25. Light Out of Darkness: 
(Re-)staging a Collaborative Inquiry

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Prelude: A Program Note to Our Audience

Our chapter finds its beginnings in one of our collaborative arts-based inquiries; in this instance, that of Christine’s doctoral thesis as supervised or co-imagined by Patrick. Midway through the first year of Seeing Through Apples: An Arts-based Exploration into the Ethics and Aesthetics of a Teacher-educator-researcher’s Arts-based Beginnings (van Halen-Faber, 2004), Christine intuitively turned to the ancient Indonesian art form of batik.¹ This technique became central to her methodology and formed a key
representational strategy in the inquiry. Drawing upon an array of different fabrics, dyes, and wax she co-created six fragmented apple images to mediate her exploration of her own beginnings as an arts-based inquirer who was working in the presence of six other collaborators who were themselves student-teachers / beginning teachers. As a result of her ongoing self-reflection and exchanges with her co-inquirers and Patrick, Christine came to re-present the six individual batik apple images as characters in a shadow play in which she took the role of a beginning or apprentice dalang — shadow master who eventually graduated to become a shadow master herself. By learning to “hang fire,” or watch and wait and to remain open to a series of arts-informed intimations she gradually came to realize the significance of her family’s emigration from the Netherlands to Canada. This in turn resurfaced Dutch (former colonial) connections with Indonesia, its art forms, and experience of liberation. These culture-straddling threads were strengthened further by revisiting Clifford Geertz’s (1960) pioneering symbolic auto-ethnographic inquiries in Indonesia, forming a spreading web of ghostly imaginings that foreshadowed things to come.

We two have come to understand that we are seeking to examine not just a culture (that of doing an artful thesis) but experience itself — in ways similar to reading or interpreting a text. Our goal is not to perpetuate a specific form of arts-based methodology but, rather, to set an inquiry tone or mood that others can react toward or against. Seeing the interplay of light and shadow for themselves.

In this chapter we extend this shadow play image as a metaphor for tracing the contours of a collaborative development between a thesis candidate and her supervisor. We now re-present Christine’s arts-based inquiry experience by placing it in a re-focused light and accept that in the presence of light there is always a shadow. The shadow side was revealed as an integral part of us as inquirers, symbolizing our individual and joint presence, and providing the
backdrop to our emerging text. Our experience confirms that the first wavering steps of the inquiry warranted being followed.

Setting the Scene

Our chapter consists of a collaborative self-study of how we conducted our inquiry by choosing to follow an evolving arts-based form and by constantly re-imagining its possibilities. Our informing theme is that such an inquiry needs to be non-linear and to honour the central place both of "imaginative rationality" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and the play of intuition. We also consider the complexities that are entailed when reflexivity, subjectivity, and presence are invited into the research process. When the need for supportive relationships with the other thesis committee members and the external examiner is acknowledged.

For our centrally informing analogical form and structure here we take that of the Indonesian wayang purwa or shadow play. We extend the implications of this form to illustrate the collaborative inter-play between a master-puppet-master (Patrick, supervisor) and an apprentice-puppet-master (Christine, thesis writer) and their journeying toward ever more artful imaginings.

The intermingled moves or tone are thus intro- and retro-spective: Introspective as we follow both Christine’s use of the shadow play as a form to introduce and showcase her six research participants and Patrick’s "in-the-shadows" or behind the scenes role as her thesis supervisor. Retrospective as we re-trace his development and role as an arts-based thesis supervisor (and beginning novelist), and Christine’s own "in-the-shadows" role as a beginning arts-based inquirer and writer herself.

The wayang purwa plays are epic, all-night performances in which the shadows cast by puppets are considered to mediate between the visible world and the unseen realm of the spirits. So too our re-scribed arts-based thesis play, within the confines of academe, follows pre-scribed performance practice. The members
of the audience (that is, the thesis committee, external examiner, university-appointed examination chair, and present readers) are actively engaged as they sit and watch on either side of the screen. They can somewhat anticipate the overall storyline and its musical accompaniment but need to remain open to the (apprentice) puppet master’s (or thesis candidate’s) improvisations and re-voiceings of inquiry. Ready for the unexpected. The audience members closely follow the sequence of the play’s ritualistic patterns believing that those who have gone before (as cited from the literature) might be “brought to life as shadows” (Geertz, 1960, p. 268) to give advice and guidance in the ways of the super-natural: That of “sur-real” arts-based inquiry.

