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THE GIFT OF WIT(H)NESSING TRANSITIONAL  
MOMENTS THROUGH A CONTEMPLATIVE ARTS  
CO-INQUIRY

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# THE GIFT OF WIT(H)NESSING TRANSITIONAL MOMENTS THROUGH A CONTEMPLATIVE ARTS CO-INQUIRY

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## Abstract

*In this article, we offer glimpses of a contemplative arts co-inquiry that we recently undertook: our primary purpose was to wit(h)ness one another as we reimagine our lives and work. Briefly, we are white, Canadian-born female professors of European settler heritage living on the traditional lands of the Indigenous peoples of Treaties 6 and 7, and Métis Region 3 and 4, who have been living in the transitional spaces of leaving the academy for the past two years. We share a deep personal and social commitment to engaging with contemplative arts practices in relational ways in our daily lives, as well as in our teaching and research. We became interested in wit(h)nessing one another through a co-inquiry that offered the opportunity for us to explore more deeply the transitional spaces we now occupy—and to foreground the inter-relational healing aspects of the process, both personally and in relation to the potentialities for broader social transformation. Our co-inquiry involves visual and textual offerings that embody wit(h)nessing as a creative and contemplative act—in the service of intentionally being with moments of relationality and reciprocity.*

## Résumé

*Nous offrons un aperçu d'une récente enquête coopérative contemplative et artistique. Notre principal objectif était de (co)témoigner de la réimagination de nos vies et de notre travail. Comme professeures blanches nées au Canada dont les ancêtres étaient des colonisateurs européens, nous habitons les terres traditionnelles des peuples autochtones des traités numéros 6 et 7 et des Métis de la région 3 et 4, et, depuis deux ans, habitons également les espaces transitionnels du départ de l'académie. Nous partageons un profond engagement personnel et social à la pratique quotidienne d'arts contemplatifs et relationnels dans notre enseignement et dans nos recherches. Nous nous sommes intéressées au (co)témoignage par l'enquête coopérative qui permet d'explorer plus profondément les espaces transitionnels occupés et de souligner*

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*les aspects interrelationnels guérisseurs du processus sur les plans personnel et d'une potentielle transformation sociale plus large. Notre enquête coopérative comprend des éléments visuels et textuels qui incarnent le (co)témoignage comme geste créateur et contemplatif, et ce, au service d'une présence intentionnelle dans les moments de relationnalité et de réciprocité.*

\*

I arrive walk campus inside  
 out for two full days before  
 the course begins skin slippery breezeless  
 air unseasonably hot humid I reacquaint  
 myself with the east coast my colleagues  
 attend to a tangle of thoughts feelings  
 pray set intentions attune to energies  
 in the space where  
 the course will manifest

*may this course unfold in spacious and  
 organic ways for the benefit  
 of all involved and beyond*

*may we re-member to open to life  
 energy moment by moment*

on our first day together twenty graduate  
 students and I ponder our collective  
 intentions what do we aspire to in working together?  
 how do we co-create a compassionate  
 respectful space for learning?

and then through textures pieces of fabric lace yarn we etch  
 personal intentions what do I wish for  
 through this experience? what does my heart want?  
 what do I bring to this work  
 in community? textile squares strung together like  
 prayer flags send aspirations with the wind



Figure 1. Materializing intentions. Photo: S. Walsh.

teardrops fall  
into open space  
eye of diamond  
crystal clear

A receptacle of threads spun in collaborative ways with tenderness and compassion, this article is a labour of love stitched into each page with poetic, visual, performative, expository prose, and reflective writing that offers glimpses of a contemplative arts co-inquiry that we recently undertook. Our overall aspiration was to wit(h)ness one another as we move with&in transitional spaces and re-member and re-imagine our lives and work. Acknowledging that the experience of collaboration is greater than each of us as individuals, we invite you, as readers/viewers, into an open textual-image space that is porous and relational, and that allows experience to steep, breathe, and hold different, evolving meanings for each of us. Welcome.

