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# The Authentic Dissertation

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Alternative ways of knowing,  
research, and representation

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I dedicate this work to my two grandsons,  
Sage and Kaien;  
and to all of the children and grandchildren  
of and beyond the seventh generation;  
and to all the creatures, large and small,  
with whom we share the air, land, and  
water; and to all the plants;  
and to the rocks, rivers, and mountains  
and the wisdom they contain;  
and to great mysteriousness that  
surrounds and informs;  
and to the spirits of the invisible world;  
and finally,  
to life itself and its continuation into  
and through death.

## “Out of the cage”

Karen Lee

with Peter Gouzouasis

- Storied dissertation
- Personal experience as data
- Creative non-fiction
- Autobiography/autoethnography
- Importance of mentor support
- Stressful repercussions

*Runner:* Our next presenter is Dr. Karen Lee. She received her doctorate in Curriculum Studies from the University of British Columbia in 2004. She is a Faculty Advisor and co-founder of the Teaching Initiative for Music Educators cohort (TIME), at the Faculty of Education, UBC, Vancouver, BC. Her research interests include performance ethnography, women's life histories, autoethnography, writing practices, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research. She is a writer, musician, music educator, and researcher. I understand that Karen's doctoral supervisor, Dr. Peter Gouzouasis, is here also and will say a few words to us about Karen's dissertation journey as well. Peter is the Chair of Music Education at UBC and 2003 recipient of the Sam Black Award for Excellence in Education and Development in the Visual and Performing Arts. Karen, it is all yours!

*Karen:* Thank you Runner, and my greetings to everyone. My dissertation, “Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Music Educators” is a storied dissertation that researches the inherent shifts and extensions in musicians' identities as they transform into schoolteachers. My research explored literary studies, arts-based research, and feminist-based literature. I investigated musicians' lives in practicum, university, and school-based contexts. I discussed the nature of institutional education and the musicians' conflicts with love, loss, pain, wisdom, and change.



I represented my research in the form of eight short stories and an autobiographical account of my experience. The stories are considered creative non-fiction as I tell stories about what happened with an artful presentation of real people and real events. My stories were told with a clear eye and alert imagination. In them I examined musicians' beliefs, education, and experiences, focusing on their identity issues as they transformed into music teachers. The stories confront and challenge and steer readers into critical places of thought and unexpected spaces of change.

My research led to several important ideas. It revealed that some musicians benefited in their transitions to teachers if they collaborated in the story-writing process, and if they were mentored by a school advisor who was also a professional musician. It proved the value of autobiography in resolving my own conflicts relating to the musician/teacher dynamic. I also learned that exploring issues from multiple viewpoints and writing styles enables people to gain new insights that help make change possible.

Because I was asked to tell my story about the process of my adventure into an arts-informed dissertation and because time is short, I want to share with you the thoughts that went through my mind the day I waited for my doctoral committee to determine the outcome of my doctoral defense.

It's been forty-five minutes and the anxiety causes me to reflect on the arduous and challenging journey of writing a storied dissertation.

Don't panic. It's only my doctoral defense. It demonstrates intellectual depth, breadth, dexterity of knowledge. The last and most challenging exam I need to pass: *viva viva*. I stand and wait, try to figure out what happened. Nothing comes. My hands shake, my heart beats. I rub my stomach, feel it coming. I close my eyes and let my mind lapse. I wear my black suit, something for formal occasions. An actress in costume, I just performed. After forty-five minutes, I retreat outside while the jury deliberates. An unusually long time to wait. *Will I graduate?*

I remembered my decision to choose an "arts-based research" project as the conceptual, theoretical, methodological underpinnings for my research. To write a non-traditional storied dissertation. To open up new epistemological and political ways of seeing and saying.

I reflect on my journey as middle-aged daughter, lover, mother, scholar. My voyage has been wildly unpredictable, dark with secrets, evocation, and celebration. I recall the hurdles in a flood of memories. A lump in my throat, clay in my hands. No choice but to wait. Going back inside for after-defense small talk would crumble this moment into dust. Instead, I unpack years of murmurs about writing a non-traditional dissertation. A fine rain starts to fall. Pushing back my hair, I tell myself I will graduate. A damp mist takes hold. Years earlier, when my dissertation was born, I searched to express the emotion of the magnum opus. A steady sound of writing behind closed doors; I divided time between my daughter and my dissertation. She wanted to attend convocation. Habitually, she drew with stubby crayons beside me.

*Calling from fog*  
*My daughter*  
*When will you graduate?*

It's March. I remember, we are arguing. My supervisor is a skeptic. It's a cold winter morning. My hands shake, my heart palpitates. I walk to a large, blue building in the opposite corner of the quadrangle. I could probably convince him to go for coffee, could probably afford the cost. My doctoral supervisor likes to eat and drink when we talk. And I need to change his mind. Provide a convincing argument for writing a storied dissertation. He must understand that my dissertation needs music, poetry, autobiography. That subjective knowing contributes to academia. That an alternative form of representation would contribute new knowledge. But arts-based research is novel and problematic for him. Originally, I had decided to write a traditional dissertation by interviewing musicians with structured and semi-structured questions. But after in-depth interviews, coding, ordering, categorizing could not explain their experiences. Instead, writing stories about their experiences would express their emotions and dilemmas with change.