In the wayang purwa, the flickering of a coconut oil flame (or that of the arts-based inquirer’s intuition and imagination) behind the screen adds mystery and excitement, lending an unearthly and compelling beauty to the lacy shadow figures of the puppets (or the co-participants in the study). An interplay of informing light and concealing shadow. Well-known, time-honoured stories allow the members of the audience to see themselves and others in or through the mirror of collective history and to re-view current situations through more expansive perspectives.

Like the shifting scenes of a shadow play our chapter text is divided into sequences. Each of these re-captures some of the inquiry dilemmas or sensory memories that turned out to be crucially important to reconstructing our personal history of shadow-mastery and of becoming collaborative arts-based educational researchers. The sequencing of the scenes follows the chronology of the “apprentice’s” (Christine’s) arts-based experiences and is inter-voiced with the “master’s” (Patrick’s) recollections of and references to other supervisory experiences. The text draws on fragments from thesis journals, conversations, co-written texts, and our extensive Email correspondence. As our working-together develops, thoughts, words, and lines of text run into each other
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naturally like the wax and dye upon the fabric apple images. Roles shift and change. And then recur. The apprentice becomes her own mistress and the master the apprentice.

Light out of darkness. We turn to Christine’s oral defence to show how "cultural [and academic] forms can be treated as texts, as imaginative works built out of social [and academic] materials" (Geertz, 1973, p. 449). It then follows a sequence of inciting moments or scenes (as in a shadow play) that represent the trajectory of our work alone-together. Showing how a collaborative arts-based thesis can be staged. A dramatizing of the inquiry sequence from sharing doctoral level arts-based courses to conducting and then writing up and defending the whole thesis process. Simplifying while honouring the complexity. The text is shaped to reflect the interplay between con-text and contents: We use separate and overlapping voices as columns to in/trans-form our script. Light and shade, movement and stasis.

Scene One: The Oral Exam


Christine

The scene is set. The theater a square, nondescript room. Institutional and un-adorned beige walls. No windows. Two doors to be closed. I re-arrange the furniture, placing the chairs equidistant around the rectangular conference table.

Patrick

Shortly before 2:00 PM and the defence. I have just returned to my office on the 10th floor of my academic tower. I stand at the window and gaze over the cityscape toward the lake with its pale horizons. The route Christine would have followed earlier.

Like Henry James’s (1881 / 1995) window vantage point
formance, I set out my props on smaller tables lining the walls:
Six batik panels featuring distinct apple fragments.
Silent participants.
These are the six characters in my thesis play, waiting to be re-animated yet once again. As wayang (shadow play) puppets are displayed in the soft juicy flesh of a banana tree, so my six characters are sorted and placed in order of appearance but on hard wood veneer.
At rest for now.
Quietly waiting until I, their dalang (or shadow master), decide their time has come.
November 20, 2003. The day of my defence. My husband had patiently awaited my timing. As had Patrick.
Today is a golden apple day for me: One that marks my entrance into the academy. The day that signals my appearance as a shadow master in my own right. Initiation day. Patrick, my master-shadow-master and mentor, has assured me that I am ready. The final draft of my shadow text is finished. During the past week I have performed versions of my shadow play at several dress rehearsals. And it passed the scrutiny of others. I now feel that I am ready. Let the audience come. Let the shadow play begin.

It is almost 2:00 PM

The members of the audience

Time to put in my appearance.
Not just another defence.

On my way down in the elevator, I let my thoughts drift back to the class when I first met Christine. January 6, 1999. The Feast Day of the Epiphany. By way of introduction I had shared a diamond-shaped name-poem, a "self-narrative or signature piece... [as a] geometric miming and aesthetic expression of self" (Diamond & Mullen, 1999, p. 440). In a response to the course readings and the poem, Christine shared how, for her, the last two letters of my name and poem took on a very different meaning: nd became a new day. She then invited the class and me into a relational setting based on the fragments of our life histories we had chosen to share. Later when she asked if I would consider becoming her "supervisor," I did not hesitate: She genuinely seemed to be "a student whose research interests matched mine" (Diamond,
enter the room one at a time.