To briefly share our historic and lived locations, we are white, Canadian-born female professors of European settler heritage, currently residing as visitors in the Province of Alberta on the traditional Indigenous lands of Treaties 6 and 7 and Métis Regions 3 and 4. Now resettled in two different prairie cities, each of us has been living into the transitional spaces of leaving the academy for the past two years. We share a deep personal and social commitment to engaging with contemplative arts practices in relational ways in our daily lives, as well as in our teaching, writing, and research. As one of our last institutionally offered courses (at least in our current academic incarnations), we planned and taught parallel intensive summer courses in the area of arts-based, holistic, and contemplative education in Faculties of Education at two Canadian universities. We structured the parallel courses loosely as contemplative arts retreats; we planned the courses in collaborative

ways over approximately six months and then taught our individual iterations of the summer courses over less than two weeks. In our initial debriefing after completing the courses, we each independently described our teaching experiences as healing; healing of the accumulated trauma we have both experienced as spiritual feminists working in the isolating patriarchal neoliberal institution of higher education. We became interested in wit(h)nessing one another as we explored more deeply the transitional spaces we now occupy. Thus, our co-inquiry embodies wit(h)nessing as a creative and contemplative act: intentionally experiencing moments of relationality and reciprocity, something we see as imperative in broader social contexts.

Through our interconnected wit(h)nessing processes, we engage with what artist, writer, and art critic Suzi Gablik (1992) calls "connective aesthetics"—a paradigmatic shift from modern consumer-based aesthetics, to that of an ethical socially based aesthetic that is concerned with "[m]aintaining a deeply connected relationship with society," each other, and the other-than-human world (p. 2). Connective aesthetics is porous and relational, moving beyond what is solid and individual; it includes listening and viewing and calls us to attend to both self and other with respect, compassion, and care. As a form of inquiry, we engage an expanded practice of witnessing, or what Bracha Ettinger (1999) names *wit(h)nessing*, as an approach to inquiry that involves the intentional creation of space for deep listening, compassionate conjoinment, and artistic artworkings. Ettinger (1999) extends understandings of connective aesthetics with her matrixial articulation of the eros-*agape* infused event of art-making and art-encounters. The art event holds the potential for the healing of conscious and non-conscious trauma through wit(h)nessing the other. Ettinger opens pathways through matrixial theory for what can take place in the liminal zone of art and encourages each of us to engage the world as a "woman artist," attuned to connective aesthetics as the precedent to political and ethical acts in the world. She writes, "In the matrixial borderspace, the artist as a partial subject takes part and testifies to/for an unknown other or rather, it is the matrixial threads of the artwork which testify to the traumas of an-other in wit(h)ness" (pp. 93–94).

Although our own relationships with teaching—and the shape of our lives in general—are more fluid and shifting than usual at present, throughout our co-inquiry, we held clear intentions for co-creating an open and connective space for wit(h)nessing one another. We held one another's offerings in open spaces of deep listening and care, and responded to one another and ourselves through a range of contemplative arts practices. In this way, the form of our co-inquiry complements the focus of the parallel courses and also our pedagogical and personal commitments. We drew on our previous research experiences with women in collective contexts, on our personal arts and spiritual practices, and also on our teaching experiences. We met at a distance through video conferencing over the course of several months and engaged with contemplative arts practices such as writing, visual art, sewing, movement, and vocal improvisation: bringing ourselves always back—and back again—to trusting the wisdom of whatever arose through our creative processing, as stories, feelings, insights, and associations emerged. Our online meetings included Indigenous land acknowledgements and the creation of ritual space, as well as cycles of free writing, sharing, and art-making, all of which are ways of wit(h)nessing—attending to the other and to the self—as self-other co-evolve and shift in a shared space-time. At times, we also considered artifacts from our courses (i.e. teaching plans, journal entries, artwork that emerged during the courses, etc.).

Further, the writing of this article brings us to another dimension of creative processing that yields even deeper insights. We engage the layout of the page metaphorically in a hand over hand stitching practice, aligning the text and images left or right on the page, thus manifesting a visual space-between that highlights the fluid relationality of our co-labour and its rich generativity: a space that tenderly holds our intentions of listening deeply and wit(h)nessing.<sup>1</sup> We gift one another through our co-labour. We do this with a spirit of gratitude, humbly acknowledging the source as from a place greater than our individual selves (Hyde, 2007).

