. Facing this discomfort brings up questions around the reality of writing in a community with its own goals and means of evaluation, as well as where and how the individual writer writes their way into this community.

Writer vs. Self

If there is one thing I have learned in comparing myself with my graduate student colleagues, it is that I seem to be vexed with a certain reality, while others, not so much: writing

is a mystery, a frustrating mystery. If the frustration lies in the mystery, then despite all I have learned and despite all I want for my students, the truth is, when I am put back into the position as a writer with an audience, I yearn for the paradoxical magical formula. In the first scene of the narrative, the longing revealed itself in that seemingly simple and final question of how to create something unique again. Not only was this an apostrophic plea for someone/thing to tell me what to do, it was also a pragmatic query about ways to recreate the same qualities/criteria in my writing so I can earn the same results (grade) a second time. And with this realization, I identify with many of my own students.

As a writing-teacher, angry at text-as-product paradigms and standardization, I am also the graduate student who desperately wants to finish her own writing products skillfully, needing clear signposts on how to do so. The narrative speaks to the deep desire I have for certainty, predictability, and a firm place to rest my questions about writing on. Camus (1991) proposed that one of the greatest existential problems that human beings face is that we exhaust ourselves in "trying to find formulae or attitudes which will give [our] existence the unity it lacks" (p. 262). I don't think any Walt-Whitman-Song-Of-Myself quotations will suffice as justification for the irony. I wish I could live out my principles with more confidence and not be my own punchline.

The first scene comes from a particularly low point in my graduate school journey and I am not surprised that it has to do with my writing. Any writing for me, whether it is for academic purposes or for processing through my emotions in my journal, is deeply personal; I would even go so far as to say that it is tied intimately with my consciousness, and therefore, my identity. Thus, any troubles that I am facing in a writing situation are often not really about writing at all, but are moments where I become hyper self-aware of my limitations. "Writing what I know"

then becomes a much more layered truth. While I did not want this narrative to be a sort of confessional or therapy session about my personal neuroses, by highlighting my own contradictory approach to writing, I am interrogating the "givens" I have, even those in my own beliefs. How I take this new understanding of myself into the classroom will impact the instructional choices I make. If I want to keep prodding my self-awareness to stay awake, then I must "attempt to make [my] assumptions explicit, for only then can they be examined, analyzed, and understood" (Greene, 1973, p. 70). Immediately, it is making me question the "stupid advice" I give to my students to "just write and don't worry." If *I* am not living in that advice well when I write, I am being unfair and untruthful to them.

Underneath all of the insecurity thrumming in the narrative is another important personal context to consider: prior to enrolling in graduate studies, I have been writing without external criteria for a very long time. As much as these conditions have opened my understanding of what writing can be, it also made me forget what writing for others was like, and that created another type of writing insecurity. I see now that this is just as true for me as it is for my students; we often take writing very personally, as an expression or extension of ourselves even if we treat it as a disembodied, "objective" form. Like these scenes suggest, we are often evaluated on what we do/produce, and if we identify very strongly with what we produce, the grade becomes much more than just the percentage point or letter of the alphabet.

Writer vs. Environment

I chose to focus on this particular paper and these particular moments from my graduate school coursework because they speak to and of each other. To assume the "stranger" position (Greene, 1973), I want to step outside the narrative and look at the two "characters" that are in conflict in this story: Teri versus graduate school expectations. To be fair to graduate school

expectations, I accept that it (as an abstract entity) has no feelings of conflict towards me, but rather this setup is more about where I project my own sense of inadequacy. However, the projections are not necessarily 100% from my imagination either, but have a lot to say about the role and function of the discourse community in a writer's success and sense of belonging in a writing situation.

Swales (2014) describes the concept of the discourse community as having certain criteria or "participatory mechanisms" (p. 221) that serve as both defining features of the community as well as gatekeeping devices that preserve the integrity of that discourse community. Even though these participatory mechanisms are "primarily to provide information and feedback" (Swales, 2014, p. 221) there is a "threshold of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise" (Swales, 2014, p. 222). As to be expected, to delineate a specific group as a specific group, its members must have a certain level of this and not that in order to define its distinction. However, the "awkward paradox" of being a novice in a discourse community is in balancing or navigating the "creative tension" (Corrigan & Slomp, 2021, p. 161) of trying to not just belong, but to contribute to its vitality. This would mean balancing one's own "needs and intentions with the needs of the intended audience and the intended purpose of [their texts]" (Corrigan & Slomp, 2021, p. 161). What is apparent in the narrative is that the needs of the intended audience were not clear enough to the novices (i.e., myself and my cohort friends). I am by no means suggesting this is an intentional bridling of standards to purposefully confuse the novices; rather, because we are intelligent professionals and we chose to want to be introduced to academia, it is required that there be struggle in learning where the edges are in creating our own texts so that we ultimately prove our mettle. It's a dance between writing for yourself—to assert your own ideas and values—and writing within a discourse community's

standard. This requires belonging enough to also offer ways to push against those standards with fresh insights, or other ways of seeing. Most certainly, I am a novice member of this discourse community, and I imagine that if I were to read samples of prior graduate students' work I would have had a better sense of the threshold I had to meet, to step behind the curtain and see Oz face-to-face. Grades, at least for me, became the only way to know whether or not I was doing sufficient written work.