Patrick is first to arrive. A quick hug and a kind glance. I am ready.

The external examiner enters next. An imposing, almost magisterial, presence in dark suit and white shirt. Patrick offers introductions and, before long, we two speak with each other in Dutch, our mother-tongue. The others follow. More introductions and small talk: three committee members and lastly the university-appointed chairperson.

Members of the audience, yet all are master-shadow-masters in their own right.

I am asked to leave the room. Time to gather my thoughts. Some deep-breathing.

The door opens.

The final call.

Scholartistry in Relation


I enter the now quiet examination room and quickly check the staging: Apple portraits against the wall. Yes, Christine is ready. The audience is arriving. I smile at the examiner.

The chairperson sees that the paper work is completed and the order of appearances is determined.

I invite Christine back in. Let the play begin.
And I am on stage.
In the spotlight.

Quietly I begin.

I improvise.
I weave my shadow text into the text prepared by the external examiner.
I speak of darkness and light.
I speak for my co-inquirers.
I re-animate them one more time.
I let their shadows dance.

For the next two hours, this enclosed room will become a light-filled "box in the theater of the world"
(Benjamin, 1999, p. 6).

A dancing exchange between Christine and her audience.
Play and ritual.

Interlude One

In the light and shadow world of a wayang purwa, the dalang is the puppeteer, the so-called mastermind, or shadow-master behind the scenes. Often there is a strong familial connection, a clear lineage, and an important oral tradition that supports the dalang. His training usually begins spontaneously at a very young age, growing up in the profession: While a father performs, the young child is encouraged to keep busy (and out of trouble) by imitating the shadow-master using small cardboard puppets on the non-shadow side of the screen (Herbert, 2002; Ulbricht, 1970; van Groenendael, 1985; van Ness & Prawirohardjo, 1980). There is also the more formal training offered at institutions for the
performing arts where the apprentice shadow-master "acquires ‘experience’ primarily from two sources — reading and performance… and [must demonstrate he is] inquisitive by nature" (Mrazek, 2002, p. 119).

Scene Two: Past in the Present

Christine
I let my shadows dance by going back to my beginnings as an (arts-based) inquirer. "For me to return to my distant childhood is a necessary act of curiosity" (Freire, 1996, p. 13).

My "dalang training" took place in a safe place: Behind the screen of my father’s study, surrounded by the many books in his theological library, I learned to "read and underline" (van Halen-Faber, 2004). Sacred moves.

For many years I resisted walking in my father’s doctoral footsteps. Even when two of my younger siblings chose to follow that path.

Patrick
Every defence stirs memories of my own academic beginnings. My own play set within an Australian context: "The three page abstract, like the thesis, was written in the third person, in the past tense, and mainly in the passive voice. It now reminds me of a campus novel with a cast of shadowy players." (Diamond, 1994, p. 54)

Tensions between committee members. But not with my external examiners.

I, too, remember the play of shadow and light when I moved in my doctoral inquiry from words to numbers to words.
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My epiphany occurred in the light of arts-based narrative inquiry:
When I (re)cast traditional research into arts-based and experimental text.
When I (re)placed the neutrality of cognitive knowledge with intensely personal and autobiographical knowing.

And now years later to arts-based writing.
Seriously.
I read. I write.
I re-read. I re-write.

I now re-trace my present shadows in the light of my past, re-membering that also in my (con-)text, "memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience." (Benjamin, 1978, p. 26)

Once again I experience how "writing about a topic presupposes previous and parallel readings, as well as the reading of one’s own writing. And none of that can be done without effort, dedication, and responsibility.” (Freire, 1996, p. 172)

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Serious engagement as exemplified by Christine.

Interlude Two

From then to now to then.
Before and after November 20, 2004, in our work together as supervisee and supervisor, we each and together move forward on our life-and-work course. We continue to live our personal experience of inquiry as currere (Pinar & Grumet, 1976). "The play thus is not a static object but an active process constantly mediating [the dalangs’] personal experience” (Mrazek, 2002, p. 119).
Scene Three: Present into Future

Christine
And so here we are.
Two arts-based dalang masters at different ends of the academic career continuum:
Beginning and ending.

