

The Graduate School of Education
at The University of Melbourne present

UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

.....

SPECIAL ISSUE

A/r/tography and the Literary and Performing Arts

Volume 3 | Issue 2 | 2013

.....

Guest Editors *Rita L. Irwin*
Anita Sinner

Editor
Associate Editor
Designer

Lindy Joubert
Naomi Berman
Rosie Ren

UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

Volume 3 | Issue 2 | 2013

EDITORIAL TEAM

Guest Editors

Rita L. Irwin
Anita Sinner

Editor

Associate Editor
Designer

Lindy Joubert
Naomi Berman
Rosie Ren

ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

ISSN 1835 - 2776

Published in Australia

Published by

The Graduate School of Education

© The University of Melbourne

The University of Melbourne, Parkville,
Victoria 3010.



Special Issue: A/r/tography and the Arts

Guest Editors

Rita L. Irwin | Anita Sinner

THEME

To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through an ongoing process of art making in any art form and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create relational and/or enhanced meanings. A/r/tographical work are often rendered through the methodological concepts of contiguity, living inquiry, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations and excess, which are enacted and presented/performed when a relational aesthetic inquiry condition is envisioned as embodied understandings and exchanges between art and text, and between and among the broadly conceived identities of artist/researcher/teacher. A/r/tography is inherently about self as artist/researcher/teacher yet it is also social when groups or communities of a/r/tographers come together to engage in shared inquiries, act as critical friends, articulate an evolution of research questions, and present their collective evocative/provocative works to others (see <http://m1.cust.educ.ubc.ca/Artography/>).

This special issue of Multi-Disciplinary Research in the Arts invites original creative and scholarly inquiry that engages in critical debates and issues regarding a/r/tographical methodologies; are exemplars of critical approaches to a/r/tographical research; and/or extend the boundaries of inquiry-based research. Contributions are welcome from disciplines across the arts, humanities and social sciences and in a wide range of formats including articles, essays, and artistic interludes, which explore diverse forms of the arts from drama, dance, poetry, narrative, music, visual arts, digital media and more.

A/r/tography and the Selkie – An interlude

**Victoria Campbell
Robyn Gibson**

*Faculty of Education and Social Work
University of Sydney*

ABSTRACT

This interlude reflects on how *The Selkie Project*, a group-devised narrative performance exploring the experiences of four early career teachers was interwoven and thematically linked to a retelling of the *selkie* myth. A/r/tography as a method of inquiry spoke directly to what we were attempting to do throughout the six-week rehearsal process. The rendering of *openings* is used to explore the process, the performance and the audience involved in a journey to find meaning in liminal spaces.

The *voices* of both the actor/researcher/educator and her critical friend (her supervisor) are stitched together to reveal new ways to conceive of the research process.

KEYWORDS

a/r/tography, openings, early career teachers, performance, narrative, The Selkie Myth

Between land and sea lives the *selkie* – a creature part woman, part seal.¹ Her appearance emerges in Celtic mythology, yet her story is universal. Her tale focuses on the tensions inherent in themes such as loss, identity, adaption, and ambiguous endings. The myriad threads woven through the fabric of her story, like her luxurious skin, are textural and evocative in nature. This interlude reflects on how *The Selkie Project*, a group-devised narrative performance exploring the experiences of four early career teachers, connects with *openings*, one of the six a/r/tography's renderings.

As artist/researcher/teacher, my voice is evident throughout the discussion as is the **voice of my critical friend² (my supervisor, Robyn)** as she engages, re/engages and at times, disengages from this personal journey to find meaning in liminal spaces.

¹ The celtic Selkie myth is also known as the Seal Woman or Seal Wife. In the story a fisherman steals the seal woman's skin and locks it in an attic. She adjusts to life on land. One day she discovers her skin in the attic and returns to the sea. The story has deep resonances with identity and adapting to new ways of life.

² This change in weight is used to identify the voice of Victoria Campbell's PhD supervisor, Dr Robyn Gibson.

BACKGROUND

The Selkie Project was a narrative performance based on four early career teachers' personal stories interwoven and thematically linked to a retelling of the *selkie* myth. My study sought to creatively examine professional teacher identities and emerging pedagogies through the unique creation of a staged presentation rather than focusing solely on a traditional dissertation format.

The frayed edges of dissatisfaction are visible. Narrative/storytelling create engaging texts ... Victoria begins to unravel the threads of her story – searching for a connectiveness to her identity as teacher/actor and those of her four teacher/performers.

To prevent early career teachers leaving the profession, Manuel and Hughes (2006: 21) argue that more attention needs to be given to the 'moral, spiritual, emotional, empathic and subjective dimensions' of teachers' lives. *The Selkie Project* builds on these ideas and recognises that when teachers are given a voice to creatively express their experiences, they have an opportunity to address problems that arise from a 'school culture ... that marginalises rather than embraces new teachers' voices' (Manuel and Hughes 2006: 21). Thus *The Selkie Project* provided an artistic forum for these new teachers to explore their professional and personal identity in powerful and meaningful ways.