Borg (2003) argues that by the very nature of a discourse community being relatively stable (in order for it to be acknowledged as a discrete identity), "with experts who perform gatekeeping roles, then their genres are normative" (p. 400); therefore, there is a necessary element of conformity required from the novices. In school communities, this conformity is often shaped by grades. And because the main currency in academia is writing, in order to belong, as expected there needs to be a regulated assessment of writing skill at this level. Furthermore, one can have a lot of extensive knowledge and experience about a particular topic and can write with proficiency, however, this is still not a guarantee of success in a writing situation. Knowledge "about the discourse community for whom one is writing—its purposes, values, and expectations, and how that community views the subject one is writing about" is just as important (Corrigan & Slomp, 2021, p. 167), and therein lies the struggle: figuring out what counts as the necessary "social capital" and what would not make the cut. As a beginner in academia, this is not clear, and I expect that the lines vary between themes, faculties, and institutions.

While Swales (2014) stated that in most circumstances academic courses would not qualify as a discourse community, it is "the hoped-for outcome" because, at the very least, the experts can review "what needs to be done to assist non-native speakers and others to fully

engage" in the community (p. 227). From this vantage point, I understand the need for standards in writing in such schooling scenarios (where a dialectical and rhetorical situation is present).

Bartholomae's (1986) influential essay, "Inventing the University," explores this need for students to "appropriate" to the "specialized discourses" (p. 9) of whatever discipline they are studying. Their writing has to read "as if they were easily or comfortably one with their audience" (Bartholomae, 1986, p. 9). While we may be professionals who have demonstrated our writing acuity via our graduate school applications and undergraduate transcripts, this does not ensure that we have a confident understanding of the acceptable level of complexity in thinking and structuring of academic texts. The texts we study in our coursework are from published scholars, with PhDs and years of experience. To develop a heuristic method in order to problem solve what would constitute and then somewhat emulate the genres *for ourselves* is not only intimidating, it may not be explicitly encouraged. Bartholomae continues:

> When students are writing for a teacher, writing becomes more problematic than it is for the students who are describing baseball to a Martian. *The students, in effect, have to assume privilege without having any* [emphasis added]. And since students assume privilege by locating themselves within the discourse of a particular community—within a set of specifically acceptable genres and commonplaces—learning, at least it is defined in the liberal arts curriculum, becomes more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery. (pp. 10-11)

The teacher's impulse to prescribe, with great detail, what is necessary in a writing task when grades are involved is thus understandable. It feels disingenuous to encourage students to think for themselves and create their own understanding through writing when their product is then also evaluated and scored by someone outside of themselves; yet, like Bartholomae suggests, if teachers are very precise with how certain things are scored, students are more likely to write *to* those certain things, rather than following their own instincts, queries, or even pushing back against that criteria.

As I explored previously, highly prescriptive writing instruction leans too heavily towards the external standard and often does not allow for individual expression and meaning-making. In writing something to meet someone else's standard we often put our own writing goals to the side. When I am using the traditional rubrics from Alberta Education to assign grades for my students' writing, they (and I) are confused and frustrated when I try to explain what "it takes" to earn higher scores. Moreover, if a new graduate student were to ask me advice on how to score As on graduate school papers, even though I am near the end of this junior academic journey, I would have no idea what to say. I can certainly empathize with their thirst for practical tips, but believing these exist, especially in service to earning good grades, also means that any advice I give may lead to antiwriting (Neel, 1988). That feeling of not knowing *how* what I have written has met some standard outside of myself, while further wanting to be able to recreate that quality the next time allows me to imagine a similar confusion my students have.

I have come to accept that we are unable to comfortably balance this confusion or tension. When grades are involved (from an external standard, and not self-assessment), obviously we must mold our writing to the task set before us and the natural check-and-balance that discourse communities provide is essential for its health. This leaves me wondering, as an individual in a new threshold (a graduate student writer), about when the transition between novice and expert "happens" within a discourse community. If I am to use the teaching profession as an analogous model, I cannot pinpoint a particular time or moment when I felt like a "master teacher" despite having that label used on me. There is no defining milestone. It is more likely that it was a quiet and gradual gaining of confidence over time. It was an unspoken movement away from external teacher evaluations to meeting my own expectations born from

the day-to-day needs of the classroom. If I have not been heavily discredited or banished from either the teaching or academic writing community yet, then I suppose that is a sign that I am gaining belonging.