*We begin with simple ritual...*

### Embodying Wit(h)nessing Practice

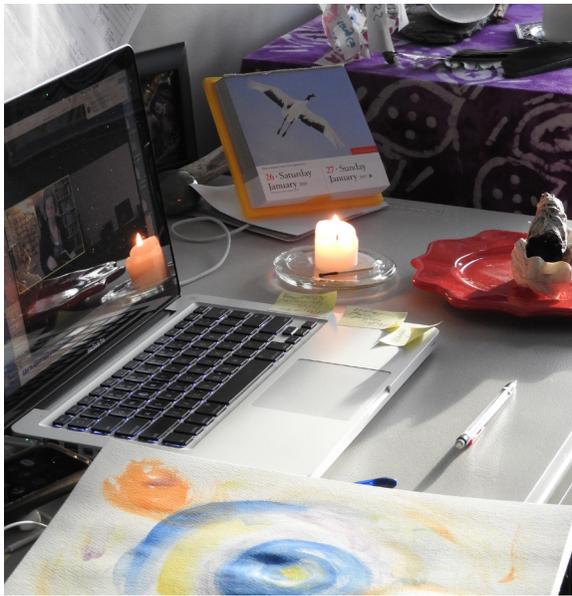


Figure 2. Art and ritual. Photo: S. Walsh.

- 1 Susan acknowledges with gratitude the influences of her previous writing with Heesoon Bai, a writing-witnessing process whereby two researchers shared and contemplated pieces of writing through deep, intentional, care-filled listening and meditation that involved being still and open to the fresh images and words that arose in textual spaces-between (Walsh & Bai, 2015, 2017). The writing-witnessing process in the 2015 work also included a left and right justified structure, a textual representation of the container we co-created for holding one another's words.



Figure 3. Barbara candle lighting. Photo: B. Bickel.

candles connected flames  
 awareness of fields tuning into energy fields prayers  
 setting intentions coming back to  
 the ground spiritual teachings  
 co-creating a healing restorative space  
 collaborative open flexible respectful feeling loss grief  
 co-inquiry witnessing intentions  
 what do we need?

I need structure  
 I want to perform this  
 I want to physically move  
 with through it  
 I want to be wit(h)nessed  
 I hold so much  
 I keep so much in my body  
 I can share what is in my body  
 I can share what I carry  
 "carriance"<sup>2</sup>  
 I am carried  
 I carry others  
 part of the grief  
 is the loss of relationships  
 with students  
 not sustaining relationships  
 I came

2 See Bracha Ettinger (2014) video. "The world is gone, I must carry you": Daring the shock of *emun* (trust), on the transjective subreal in art and psychoanalysis. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3hbixTlncU>

I carried  
 I put them down  
 left them to return  
 to their own lives  
 I offered  
 ongoing communication  
 but none took my offer  
 the institutional  
 teacher-student pattern  
 I had as a student  
 now live  
 as a teacher  
 the disconnection  
 of connection is painful  
 how to bring closure to  
 what was opened  
 all the teaching learning  
 the good  
 the bad  
 with my entire body  
 I can perform grief  
 I can perform grief  
 with my entire body  
 my body performs  
 to un-perform itself  
 through what it has carried  
 I feel sadness  
 heavy on my face  
 holding my neck  
 compressing my chest  
 letting down



Figure 4. Barbara in movement I. Photo: B. Bickel.

tension and release clarity things held tightly  
 in the body breath shallow face clenched  
 breath opening exhaling opening release hand  
 on the side of the belly inward outward various directions

generational layers stitching across mother grandmother  
 daughter granddaughter small stitches so neat  
 and tidy exactness feeling the harshness of  
 doing things right fear not feeling safe  
 directions of my stitches so tight orderly  
 an overcast stitch a mistake a misstep noticing  
 tension and a memory of my mom frozen solid unable  
 to put a pencil line on a piece of paper



Figure 5. Sewing across generations. Photo: S. Walsh.