She looks for new ways of knowing (Habermas 1972). She speaks ... And by creating a space for engagement, she hopes to locate those in-between spaces where one idea touches another.

As someone from a theatre arts background, I searched for a methodology that would elicit accessible and yet, engaging results, not only for myself as the researcher but also for the teacher-performers involved. For *The Selkie Project*, I turned to Pelias (2009:186) who acknowledges that performance-based inquiry gives 'voice and physicality to words', defines the 'body as a site of knowledge' and 'finds its epistemological and ontological heart in performers enacting their own or others' words on stage'.

Her lived history as actor/researcher/educator looks for overlaps with other arts-based methods ... Victoria begins a layering process that will inform her research ... theatre/drama will be intertwined with living inquiry.

At a midpoint in the writing process, my supervisor presented me with an article. An article that explored a/r/tography as a methodology distinct but simultaneously linked to arts-based inquiry – my curiosity was whetted. As Leggo, Sinner, Irwin, Pantaleod, Gouzouasise and Grauerf (2011: 240) have noted that marrying a/r/tography with more traditional qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, is 'about the arts and graphy coming together' resulting in 'an occasion for transformative meaning making'.

THE PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

A/r/tography unravelled aspects of living inquiry that spoke directly to what we were attempting to do throughout the six-week rehearsal of *The Selkie Project*. During this time the teacher-performers developed their own personal stories and worked on the skills with which to perform them. It was, as Springgay, Irwin and Kind (2005: 903) claim, a 'life creating experience into the personal, political, and professional aspects of one's life, through attention to memory, identity, autobiography, reflection, meditation, storytelling, interpretation'. Meaning arose through dynamic and collaborative processes enhanced by the flexibility of the script. The nature of oral storytelling is not dependant on memorising words. Unlike an actor working with a written script, the participants were free to use their own words, grammar and syntax to bring their oral vignettes to life, and were free to make adjustments to the script at any time, even during performance itself. As Livo and Rietz (1986: 15) contend oral story 'moves, bends, and breathes', it is 'soft and malleable' and 'yields to the pleasures and needs of the audience'. On the other hand, the sections with the *selkie* story were presented as a readers' theatre and were *read* by the teacher-performers. This provided a framework for their oral vignettes, similar to the way a lattice supports a creeping vine - the *selkie* myth, with its clear linear structure, acted as a scaffold for the teacher-performers' personal tales.

Writing about performance which is ephemeral, live and embodied, can feel restrictive. But considering the renderings of a/r/tography loosens the weave of seemingly complex fabric, creating *openings* that provide spaces for contemplation and possibilities for deeper analysis.

I feel this tension as Victoria grapples with a means to write about performance ... but research is about the journey. There is, in fact, no prescription for how this must be done (Leavy 2010).

As a method of inquiry, a/r/tography is 'a process of double imaging that includes the creation of art and words that are not separate or illustrative of each other but instead, are interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meanings' (Springgay et al 2005: 899). While it is evident to me that connections between the six renderings of a/r/tography and my research are possible, even desirable, for this *interlude*, I focus solely on the rendering of openings. The idea of openings that *rupture*, that could be created through acts of savagery appealed to me, because such 'openings are cut deliberately and act as invitations to enter into and look through, offering new views and perceptions, encouraging dislocations and disruptions' (Springgay et al 2005: 906). Similarly the *selkie's* skin opens to reveal a woman/ then disruption / the skin is deliberately stolen:³

LISA: *The fisherman crept towards the pile of skins and snatched the first (reading)*
(Bianca, as the fisherman, grabs the drop-cloth, representing the seal skin, and holds it high in the air)

RACHEL: *The bright circle broke (reading)*

BIANCA: *One by one the women slipped into their skins (reading)*

³ Transcript from The Selkie Project performance, November 23, 2010 – the 'seal woman' story is adapted from Freeman, 1995.

RACHEL: *And slithered into the rising tide (reading)*

BIANCA: *Away into the dark night sea (reading)*

LISA: *All but one (reading, she points to Anthea)*

ANTHEA: *(looking up from the Readers' Theatre script - addresses the audience)*

I'm a mum and I thought teaching would be great because you get all those school holidays off and you get a really short working day. But in reality, I really wanted to make a difference and I still think that I can.

RACHEL: *She stood before him white as pearl. She stared at him with dark eyes that held the depths of the sea, then slowly she held out her hand (reading)*

(Anthea and Bianca put down their Readers' Theatre scripts. They stand facing each other on opposite sides of the stage. They take on the roles of the selkie and the fisherman. Bianca, as the fisherman, holds the drop-cloth that represents the selkie skin)

ANTHEA: *Please give me back my skin (she holds out her hand)*

BIANCA: *Come with me, I will give you new clothes to wear (she holds out her hand)*

(Long pause as they stare at each other)

BIANCA: *(Slowly returning to face the audience)*

I used to always draw teachers with pumps on, proper shoes, like court shoes - I started to realise maybe as a teacher I need to start wearing proper shoes. I really only thought about it when this kid comes up to me and goes...