Considering the angst that runs through the narrative, existentialist perspectives provide a great challenge in how to see myself as a junior academic and writer. The anxious hesitation to write a final paper that was so individualized while also somehow demonstrating my understanding of the range, nature, structure, and function of educational research, indicates that I believed that my "instinct" to use my personality flaws as a metaphorical frame for my exploration was not going to be acceptable. According to Greene (1973), "the individual must not allow himself to be dominated by his group or community" (p. 262), but this becomes a problem when the individual is trying to break into that (writing) community in the first place. What texts may "count" in my own personal and professional writing life may not "count" in this new frame of reference. However, in order to exercise my individuality, I need to "assert initiative as a consciousness capable of grasping a diversity of realities" (Greene, 1978, p. 32). It may have been the case that what I wanted to write might not have been acceptable, and that would have been a reality I would have had to deal with at that time. Even in a writing-for-school situation, I have to accept that true freedom is always an individual's choice *within* a context (in this case a discourse community with its own goals, values, and standards), and that consciousness was made all the more real at the site of my contentious desire to want to "belong" in order to move it along. Furthermore, to some extent, I can see how my acceptance of writing as an existential project actually created more tension in this context. Because writing means so much to me personally, when it is scored and evaluated by others, and I am unsure what meaning

I am making for myself in these conditions, I cared more about my writing products than what was good for my overall well-being. I still mourn the darlings I have killed along the way.

Playing with Form

The paragraph that is included as a side commentary (and then provided at the end of the narrative) was the introduction to the final paper for the coursework of EDUC 5400 and EDUC 5410 focusing on the range, nature, structure and function of educational research. While learning about paradigms, research methodologies and discourse communities, I found myself struggling to see where I "belonged"; this is both within the field of educational research and a common emotional issue I face in my life on the whole. I have always struggled with self-doubt and that summer, it plagued me mercilessly. Consequently, I used doubt as a way to perceive educational research and my place in it. In the context of this particular chapter, it also examines what it means to "write what you know." As a graduate student writer, what does it mean to "write what I know," especially when what I have known and written for so long (personal journal writing) is *not* academic writing for education? What does it mean for me to attempt to "break into the field"? What does it mean to "*break* into the field"? For me, what I know comes from my very specific, deeply subjective point of view and experience and this is often the strategy I employ for trying to understand anything.

The opening paragraph repeatedly runs along the right margin and this choice serves several purposes. The meta-awareness of wanting to belong to a particular community—both as a cohort member and as a graduate student—could be seen (symbolically) as constantly running in the background of my thinking about what it means to write (and belong) in graduate school. It is noticeable but only distracting if the reader chooses to try and read these as one entity rather than seeing the right margin content as a sort of commentary on the narrative that runs through

the left margin. This can speak to our impulse to try to categorize and unify in order to understand something, much like my own failed attempt at trying to understand how I "fit" what I thought was the mold of graduate school writing. Because this is not neat and tidy linear non-fiction, the forced "fitting" does not work. This is also why the script in the right margin is repeatedly cut-off mid-sentence when it reaches the end of a scene. To resolve it would be too satisfying and unrealistic of the disquietude, and this would be the opposite of its artistic intention.

The meta-layers of that writing experience with now this one—writing about my graduate student writing experience as a graduate student writing—is a serendipity that, I suppose, brings this thesis in on itself to close the circle. And yet, it is still rife with incomplete knowledge and understanding about what it means for me to write, and how that informs how I teach writing. I am no closer to understanding what it means for my students to write their way into "high school" writing because what may work for my classroom expectations (when looking at the teacher as Bartholomae's "privileged knower") may not work for others, let alone the students' individual writing choices. If anything, I can only be honest about the mysterious subjectivity that is present even though the very presence of grades communicates objective standards.

Inconclusion

As much as I would like to revere writing for the enticing, mysterious, open possibility that it is, I also bear humankind's impatience with uncertainty. I want to have answers for myself and for my students. However, existentialist "[t]eachers, like their students, have to learn to love the questions as they come to realize that there can be no final agreements or answers, no final commensurability" (Greene, 1988, p. 134)—that "place where one has to get comfortable living in ambiguity." Finally confronting this truth within myself will help me attend to my students

who share the same hunger for certainty. I am facing what I both love and hate about writing: its openness and stubborn refusal to conform (or even knowing what to conform to). Writing is never finished and therefore answers are never fully "right." Even if I/they score an A+, recreating that definitively is impossible.