Barbara moving freely her body expressive releasing  
 what is held was held we are attending to wounds scars  
 a memory of me watching a dance class peeking  
 under the door seeing girls moving freely joyously feeling  
 I was not allowed had to  
 do more structured forms of dance compete  
 it's either right or wrong how do we work through  
 untraining bodymindspirit unhinging  
 harshness from structure

body  
 body wrapping  
 body carrying  
 body holding  
 body caring  
 body remembering  
 body training  
 body releasing  
 body managing  
 body disciplining



Figure 6. Barbara in movement II. Photo: B. Bickel.

body good and harsh  
 body speaking  
 out  
 loud  
 body freeing  
 body supporting  
 bodies being  
 bodies together

generationally reworking stitches across  
 time  
 so many stitches still connected  
 not cut  
 to cut now  
 with intentional com/passion

### Threads of our Colleagues in our Co-inquiry

We gratefully acknowledge the co-labour of our colleagues and the conscious and non-conscious threads of their intellectual and creative gifts, threads that interweave lovingly throughout our co-inquiry. “The labour of gratitude accomplishes the transformation that a gift promises...The gifted become one with their gifts” (Hyde, 2007, p. 71). Our work as teacher educators and researchers has grown through years of engagement with spiritual practices that serve to situate our co-inquiry within holistic and contemplative education. In particular, we have worked within feminist, earth-based, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions personally and professionally (e.g. Brown, 2001; Cixous, 1993, 1997; Ettinger, 1999; Fernandes, 2003; Gradle, 2006; Klein, 1995; Lange, 2004; Mattis-Namgyel, 2010; Starhawk, 1989). Intuitive and holistic (nondual, embodied) being, knowing, and not-knowing as well as intentional, respectful engagement with the Earth and all sentient beings form the ground for our pedagogy, research, and ways of being in the world; respect, relationality, reciprocity, and co-emergence are central.

We also acknowledge the influences of our colleagues who work in holistic and contemplative education (e.g. Bai et al., 2009; Bai & Scott, 2011; Binder, 2016; Eppert et al., 2015; Eppert & Wang, 2008; Gunnlaugson et al., 2017; Kumar, 2013; Miller, 2013; Palmer et al., 2010; Seidel & Jardine, 2014; Smith, 2014; Zajonc, 2003, 2009). More specifically, we desire to foreground the work of colleagues who engage with arts-based practices (e.g. dance, movement, contemplative photography, visual art, vocal improvisation, poetry) as

forms of contemplation that are holistic, intuitive, embodied, and relational forms of inquiry and teaching (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2016; Binder, 2016; Fisher, 2017; Franklin, 2017; Jordan, 2013; Kelly, 2015; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Neilsen, 2004; Snowber, 2016). Many of the contemplative practices taken up in the above teaching and research contexts—and in the broader social context—draw upon practices derived from diverse ancient wisdom traditions and worldviews, practices through which people connect energetically with the natural-spiritual worlds (for example, Puja ceremony, labyrinth walking, Indigenous creative apprenticeships, and contemplative arts practices such as Miksang/contemplative photography).

As we pull ourselves through the needle of our co-inquiry, we feel deeply the gifts of learning we have been given in the academy—a whole range of human experiences—we also send love and gratitude to all of the women and men with whom we have worked in previous research and teaching contexts over many years, cited and not cited below; their influences resonate in this relational space and shape our co-inquiry and everyday being in the world (see, for example, Bickel et al., 2018; Gradle & Bickel, 2010; Bickel & Gu, 2015; Bickel & Hugill, 2011; Bickel & Sims, 2014; Bickel & Wendt, 2015; CORE, 2006; Counternormativity Discourse Group, 2005; Fisher & Bickel, 2015; Gannon et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2016; Luce-Kapler & Walsh, 1996; Richardson & Walsh, 2018; Snowber & Bickel, 2015; Walsh, 2018; Walsh & Bai, 2015, 2017; Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015; Walsh, Brigham, & Women Diversity and Teaching Group, 2007; Walsh, Gonzalez, Joy, & MacAulay, 2014; Women Writing Women Collective, 2014).