LISA: *(Lisa takes on the role of the child)
"Miss you look like you're sixteen!"*

BIANCA: *And I was like, maybe I should try and look older than the kids and I should start wearing proper shoes? So then I started wearing proper shoes and looking like a teacher.*

Like many a/r/tography readings, the fabric metaphor becomes a means of understanding ... embodied ways of knowing (Springgay, Irwin and Kind 2005). Victoria's teacher-performers stitch together their stories to reveal a second skin with which to hang upon The Selkie Myth.

The selkie suffers *dislocation* as she assimilates to her new life – to survive, she must learn to live among the *people of the peat* (Freeman 1995). She must adapt and forge a new identity. There are strong parallels to the early career teachers' stories as they navigate intersections between their own personal identity and new teacher identity. For Flores and Day (2006: 220) identity refers to 'the ongoing and dynamic process which entails making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experience'. The story of the *selkie* provided a way in, an opening, a provocateur, and a metaphor, working in symbolic juxtaposition with the personal stories of the teachers.

THE AUDIENCE

These aspects of the teacher performers' living practices were revealed to a theatre audience in 'evocative ways' (Springgay et al 2005: 906). For the audience, the intertwining of the teachers' present-day stories with the ancient *selkie* myth provided evocative *openings*. These *openings* happened on the borderlands shared by the different narratives. This created deeply reflective spaces for the audience to contemplate, reconsider and reshape their thinking about aspects of teacher identity:

I was impressed with: creative visual setting; catching the thread of the myth weaving throughout the teachers' experiences; honesty of the teachers - including the good, bad and ugly experiences; how much I was relating to what they described; confidence and authenticity of the teachers' stories; the human and profundity of their experiences and reflections.

(Response 2, audience member - visual artist)

As an audience member from a corporate field, it's wonderful to see, hear and experience another chosen field expressed in such a creative way. The teachers' own stories were all different, yet each one was engaging. Each performer had their own unique style. It was great to experience a personable, yet humorous, human side to teaching that is so often forgotten.

(Response 8, audience member - corporate sector)

It was interesting to find out about the 'backstage' aspects of teaching, that teachers have fears and vulnerabilities. I don't think I have been aware of this in the past - it has changed my thinking about teachers.

(Response 7, audience member - actor)

CONCLUSION

The Selkie Project allowed time for the audience to imagine and critically reflect on the nature of teacher identity. These *openings* created new understandings, and allowed for spaces so the audience, the performers and myself could meaningfully engage with the *living* processes inherent in conceiving, making and performing *The Selkie Project*. The *selkie's* other-worldly tale took each of us to the margins of ambiguity. Her story pushed through holes in the fabric of the teachers' stories - emerging, stitching disparate threads together, linking her story to the teachers' stories, then slipping deftly beneath the surface again. Her presence rendered a new way of speaking about the teacher-performers' lives and provided rich *openings* for audience engagement. Discovering the renderings of a/r/tography has given me new ways to conceive of the research process, and evocative concepts with which to share the experience with others who move in liminal spaces.

REFERENCES

- Beare, D. (2009). A/r/tography, secondary theatre teaching, and the theatre of possibilities project. *Youth Theatre Journal*, 23(2), 162-175.
- Flores, M. A. & Day, C. (2006). Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers identities: A multi-perspective study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(2), 219-232.
- Freeman, M. (1995). *The Selkie*, Viewed 3 March 2011, <http://www.chalicecentre.net/selkie.htm>
- Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests*. (J. Shapiro, trans.), London: Heinemann.
- Knowles, G. & Cole, A. (2009). Imagining, creating and supporting scholartistry: Challenges of research work grounded in the arts - Arts informed research perspectives [Lecture presentation] The University of Sydney, Faculty of Education and Social Work.
- Leavy, P. (2010). A/r/t: A poetic montage. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(4), 240-243.
- Leggo, C., Sinner, A. E., Irwin, R.L., Pantaleod, K., Gouzouasise, P. & Grauerf, K. (2011).
- Lingering in liminal spaces: A/r/tography as living inquiry in a language arts class. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24(2), 239-256.
- Livo, N. J. & Rietz, N. J. (1986). *Storytelling: Process and practice*. Colorado: Libraries Unlimited.
- Manuel, J. & Hughes, J. (2006). It has always been my dream: Exploring preservice teachers' motivations for choosing to teach. *Teacher Development*, 10(1), 5-24.
- Pelias, R. J. (2009). Performative inquiry: Embodiment and its challenges in J. G. Knowles & A. L. Cole (eds), *Handbook for the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples and issues*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Springgay, S., Irwin, R. L. & Kind, S.W. (2005). A/r/tography as living inquiry through art and text. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(6), 897-912.