Gilbert (2015), in her book *Big Magic*, encourages creatives to "[m]ake space for all these paradoxes to be equally true inside your soul" (p. 273). These spaces, or as Greene would refer to them, "openings," is where educating for freedom happens. Writing will always be a struggle *because* of its situationality and inherent uniqueness which makes the pursuit of it ever "finishing" impossible; this impossible completion is also a very simplified, absolutist acceptance about writing. But Greene (1995) also reminds me that "[l]earning to write is a matter of learning to shatter the silences, of making meaning, of learning to learn" (p. 108). While I am near the end of my graduate school writing journey, that does not mean that I am guaranteed a final, complete understanding of what it means to write in graduate school or attain an accomplished feeling like I belong in the academic discourse community.

This is why writing, like all learning, is about beginning again. Writing as an existential project—the kind of writing that I have cultivated outside of my graduate student experience—has taught me that. And if we are always beginning, we are always becoming. Maybe belonging is not the finish line we should be chasing.

CHAPTER 7: In/Conclusion

This final chapter is supposed to accomplish a lot. I need to convince the readers (the field) that these stories and this exploration have been a worthwhile endeavour and to provide answers to my central questions.

However, it also needs to respect and reflect the style and voice of the previous six chapters, balancing narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and philosophical existentialism. Facing this tall order, what I have come to learn is that, ultimately, this thesis has been a search for meaning, not answers. Even though "[t]he scholarly community expects the report to include discursive arguments that yield a result—a truth claim" by "committing a narrative rendering, the researcher makes arguments implicit" (Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 585). And so, for one last time, I need to weave in and out of memories and moments in order to express what it means to come to the end of this thesis.

The Givens

I once sang at a funeral where the deceased lost their lives in terrible, random circumstances. An entire family including a mother, father, their daughter, and granddaughter, were killed in a car accident. The priest officiating opened his homily with a profound reflection on how we take every step of our life buttressed on assumptions—assumptions that we can predict with relative certainty how our days, weeks, years will go. Rhythm and routine and seasons lull us into complacency. When we wake up in the morning, we assume our day will go about regularly: we shower, brush our teeth, go to work, go home, repeat, repeat, repeat. However, there are innumerable possibilities that could disrupt and thwart this daily routine. It is these shocking times (like a tragic car accident) that pull back our curtains on how feeble these "foundational" assumptions really are.

The distressing problem with these assumptions is not so much that they aren't stable (and thereby not assumptions) but that they are *necessary,* frail though they are. Without these assumptions, we would not be able to function because we would be crippled by the blunt truth of our very thin thread of mortality. We need these assumptions to keep going about our regular business, to get things done and to move life forward.

My depression and the life-or-death line I straddled was not a freak accident, but I can relate to the sense of existential turmoil that begins in such foundation-shaking times. The unquestioned beliefs about my life's path fell away, and I was left with no sense of direction. Picking up a pen and writing out my self-talk was a way to get still, listen, and think to and for myself. What was I doing here?

That question—what am I doing here?—is just as relevant to my life in the classroom as it is in my personal life. If my doubt and subsequent investigation of my own assumptions awakened my consciousness, I can approach my career with this thinking and frame similar questions about education. What are the curtains we need to pull back in our school cultures? What are the givens, or even frail assumptions we rest our pedagogy on? What problems have I faced in doing this research, and how have these complicated my understanding about writing? We/I could respond to these questions with a fatalistic or nihilistic perspective, accepting beliefs that challenging writing, curriculum, and learning is futile, but if I am to do good work and continue to move forward, I have to push back on this impulse. Because writing this thesis was itself an investigation into my values and beliefs about the writing process, the journey I went on as a junior academic had its own set of givens that I had to contend with.

Writing-as-Inquiry

After my thesis colloquium, I had a visit with a friend, who happens to be a retired member of the faculty of Education. I needed the support from someone who has been a part of the academic scene, but is also comfortably removed from it. He is not a committee member or otherwise invested in this document, but a friendly advisor nonetheless. We sat in the shade in his backyard and he started the conversation with how shocked he was at what I wrote in my proposal. “How do you write with such power?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just write.”

He urged me to speak more of my writerly choices, and so I began to explain, as one example, that in the narrative vignette I included in my thesis proposal (the first narrative vignette in this thesis) I wanted the list of symptoms of my depression to repeat the word “loss” over and over, with increasing severity, to give the reader a weighted feeling, one that is relentless.

Sensing I was struggling to try and explain myself, but also because I think he wanted to keep a writer’s craft a bit of a mystery, he said, “Actually, I don’t want to know anymore.” The conversation continued, filled with his encouragement for me to keep going, to keep writing, to keep telling the truth.

Further along in my journey, when I received revisions suggestions from my committee after a full draft had been submitted, he gave me some more advice: “Now, you just have to do what they want,” as though it were as easy as sealing an envelope. I did not like that answer. And that made me feel like a petulant and defiant toddler. Not a writer, and certainly not a researcher.

