

Paper Title: *A Research Journey Through Metaphoric Imagery.*

Stream: **New Ethnographies and Critical Creativity**

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## A Research Journey Through Metaphoric Imagery.

Abstract:

*This paper presents the personal journey of a researcher through the use of metaphoric imagery. The researcher's use of alternative means to tap hidden knowledge and meanings is demonstrated through examples of the artwork and ongoing analysis of the product created as a supplement to the traditional researcher's journal. The focus of the doctoral dissertation is an investigation of the narrative lives of gifted adults across multicultural Australia. The artwork generated from the research process permitted the researcher to clarify many of the ideas and concepts that were initially unformed and unable to be accessed in conventional ways. It also enabled the researcher to include prior knowledge and viewpoints brought to the research, including Indigenous ancestry, essential to establish researcher's bias, and within phenomenology. This type of creative process is recommended to those disenchanted with conventional methodology as an aid to stimulate deeper gestation of research process and findings.*

Phenomenology was the main qualitative method used in this doctoral project involving in-depth narrative inquiry into the life stories of gifted adults within multicultural Australia. Although a variety of data collection methods were used this paper is concerned with the researcher's own journey rather than the data generated by participants.

Consistent with the experience of Scott-Hoy (2003: 268) "I had become dissatisfied with the direction my writing and research were taking" and felt a lack of connection to the research, largely due to the researcher's goal of suspending their own perspective of the phenomenon under investigation whilst engaging in the study (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Following advice from the research literature I had outlined my background and prior perspectives and assumptions, however by standing aside to view the phenomenon inherently presented within participant data, I felt disconnected from the research and removed from the experiences of the participants.

During the initial phases the research followed quite traditional methodology, but these methods were found inadequate to express the multiplicity of reflective metacognition within the researcher's journey. The standard representation was without soul. There was no way to express the myriad thoughts, feelings and ideas that presented during encounters with participants, literature and the formation of ideas. Presenting ideas in only textual forms was also at odds with my own tendency toward visual imagery, a legacy of my Indigenous heritage. Disenchanted with the standard results of quantitative research (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) I experimented with other qualitative methods, including the use of collage to investigate the experiences of my participants in more depth and greater variety of forms.

As a novice venturing into art-based inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2002) the focus remained on traditional data collection forms of interview transcripts and field notes. The only art based method initially attempted was a 'sample' collage to

experiment with the time and materials required for my participants prior to requesting their involvement in the activity. Then, in an experience similar to Scott-Hoy's (2003) a picture began to form in my mind. It was insistent in its presentation and haunted in a similar manner to those songs that 'get stuck in your head'. It simply would not fade away. Eventually it was sketched, which eased the torment, but as it continued to demand life and form, the sketch was changed again and again, and many additions incorporated throughout data analysis and after interactions with participants. Although I attempted to ignore the picture haunting my mind, it insisted on its creation, until finally it took form and was painted on canvas. I then found myself in uncharted territory, for the artwork once created seemed integral to the presentation of the research.

Butler-Kisber (2002) suggests that when artful portrayals are included in public work, they are chosen to serve a particular communicative purpose, and that no one becomes seduced into using an arts-based approach just for the sake of it. Butler-Kisber (2002) also found the move into art based inquiry was more common for research students who "already have a background in qualitative research and are frequently well into their thesis work" (Butler-Kisber, 2002:1), which is consistent with my own experience.

However, there are both "promise and perils" (Eisner, 1997, cited in Slattery, 2001:382) in art based inquiry methodology, not least of which is how the artwork will be judged. Grey's (1998:9) contention that the mission of art is to bring about spiritual awakening and personal catharsis fails to consider that for the researcher with little art background such an awakening can be daunting and fraught with doubt. It is difficult to imagine one self as an artist, when this is out of our realm of experience. It is disconcerting to realize that once the artwork takes form it will become an integral part of the research and therefore would have an audience. No longer a personal reflective journey, it becomes an expression of meaning, another method of recording the research journey using visual

metaphors to guide the reflective thought process that was otherwise hidden. Therefore the artwork must be included in the final presentation of the thesis, and will be seen by the markers, and possibly a wider audience. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) note there is emotional pain, the vulnerability of revealing yourself, and having no control over how readers interpret what you have written, or created, nor are you able to take it back. "It's hard not to feel your life is being critiqued as well as your work. It can be humiliating" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000:738).