what wants to emerge today?  
 staying in the moment  
 with each other a gift to be  
 in a new fresh moment

teaching the summer course  
 I was in such a contemplative focused  
 space for/with the students  
 my self in relations  
 the *I* and the *we* and the *it* of  
 the experience

this day meeting  
 in the space of the moon eclipse  
 moon energy  
 moon insights  
 spirit world attunement  
 cosmos/celestial  
 surrender  
 fully receiving ourselves

a hovering doorway  
 stretch and loss  
 we over extended our capacity

what feels like it wants to emerge today?  
profound gratitude and love and  
tiredness old wounds what wants to step  
forward be acknowledged in this space today?  
flame of the candle smell of sage  
my body heavy and light ready  
and also not ready

the breath the healing scent of sage its  
power to purify remove obstacles  
the presence of the moon approach of  
the lunar new year voices chanting together

taking my seat feeling my power as  
a mother female warrior writer  
artist someone who communicates  
with the spirit world holding my  
seat with dignity surrender  
receiving opening the heart  
trust in life energy  
a baby teacher

waterpaint blue baby water  
fluid surrender to spirit realm trust  
receiving whatever arises  
middle spiral painting with my  
fingers water paint on my hands  
a peaceful baby content breathing  
trust relaxing with life energy  
healing watery blue



Figure 7. Receiving, opening, surrendering. Photo: S. Walsh.



coming through my open door”

we invite Carl into our co-inquiry  
 in spirit form  
 having left this world  
 his energy still vibrating in the  
 electromagnetic fields  
 interconnecting with our we  
 Carl, the third editor of  
 our course textbook<sup>3</sup>  
 now present in our third co-inquiry  
 a meeting of three  
 a solid base  
 a strong triangular foundation  
 we have heart

we invite Carl in to the space his openness  
 willingness to follow energy be  
 vulnerable the unconditional love he  
 represents to so many



Figure 9. Visual reflections on the journey home. Photo: B. Bickel.

- 3 Carl Leggo co-edited *Arts-Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching; Honoring Presence*, with Barbara and Susan (Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015) and co-facilitated a retreat with them for the Arts Researchers and Teachers Society (ARTS) preconference event in advance of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) conference in 2017. Carl passed from his life on earth in March 2019 while we worked on this article.

re-reading my final writing to students  
 so grateful this is a pass fail model  
 and I do not have to assign grades  
     to what is unmarkable  
     dwelling with vivid memories  
 of the course on the 10 hour drive  
     home sitting in my backyard  
     writing wi(t)hness consciousness  
 I was in such a contemplative focused space for/with them  
     similar to the co-inquiry space with Susan now  
     I feel relief to be in the conjoined I and we of  
     co-shared living learning experiences  
     reflecting each other

### What is the Gift Created by our Stitching?

As we reflect on wit(h)nessing our transitional spaces through this co-inquiry, we acknowledge too the threads of our labour over many years in the academy: the ways we have arrived as women artists in this space-time, this now. The electromagnetic fields transmuted through our computers create a shared healing space for our weary spirits, offering a mutual restorative and reflexive lacuna. Through the co-writing process and the co-wit(h)nessing experience in real-time-writing we walk through the passageway of a hovering door together. The passageway marks a farewell—a leave-taking. In that leave-taking we leave behind part of ourselves and carry forward with us many gifts. Collegially imbued gifts that we have stitched into and will continue to stitch into. In our transitional passage that this co-inquiry has honoured and cared for, we deeply recognize the gift as a living entity still alive and being passed on and shared forward by many in the academy.

In the process of our co-writing discussions, those that have gifted us have shone through. In our still recovering and overextended lives, we gift each other with remembering; remembering the gift of teaching and learning has not been completely usurped by the scarcity-based neoliberal exchange economy. The 21<sup>st</sup> century academy has been compromised and beaten down but it is still gifting—circulating and extending itself through us and others. The blanket we have stitched in this contemplative arts co-inquiry holds us and others and the academy in its embrace. Its stitches re-tell omitted lines of the story, holds the wisdom of restoring the powerful interrelationships between art, contemplation, research, teaching and learning that challenges the perceived risk often engendered by such connections in the academy and other settings, while also highlighting the value of arts practices in holistic education. Our commitment to contemplative arts inquiry practices have led us toward a greater sense of connectedness in our lives, to one another, to nature, and the cosmos. Strengthening education's potential for restorative and transformative experiences in the classroom, community, and world is the gift that we have been returned to through writing wit(h)ness consciousness with each other in this contemplative arts co-inquiry.

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