I have battled with this dichotomy from the very beginning of this whole thesis journey. In my personal journal-styled field notes I wrote in these last two years, there are multiple

entries, at nearly every stage, that stated “I have no idea what I’m doing”—that I was “just writing.” That somehow, writing and research were not the same thing and there is no way I could be doing both.

Because of this, I write here today, that this whole thesis journey has actually made me start to dislike writing. I have regretted, on multiple occasions, writing this thesis at all. I want it to mean something to me, and frankly, this matters more to me than what it may mean to the field. Writing for meaning may be selfish, but writing for answers feels shallow.

I am now beginning to think that by intellectualizing and being scholarly about my writing process I have somehow marred my relationship with it. Until graduate school, writing has never been an intellectual pursuit for me; it has always been about joy and expression, even when it hurts. And even telling this truth, right now in this concluding chapter, when I am supposed to be explaining how I am contributing to the field, I feel lost, frustrated, and defeated. I got nothing.

As an illustrative example, I have been wrestling with Polkinghorne’s (1995) theories of analysis in narrative inquiry, and I cannot decipher which of the two types of analysis I have undergone in this thesis: analysis of narratives, or narrative analysis. Deep down, I am sensing that I have engaged in both and that frustrates me even more because then it feels like I am definitely *not* a researcher and *only* a writer. Of course, I am assuming that participating in both types (rather than one over another) is a sign of bad methods. Furthermore, admitting that this determination has not been made/understood until the concluding chapter is just another indication that writing is hard, writing a thesis about writing is hard, writing as a research process is hard, and researching the writing process of a thesis about writing is hard. However, as much as I, my committee, and the traditions of the thesis genre may be asking for something more

substantial to be offered, we must remember that "[t]he aim of narrative research is not to generalize…Instead, narrative research offers the possibility of exploring nuances and interrelationships among aspects of experience that the reader may apply to better understand other related situations" (Josselson, 2011, pp. 238-239). To state emphatically that the route was clear that brought me to this "end" (and included only one path) is not only inaccurate, it also does not seem to align with the goals of narrative research. Moreover, each reader will have different takeaways.

Polkinghorne (1995) explains that in the method he calls "analysis of narratives," the researcher takes raw stories as data, and from there, the researcher analyzes the text for meaning. This would involve coding for major themes, to then become categories, and from there, other meaningful relationships can be found in the data. These are the findings, built from what he called "paradigmatic reasoning" (p. 10). For this thesis, in each chapter that involved a narrative vignette, it appears that I followed this reasoning because what came after each narrative was what I noticed about myself in relation to writing in the vignette: how I was the site of cognitive dissonance in what I wanted writing to be versus what it seemed to be presented as, and my role in both of those interpretations. This exploration was then supported by other scholarship and constructs approached through Greene's existential theories of education.

However, I also engaged in what Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes as "narrative analysis." This involves storying the data and choosing narrative technique purposefully to make meaning. My trivial assertion that I "just write" actually involved choosing which memories are included, crafting the word choice for emotional impact, embedding figurative language and overall shaping a reading experience. This is very much the stuff I teach in my ELA classes, in what we attend to when we are appreciating mentor texts, and how as writers, we are always

apprentices. And in this concluding chapter, as I am wrestling with how to "conclude," to provide answers or a unified understanding, "the researcher's task is to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data as contributors to a goal or purpose" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). The next thing for me to do would be to find a plot that links these data elements together "as parts of an unfolding temporal development culminating in the denouement" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). In this case, this concluding chapter should be a narrative itself.

That is the crux of narrative inquiry; in the storytelling elements and creative form I am presenting a position—an argument—about writing, what it means for me as a teacher and as a regular person. But what crumples this even more is that coding as some sort of external, objective process imposed upon written text, doesn't really work when you are writing about yourself. Even though it feels like cheating because I write to match the codes, or code to match the writing, Hunter (2010) notes that "analysis and writing are interwoven processes" (p. 50). Bishop (2004) states that "[r]esearch and writers' practices show that writing is about choices, large and small—choices that can't always be discovered by looking at the finished text" (p. 4). And yet, in order for a concluding chapter to line up with research expectations, what is expected feels a lot like template writing, with boxes to be checked off. In explaining the dilemma in autoethnography, Ellis (2009) speaks of this desire for the researcher to have a "methods cookbook to guide [them]" (p. 362). It seems as though I have to somehow answer to this despite a major argument of this thesis being to push back against a recipe for writing.

Greene (2017) reminds me that I am fighting against something that has long been a reality, that "[w]e are still too prone to dichotomize: to think of 'disciplines' or 'public traditions' or 'accumulated wisdom' or 'common culture' (individualization despite) as objectively existent,

external to the knower—there to be discovered, mastered, learned" (p. 147). This impulse to want to create and/or learn something that checks all of the boxes is not only visible in myself writing this thesis, but is really no different from the discomfort I have with how writing is practiced in school.