Bochner and Ellis (2003: 510) "believe that art-based research will be judged not so much by what it promises as by what it delivers – its ideas, insights, values, and meanings". Piantanida, McMahon and Garman (2003: 186-187) have concerns regarding the critique of such artworks. Researchers "claim their work as art, and prefer that it be judged primarily on its aesthetics. Yet collectively as an educational discourse community, are we prepared to have our research judged as much on its aesthetics as its scholarly merit?" Again Finley (2003: 291) suggests there should be some way of allowing "deviance from conventions in the artworld" (Finley, 2003: 291) but supplies no definitive standard for these deviations, and demands an "expert artist" (Finley, 2003:287) to ensure quality craftsmanship.

As a novice to the use of art-based inquiry, the area is challenging and yet strangely satisfying. Whilst Bochner and Ellis (2003) contend that imagination is as important as rigor, still this notion seems opposed to the requirements of academic excellence. It was never my intention to proclaim myself an 'expert' artist, or even an Aboriginal artist, there are others who are far more able than I.

Although this artwork serves its mission of 'personal catharsis and spiritual awakening' (Grey, 1998), I have also found that I suffer from an asynchrony of vision and talent. That which I can visualise inside the kaleidoscope myriad of images within my mind's eye can never be achieved. My imagination over reaches my ability with image or words, I can never truly share the vision, only

provide a glimpse into my own self reflective research practice and the reasoning behind the use of metaphoric imagery to examine the research journey in greater depth. A point noted by Bochner and Ellis (2003:507) “as artists, these researchers also recognized that gaps exist between what can be shown, seen, or felt and what can be said”. Frequently throughout the process the artwork “didn’t feel right” (Scott-Hoy, 2003:270) and as the research progressed the artwork, indeed the research, became increasingly complex, representing the “variety of ways our experience is coded” (Eisner, 1997 cited in Slattery, 2001:382). As I have yet to reach the phase where the artwork is shared with and possibly critiqued by my participants, I am unsure whether it is actually complete in its current form. And there are some concerns regarding what elements others will see within the artwork.

Barone and Eisner (1997, cited in Butler-Kisber, 2002) put forward seven features of arts-based work. In critiquing my own work I find it definitely deviates from traditional artwork, but at least meets three of these criteria; ‘virtual reality’ ‘ambiguity’ and the ‘personal signature of the author’. I do not claim it has ‘aesthetic form’ (Barone & Eisner, 1997, cited in Butler-Kisber, 2002), as this is too subjective to judge.

Finley (2003: 282) cites Lincoln (1995) as setting five standards: positionality; community; voice; critical subjectivity or reflexivity; and reciprocity. Within Lincoln’s criteria my art work and its analysis would meet the criteria for ‘positionality’ and ‘critical subjectivity or reflexivity’ but until shared with the participants at the end of the research it is unknown if the elements of ‘community’, ‘voice’ and ‘reciprocity’ will apply. Such “Self-conscious method” (Kilbourn, 1999 cited in Piantanida, McMahon & Garman, 2003: 186) where the artist inquirer questions the worth of their work can be beneficial as it encourages reflective research practice. However Oikarinen-Jabai’s (cited in Bochner & Ellis, 2003: 511) comment that she had to “expose herself in order to place herself at a distance again” relates particularly well to my own experience, and pertains to the

ideals of phenomenology. The artwork created permits the researcher to re-examine their own viewpoint and once again distance themselves from their prior assumptions.

As with many of Butler-Kisber's (2002) students, I find myself unable to completely abandon conventional methodology, therefore the artwork is not presented in lieu of the traditional researcher's journal (Burns, 1997; Richardson, 1998) but supplementary to it. It presents a different perspective and an effective aid to clarify the thinking process. Whilst concentrating on the creation of this painting a completely different kind of mental gestation occurred. Tapping into other areas of the brain gave the logical researcher part of the mind access to more creative areas. Ideas that were mere threads took shape and were illuminated within the peripheral edges of the research. Data that previously seemed unconnected suddenly became part of the whole, facets of other aspects were integrated into the findings in ways that may never have been accessed unless metaphoric imagery was used.

Consistent with this experience, Lampert (2006) provides evidence that the arts do indeed enhance the disposition to think critically. Butler-Kisber, (1997 cited in Butler-Kisber, 2002) contends that art can tap into talents that were otherwise not apparent, and refers to Eisner's explanation of how understanding is mediated by form. "What we know and how we know are inextricably related". (Butler-Kisber, 2002:2), therefore accessing other ways of knowing can release unconscious meaning.

By excavating the unconscious (Slattery, 2001) one can understand complex layers, express deeply guarded secrets and "release the imagination to open new perspectives to identify alternatives" Greene (1995 cited in Slattery, 2001:378). Slattery (2001) cites Pollock's experience as a metaphor for the educational researcher "as artist working within" (Slattery, 2001:378). "When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a short get acquainted period that I see what I have been about" (Pollock 1971 cited in Slattery,

2001:378). This experience is close to my own experience, I was not aware of some symbolically represented meaning until after I 'autopsied' (Saarnivaara, cited in Bochner & Ellis, 2003: 512) the art experience.