Patrick
This is an award-winning thesis in the making.

As I begin my academic writing career, Patrick moves towards writing fiction.
From what he has shared with me he shows that "an author’s curiosity, risk-taking, and adventurous spirit may be of more value than a well-behaved one that reveals fear. It is not possible to create

Through our arts-based inquiries, while "on our way to a new consciousness," Christine and I (along with many others) have discovered that we "can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries…. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the
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without serious intellectual discipline; likewise it is not possible to create within a system of fixed, rigid, or imposed rules." (Freire, 1996, p. 169)

I know that inquiry cultures continue to collide as unlikely worlds and inconsistent frames of reference clash. But I also know that "life is a constant search that cannot, even when writing [or supervising] theses and dissertations, be immobilized."

And so I move on.

As I respond to the insistent pull of heart-strings, I prepare to return to my native home, Australia.

Some day.

My own play of light and shadows.

Opening up other ways.

Postlude

Now that we have shared some of our experiences of becoming arts-based educational co-researchers we invite you, our readers, to
view our shadow play in the light of your own shadow-text.
Perhaps like us you may choose to ask yourself, "What is [my]
substance, whereof [I am] made / That millions of strange shad-
ows on [me] tend?" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 53). Your "strange shad-
ows", when you trace them back to external and internal sources
such as academic norms, non-arts-informed thesis formats, top-
down forms of supervision, memories, and self-doubts, may pro-
vide intimations of future inquiries. As our own collaboration
deepens we know that, while a thesis text has "substance" like a
novel, it also needs its shadows. Throughout a text there must be
tensions at play between light and dark, between imagination and
rationality. A play of contrasts. As we have shown above, "this
shadow [play] is a bit of ideology, a bit of representation, a bit of
subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must
produce its own chiaroscuro" (Barthes, 1975, p. 32). When
imagining and completing an arts-based thesis, opportunity for
such multidimensional play to enter in can be provided by allow-
ing intuitive knowing to declare itself through the use of artful
forms. Even the most unlikely experience, as of a thesis-defence,
filtered through the screen of an arts-based sensibility, can be dis-
lodged from its usual context and assigned a new and more
enlightening role.
As in a shadow play art speaks to art.

End Notes
1. Batik is the process by which a design is produced on fabric
through the use of a dye-resist. According to Indonesian tradition,
batik was considered to be a way to develop spiritual discipline:
Each time the batik artisan executes a particular intricate pattern
the design is not only fixed to the cloth but the meaning of the
design is engraved ever more deeply in the soul of the artisan.
2. A dalang is a puppeteer or shadow master who single-handedly
stage-manages, directs, and conducts the gamelan percussion
orchestra, while giving voice and movement to all the puppet-actors in a wayang performance. The dalang is said to be able to communicate between the spiritual and physical worlds.

3. Wayang [shadow] purwa [ancient] is a traditional form of Indonesian theatre in which shadows created by flat cut-outs of leather puppets are used to convey sacred stories of cosmic events and divine will. Wayang purwa plays provide moral and social instruction along with entertainment and the audience is said to be protected from evil while a play lasts.

4. Chiaroscuro is an art term that describes the bold contrast between light and dark. The use of highlights and shadow to suggest the illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface was first developed in 15th century painting in Italy and Flanders.

References
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About the Authors

CHRISTINE VAN HALEN-FABER is Principal and lecturer at Covenant Canadian Reformed Teachers College, Hamilton, Ontario. Her research interests include visual and literary forms of arts-based narrative inquiry into self / other as artful pathways leading towards pre-service and in-service teacher-educator-researcher development. Her doctoral thesis was given the Canadian Association for Teacher Education 2004 Dissertation Award. She is a founding co-editor (with Patrick Diamond) of the Special Series on Arts-Based Educational Research in Curriculum Inquiry.

In Seeing Through Apples: An Exploration with the Ethics and Aesthetics of a Teacher-educator and Researcher’s Arts-based Beginnings, Christine’s doctoral thesis, she explores the ethics and aesthetics of her arts-based beginnings in the presence of others. She uses apple batik panels to re-present her six co-participants who are then re-animated in a shadow play. As a teacher-educator-researcher drawn to artful forms of development, Christine experiences her self-inquiry in non-linear and layered ways.

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