I do recognize that I likely would not be in such a frustrated space if I was less binary in my thinking—that writing for meaning *and* answers, writing for myself *and* for the field, writing expressively *and* in a genre with gatekeepers—can coexist. I am still learning how to do this. It speaks to the difficulty in accepting writing as a dialogical practice, and the freedom that Greene (1988) spoke about:

> To be aware of authorship is to be aware of situationality and of the relation between the ways in which one interprets one's situation and the possibilities of action and of choice. This means that one's 'reality', rather than being fixed and predefined, is a perpetual emergent… (p. 23)

As the author of this thesis (and my own life, to borrow an existential metaphor) I have to recognize the position I am in amidst the pressures to produce something that will satisfy the field while somehow also being truthful, that I don't think I have arrived at any answers. If there is to be any reaching out to a reader at all, it may be to a writing-teacher like me who needs to read someone's experience who is like their own, simply so they do not feel alone.

Resistances

All of this meta-reflection on the thesis writing process includes the all too familiar angst I feel toward writing-as-product paradigms. Adopting a writer-teacher-as-stranger-to-research position appears to have alienated me so far that I do not know if what I am doing even "counts" anymore. When I apply this to my teaching life, I arrive at the same feeling of being out of place. With renewed frustration, bred from wanting to contribute to the field of research but coming up empty, I can see where I experience this in my school reality. This stepping back from myself as

a thesis writer reveals the pitfall in the teacher-as-stranger metaphor because of the potential for feeling lost and powerless to change.

Joseph (2007) introduces a problem with Greene's central metaphor of doing educational philosophy with an existentialist lens: the teacher-as-stranger analogy consistently puts the teacher outside as an external critical observer of school culture. It can be alienating, and if one steps back too far, they may lose heart for the whole mission. The problems can seem too grand, the work too difficult, the pathways too entrenched. When consciousness is opened, schooling can indeed seem "strange" and the teacher can be left in the tension between wanting to slam the curtain closed and return to routine, or the teacher is overwhelmed with their new reality and freezes, not knowing what to do. Grumet (1999) argues that this is a feeling of powerlessness because "[i]n schools, the exercise of power is institutionalized and disclaimed" (p. 28). For power to be reclaimed, attention must be paid to what "initiatives we take and the responses we make" individually as teachers (Grumet, 1999, p. 28). For Joseph (2007), those working to reclaim this power are "curriculum leaders...[who] carry forth with moral integrity characterized by a remarkable sense of hope, *despite* [emphasis added] their awareness of inequality and injustices" (p. 297).

This is the fault line I have discovered while engaging in this research. It is in the shadow of the "how" in this thesis' central question where I falter. "How" implies both a possible "what" answer and a "why" answer. In the beginning, I thought I would be able to answer the "how" as though I could list some "realities" that I would uncover about what it means to be a writing teacher, and in some way this is true. I have learned that my relationship with writing has uncovered my points of weakness: discomfort in responding to my students' stories, training my students to write formulaically even though deep down it goes against my integrity while also

suffering in that need for "answers" myself. Those are the hows. But the "why"-styled answer of "how" I engaged with writing as an existential project is and will remain unanswered, especially when it comes to how it is happening with my students. Sometimes when we ask "how" it is as a rhetorical question. We can throw up our hands and cry "*how*?" which, in this sense, really means "*why*?" I want writing to be personally *meaningful* for each individual student, but are my small attempts for eight short weeks really something that transpires as teaching for freedom? Because there are such utilitarian structures in our schooling system, that come across as common sense, a logical mandate of "getting them through" to the next step, who is to say that my approach is any more ethical? In what ways should I be a guide, "torn between necessity and possibility"? (The Maxine Greene Institute, 2020). If the "how" is almost rhetorical and unanswerable, it is very difficult to see the answer to the "why."

As a writing teacher with existentialist values, I am most interested in freedom and choice, but this also requires significant mental fortitude and courage to rebel against the very ingrained systems that I am a part of. As illustrated in the first narrative especially, it is incredibly difficult to be the committed teacher that students need when it is so exhausting being habitually deflated four times a year. Perhaps it is hubris on my part believing I am somehow going to make a real difference in the lives of students, to think that my small efforts over 40 days in a quarter are going to *really* change how students view writing, or that writing themselves can be the existential project of their lifetime. Greene has high hopes and expectations for me, and I don't know if I can do it. I don't know if I am good enough, because the awakening I arrived at in 2011, and revisited in graduate school writing, has made me realize that even 10 years later, my reticence shows that the evidence of progress is still negligible within myself.