The picture first suggested itself through a view of the contrast between my own dual viewpoints, and is inherent to the structure chosen for the final dissertation. In all things there is an element of Ying and Yang, positive and negative experiences. As previously stated this picture haunted me for months before finally finding life on a canvas. Therefore the research journey begins with the 'ying yang' metaphor, the realization that there are positive and negative experiences within the research forum, within participant experience, within the researcher's experience, and representative of the experiences of the whole of multicultural Australia.

Artwork phase 1:



This picture, therefore, is an iconic representation of cross cultural perspectives, not just a two dimensional viewpoint, but a multifaceted viewpoint of the phenomenon of giftedness across multicultural Australian perspectives, as represented by the myriad of Australian cultural groups. Australia itself is a land of extremes, however much of the beautiful bushland requires fire to regenerate, therefore to gain the best of Australia one has to endure the worst of Australia.

As an Indigenous researcher, raised to be 'white', for most of my life I have been betwixt and between, with a foot in both camps. Therefore this dissertation

represents bicompetency (Henare-Solomona, 2004) in both the world of academia, by following the traditional forums of dissertation presentation, and the spiritual world I am rediscovering in the search for my cultural ancestry, as represented by the visual tracking of the thesis journey.

The next picture represents the researcher's Indigenous background through the traditional snake and circular dots at the top of the centre circle. The perspectives of other Indigenous people, particularly the influence of Maori research methodology and indigenous ways of knowing (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) is represented via the Maori 'curl' at the bottom of the centre circle. Although spirals are also representative of Australian Aboriginal culture, this particular symbol is indicative of Maori culture and acknowledges the infinite circle of life. The Patterson's curse is again used to signify duality of perspectives. Patterson's curse is an introduced species recognized as a noxious weed by farmers, yet the beekeeper's call it 'Salvation Jane' as the only pollen available to produce honey in drought conditions. As an introduced species it is much maligned and its existence in Australia debated by many, however few can argue that it is aesthetically pleasing to discover waves of purple rippling across the ranges when traveling through the Australian countryside.

Artwork phase 2:



Artwork phase 3:





The artwork was then enhanced by the addition of some traditional colours. The black and red used is representative of both Maori and Aboriginal traditions. The orange and yellow, although brighter than traditional ochre, are also representative of Indigenous usage. The contrast with the introduced Patterson's curse, represented by non-Indigenous colours of purple and green, is deliberate, a non-traditional form joining traditional perspectives.

From these beginnings the two separate paintings were joined to incorporate all perspectives within the research journey thus far:

Artwork phase 4:



This idea was then expanded to incorporate the researcher's eye, the eye with which to view the research, with the original painting as the pupil:

Artwork phase 5:



Seen in this perspective it then becomes a 'disembodied research eye', one that is necessary for phenomenology. The researcher's bias and previous viewpoints are stated and reviewed and continually set aside in order to research the phenomenon effectively (Creswell, 1998; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). However, this view may not support the participants within their research journey. The researcher as only observer and recorder may inadvertently cause harm (Church, 1995; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Therefore the 'disembodied research eye' must be tempered within a sea of compassion:

Artwork phase 6:



As we cannot lose ourselves and become the other person, the best we can do is mediate between the two of us within meaningful and empathic dialogue (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). As the research progressed it became obvious that the participants were researching themselves and contributing to the depth of the research. Although the overall approach was phenomenology, the participants were themselves using autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000 ) to present their own narrative experience of the phenomenon:

Yes, I definitely feel like I'm researching myself too. Not just in terms of your research project, but observing my oral language (an unsettling experience!) and seeing little things about what's happened in the last two years -- how I've changed internally, how my life has changed, what I've forgotten, and what is still instantly recognizable. (Harriet, participant email, 2006).

Ellis and Berger (2003) contend a 'double subjectivity' abounds in interviewing, where each participant's feelings, thoughts and attitudes are affected by the reciprocity between the participants. So too can the personal and social identities of the interviewer and the interviewee become important factors and change the relationship. Therefore the visual metaphoric perspective of the methodology incorporated and acknowledged this development in the research journey:

Artwork phase 7:



The inclusion of Aboriginal meeting place symbols, such as the 'horseshoe shape' representing a person sitting, and lines to indicate the paths/tracks they have traveled to reach the meeting place create a new perspective of the research. It is now a place where many sit to view the research, and their ideas and commentary are acknowledged and incorporated into the findings. This highlights the importance of 'member checking' (Vockell & Asher, 1995) by participants of their interview transcripts and narratives, and the way they are ultimately portrayed within the research findings.