As I find myself tempted to turn away from Greene's instruction to accept ambiguity and from Camus' illustration of the defiant hero, I feel guilty for being angry and despondent at my conditions; it would be *so easy* to give up hope because the boulder is just too heavy. I am not sure if I have the energy or courage to take up this project for 20 more years, especially since I have spent extensive energy and time contributing to what I want to push back against. The painful irony in trying to teach for freedom is that the students (and their influencers) are free to not only ignore the importance of their own choice in becoming, but are even free to be angry at me for being contradictory to their expectations. While "[t]he good teacher becomes an occasion for permitting a child to decide consciously on freedom and becoming" (Greene, 1967, p. 72), I am not sure I have enough stamina to put my whole heart into something I hold so dear to be just "an occasion."

Kincheloe (2016) gives the same tall order: "we want to be scholars who work for the social good, smart people who help those who need it most to actually benefit from education and in the process keep their souls intact" (p. 619). That latter command is the hardest part, I think. While existentialists may argue that we "earn our freedom when we become conscious of the conditions that limit our freedom of choice and self-definition and are courageous enough to resist and overcome them" (Gutek, 2017, p. 117), freedom is not just conditions that support *freedom from* oppressive frameworks; freedom also includes the conditions that support *freedom to* act within possibilities that oppose the given—the freedom for souls not to just remain intact, but perhaps to flourish. The curriculum and assessment theories that I want (and try) to enact in my classroom—developing writing practice as a way of being, and rejecting objective assessment that upholds reliability as its only gauge—are geared towards that flourishing: that

writing can be an existential project. It has been for my personal identity, and in order to live in integrity, I want it to be true in my professional identity as well.

Indeterminate Denouement: "I Am...Not Yet"

Every year since 2014, I have chosen a word to meditate on for personal growth over the course of a year. The word I had chosen for 2021 was "whole." In the introduction of this thesis I stated how important it is for me to live in integrity (i.e., wholeness) and it has been the cognitive dissonance and frustration about writing I have experienced over the last 10 years that have illumined poignant moments of awareness of this personal truth. I chose my word for 2021 well before I had chosen Greene's theories as my theoretical framework for my thesis. Much like I lamented in Chapter 6, I am still battling with the desire for completion and unity, even to the point that I opened this chapter with an uneasiness in doing so. However, Greene (1995) reminds me that "we would not need to be wide-awake to our lives if it could be resolved" (p. 112). Consciousness is contingent on imperfection and incompletion. Using the ideal for "wholeness" as a guide may be fine, but that is not teaching and living for openings, either. Consciousness must be tapped again and again with every frustration. It seems to me that pulling back the curtains of writing pedagogy not only has made me aware of the delicate assumptions we rest our instruction on, but also of the easy necessity that exists in absorbing these assumptions. What I am choosing to reconcile is that where I stand in my pedagogy has to be true, enough, for now, so that we can begin and finish and begin again every season. Because this has been my personal experience with writing, I must stay true to that position in the classroom. I have to admonish myself that perhaps my role as a writing teacher is to act not to cure, but to care. In those caring actions towards myself writing and teaching writing, I am making my choices "without any promise of victory" and by this I have "created new values, [and] invented a new self" (Greene,

1973, p. 256). This new self that I keep re-inventing is my "[choosing] myself as a teacher" (The Maxine Greene Institute, 2020). I said so myself: in my beginning was the Word. The words that I choose to frame this reinvention of myself and my understanding of writing, right now in this final chapter of this thesis, can be seen as another (temporal) storied account that is unfinished.

I cannot imagine where I would be if I didn't start writing for myself and that's the truth. It is the place where I learned how much and how little words matter. Because words are flimsy and incomplete in how they describe an emotion or situation (the "givenness" of meaning that we imagine words have), they do not hold as much weight as we think, and they are impermanent. Time passes and they don't mean now what they did then.

Perhaps it is our choice of what words we give weight to. Maybe we need this sort of flexible respect for language, and we decide what has meaning and for what purposes the scenario calls for. Words can mean nothing and everything, and as a writing teacher, maybe that is what I need to communicate/teach my students: the skill in flexibility *within* incompletion.

And I suppose I do. With our daily writing practice, students are given the opportunity to play with words in a low-stakes scenario. It is a record of their in-the-moment thoughts and trying things out; they may have no significance to them in the present or future unless they want them to. However, we write to take ourselves seriously as well: to develop arguments, to weave lessons, to love. This attempt to take myself seriously by conducting self-study research and writing a thesis is met with the conflict of wanting this thesis to mean something to me, lost and incomplete though I am.

What I do finally understand is what lived curriculum is. Aoki (1993) says that "[t]o live in the middle between the language of the curriculum-as-plan and the language of lived curricula is to live amidst discourses that are different in kind" (p. 261). While I have learned a lot about

the history and development of the discipline of writing (composition) studies and am well-trained in standardized writing assessment, what I have lived with writing in my own life—my own lived curriculum—I cannot ignore. These two different experiences of writing are two different discourses and, as such, "they resist integration" (Aoki, 1993, p. 261). However, is it an impossible project to *try* to have them dwell beside each other and not be host to such conflict in my pedagogy or in myself? Aoki (2005) asserts that it is a tension that can never be dispelled, that teachers must master a way of "dwelling aright within it" (p. 163). While I can accept that there will always be tension, and that damn boulder will keep rolling down the hill, I must figure out how I can avoid getting sick at heart in this "dwelling." As much as I want to resolve that spinning in order to accomplish wholeness, lived curriculum is *living* curriculum, and the existential/existence project is renewed every day.

Kohl (1998) writes that Greene's existential educational theories taught him that "the practice of love requires an understanding of incompleted projects" (p. 58). If I am to value myself and my students, I have to choose pedagogy that accepts our selves' and our projects' incompletion as an act of love.

To inconclude, I offer a memory from Pinar (1998) recalling a speech Greene gave:

> As she draws near to what feels like the end of the speech, she pauses and looks at us. 'Who am I?' she poses, partly to us, partly to herself. She answers: 'I am who I am not yet'. 'Not yet'...the phrase still hangs in the air around me. Maxine Greene **is...not yet**. Her own sense of incompletion, of what is not yet but can be, inspires us to work for a future we can only imagine now. (p. 1)

It is my sincere hope that if this thesis were to matter to anything beyond my personal discovery, it would be that as its writer I was able to "move the one who encounters [this] work to self-awareness, to confrontation of [their] personal predicaments, to identification of [themselves]" (Greene, 1967, p. 5). It is through writing and teaching as an existential project that we have the

hope and the faith in each other—the courage to practice love—by giving the space to always begin again.

The Possibilities

To begin again means to see possibility. And seeing possibility is an orientation, a *choice* in how we see.

One of the biggest things I have learned throughout this process is that hope is a *choice*. The choice to look ahead and imagine alternative ways to live and to teach and to write is not only an act of hope, it is also an act of courage. While I may joke that graduate studies has made me (more of) a pain-in-the-ass at my school with the amount of challenging questions I ask about formulas for writing tasks and assessment practices, it's my way of "shatter[ing] the silences" (Greene, 1995, p. 108), of pulling back the curtains on our pedagogy.

To write autoethnographically—to break myself open in this way—has taught me how difficult (and how necessary) it is to interrogate the givens that we have about the story that we tell ourselves about our work. Telling the truth about how frustrating it is to try to present writing as a practice of freedom when the landscape of public education in Alberta is bending backward towards a neoliberal vision is a start. This is my first step in beginning again.

I want to celebrate the brilliant, good work of ELA teachers across Alberta; however, this is also a plea that we tell the truth about how things really are. My cohort and I had the great pleasure of having a guest lecture from Dr. David Jardine during our curriculum studies course work. When we vocalized the frustration with the many mediocre, prepackaged programs and external opinions we have to contend with every day, he advised us to recognize them for what they were, and then to "close [our] doors and teach" (D. Jardine, personal communication, February, 2018). However, that head-down-and-do-my-own-thing practice will keep things the

way they are. While the urge to close the door and take action by "doing our own thing" is a survival impulse, we owe it to our students and to ourselves to choose hope and to *show* other possibilities. Perhaps we should be opening our classroom doors, literally and figuratively, to show the power of writing in creating our lives.

For myself, this means being more honest with my students about those curricular and assessment theories and practices that extinguish the beautiful possibilities that writing has, and the beautiful possibility that *they* are. By writing this thesis, I now have the knowledge and the language to name our writing assumptions as only assumptions, and not solid ground to stake our pedagogy on: assumptions such as teaching writing means teaching the forms the students need to know how to do for their next educational threshold; that "good" writing is valuable because it earns "good" grades; that writing merely to explore has no place in the classroom. Rather, by devoting time to writing for its own sake, I am inspiring students to practice how literacy can come alive outside of the classroom, in their own personal lives. Ultimately, it urges us to ask the question: what/who is ELA education for?

Greene uses Camus' (2001) novel *The Plague* as a metaphor for the work that teachers are immersed in. She likens us to Rieux, the doctor who keeps working against the odds of the deadly plague that has overtaken his city. When our (seemingly) minor, day-to-day work with writing in our classrooms seems like Rieux's small, caring efforts, and the structures in our system of education seem like a harmful, oppressive infection, we must remind ourselves that "[t]he teacher who feels he too is fighting the plague can still nurture the dream" (Greene, 1973, p. 270). It can be in the smaller efforts in daily writing for play, and sharing that practice with our colleagues near and far, where we "start to move forward, in the dark, feeling [our] way and trying to do good" (Camus, 2001, p. 264).

It's the daily choice to *try*, to see possibilities for our students, ourselves, and our writing, where we practice our freedom.

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