From this point, now committed to the metaphoric research journey, more deliberate metaphors were integrated into the visual representation:

Artwork phase 8:



The 'Siamese fighting Fish' (call Bettas in the United States) is placed on the canvas under the eye. Its presence signifies the researcher's initial view that the gifted themselves are 'other' (Gruppetta, 2004). The cultural 'otherness' portrayed by many is added to their gifted 'otherness' and in fact ensures that most are dually othered, from both their own cultures as well as the mainstream culture through the characteristics of their giftedness. Within the dissertation this point is represented by a photograph of the separate tanks required to keep Siamese fighting fish from interacting with each other, as they are unable to co-exist together within a single tank.

The artwork then incorporated 'the raven'. The raven is a central theme, background to the other icons and yet central to the viewer:

Artwork phase 9:



The 'raven' is a deliberate metaphor, representative once again of Indigenous ways of knowing, incorporating the belief that the 'Raven' is messenger to Aboriginal people (Duffy, 2003). However the raven only speaks to those who will listen, all others hear only noise. The Raven also brings into the research the work of (O'Riley, 2003) and her use of the raven as trickster, in regard to her own indigenous beliefs. The 'raven' of O'Riley's (2003) northwestern American Indian tradition tricks the listener if they do not think about what they really hear. This metaphor is yet another perspective of the research, findings may be influenced by the researcher's perspective and require confirmation from the participants to ensure the viewpoint is accurate and not a misportrayal of either the participants or their lived experiences as presented to the researcher.

The Raven however is a common theme among many cultures, therefore applicable to a multicultural study. Raven is a complex bird, both in nature and in mythology, representing symbolism of both positive and negative aspects (Black, 2006). Raven is the fatal touch of the Caltech in winter, the wisdom of Odin, the vessel of prophecy given to a seer, the mighty protector of the Western Isles, and the healing message of an Indian shaman (Black, 2005; Cooper, 1992; Goodchild, 1991). Of these Odin's ravens are most connotative. Odin had two ravens - *Huginn* (thought) and *Muninn* (memory) who flew about the world, delivering messages, gathering knowledge and reporting back to him (Black, 2006; Cooper, 1992; Goodchild, 1991), an appropriate description of the

research, which relies on participant memory and much thought to interpret meaning.

Raven is magic and symbolizes the void - the mystery of that which is not yet formed. Ravens are symbolic of the Black Hole in Space, which draws in all energy toward itself and releases it in new forms (Cooper, 1992; Goodchild, 1991). The raven is portrayed with the iridescent blue and purple sheen to the feathers that represent constant change of form within the void (Goodchild, 1991). Within the raven's eye is the researcher's 'id', that element of self reflection needed to ensure integrity of findings throughout the research. Therefore although the larger research eye looks without to gather the research, the smaller eye looks within to monitor the researcher's journey.

The artwork was further enhanced by the addition of flames at the bottom, to signify the trials of life, and the trials of research. Again the idea of burning, of trial by fire is presented, although the raven now almost appears as phoenix rising from the ashes. Yet the flames only lick the raven rather than burn him, in contrast with Aboriginal Dreaming Stories where the Raven became black after being charred by a campfire.

Artwork phase 10:



The sky above the Raven's left was then enhanced by the stars of the Southern Cross. The pointers are Mirrabooka's eyes – seeing all of the earth” (Oracle Think Quest: 2006). As the participants reside in ‘Gadi Mirrobooka’, meaning ‘under the Southern Cross’ (McKay, 2006), these are the stars most commonly recognised by all. However, this metaphor also signifies the participants’ feeling of always being watched, observed in all they do, literally ‘someone looking over my shoulder’. The stars also refer to the findings regarding the participants’ search for higher meaning, a meaning often sought in the skies, heavens or wider universe. It again signifies the universal striving to reach a greater understanding of phenomenon.

Artwork phase 11:



Finally, the other symbol to the right, above the raven, is of a comet. As comets are periodical rather than everyday events it reminds us that:

*To every thing there is a season....  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh....  
( Book of Ecclesiastes cited in Dillon & Dillon, 1998)*

Throughout the research journey the participants recorded these types of epiphanies within the narratives of their lives, and shared tears and laughter with the researcher in the process.

Although daunting, I recommend fellow researchers investigate this type of creative process within their own research. It broadens the scope of investigation and allows the researcher to explore multiple facets of the research experience through the use of metaphoric imagery. By tapping into the layers of unconscious knowledge hidden within our minds research is expanded and greater comprehension is possible. All techniques to enhance meaning within research should be encouraged, and more research into the area of art based inquiry would benefit researchers seeking to add depth to their investigations.

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