I vividly remember arguing. And how the appointment was sabotaged. I had brought him a cup of tea that he knocked over. "You put the cup in a bad place," he mumbled. With paper towels, I cleaned the mess. Closing my eyes, I recall music between us. Harmony, the interplay of notes. We walked at the beach. A rainy, blustery day. Bit by bit, he unleashed his stern words. My waking nightmare unfolded:

"This arts-based stuff seems somewhat," he paused, "subversive. Know what I mean? Research needs to be systematic."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"That there must be some sense of coherence. A clearly defined purpose and problem. A certain sense of structure. Structural corroboration, not multiplicative corroboration—even Eisner says that. I mean, considering the state of research in our profession, how can you hand in a dissertation that's merely a series of stories?"

Indeed, there are arguments against personal experience as data. Questions about assumptions, collection, analysis, validity, presentation, and subjectivities that influence data. Questions about the artistic process shaping research that acknowledges the aesthetic, physical, emotional, and intellectual.

It's June. We are still bantering. Images surge like a stormy wave. Finally, I decide that any more grief, resistance, and I'll leave him. Yes, find another supervisor. Get on with life: write, defend, graduate. As is, I'm dead from hardcore cigarettes. Dead from swollen meetings, redolent of half-lit winter mornings. My hands shake, my heart beats fast. I hold articles in one hand: Ellis, Barone, Eisner, Rambo, Richardson. I curse at myself, be more persuasive. I curse writing, curse research. Curse him, curse his skepticism. But I wait. Wait for the bilious feeling to pass. Visualize myself being brilliant, persuasive.



Suddenly, he smiles and waves in the doorway. As he opens the door, I step inside. I remind myself that the *raison d'être* for visiting is to make a decision. Yes or no. I take a deep breath while he begins to speak.

"How are you?"

"Not good."

"Why?"

"I need to talk."

"About what?"

"I need to write a storied dissertation."

"What? I thought we talked about this. A thesis like that will never get you a job in our profession."

"I'm not worried about a job, Peter. I'm more interested in the best way to tell my student's stories."

"What about putting food on the table?"

"Seriously, Peter, I need to share some articles with you."

"About what?"

"About stories being research."

I explain I started a course with a poet, writer, researcher in language education who discusses how artists use art, dance, story, poetry, multimedia in narrative research. I list narrative researchers: Bruner, Cixous, Greene, Kundera, Lather, Goldberg, Wooldridge, Bareson. I tell him about the rewards of writing. About autobiographical writing as a method of discovery. I write to find out about love, death, good, evil, personal, family. Indeed, it is research to be a laborer of words. Like many, words and images fill me. I write poems and poems write me. I even share how my poems and two stories have been accepted for publication.

There is silence. Then, he takes a deep breath. We've had small arguments but always resolved them. The way scholars go about polemics like pantomime puppets, one walks in front, the other behind. As the silence deafens, I stand to leave. "Wait," he halts me, "I need to read those articles."

Later, I don't remember how long but it seemed like eternity, he scheduled an appointment with me.

"How are you?"

"Okay."

"I read the articles."

"Great."

"Let's eat and talk."

It's August. We go for sushi on Tenth Avenue. I smile and he smiles. I wear shorts and a t-shirt. I'm an actress in costume, celebrating. Long shadows of

the sun make patterns on the table as we drink water. Immediately, I turn toward him. Thank you, thank you for reading the articles. I stare deeply into his eyes, thank you. My voice cracks, I hold back tears. I taste my California roll. Lunch is easy, comfortable. There are silver flashes, blue lights. As we eat, I remember to tell my daughter, "I will graduate."

Now it's January. The day of my doctoral defense. I recall the last two-and-a-half hours. I sing and read poetry, sing and read stories, sing and read autobiographically. I sing the song my stepfather taught my daughter.

Tell me a story.

Tell me a story

And then I'll go to bed.

You promised me you said you would.

You better give in so I'll be good.

Tell me a story

And then I'll go to bed.

There was a drum roll, a downbeat to defend how stories teach. How everyone is from a story-telling tribe. How great stories bring metaphors to life. How adults and children use stories to gain insight about the world. As artist-researcher, researcher-as-artist, I play musical excerpts from the musicians in my research. But the oral exam was loaded with super, colossal, intellectual questions, the dialectic. A tribute to Socrates. On the edge of inquiry, I staggered as academic questions gain dimension, often wake me in the middle of the night.

Finally, the grueling questions end. A motionless winter morning imbued by the hurdles: my supervisor, emotional hurdles, oral defense, and the deliberation. Inhaling, I focus on my publications on autoethnography, performance ethnography, women's life histories, writing practices, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research.

Soon, a celebratory Chinese lunch at a restaurant with my friends and parents. Then, dinner with my parents and daughter. I want to tell her *I will graduate*. Fidgeting, I watch the misty waters dance on the pavement. My heart speeds up, my teeth chatter. There is itchiness from nylons. I want to wear jeans, socks, and boots. It's cold. Nothing I can do to make the wait go faster. It's the deepest part of the day, just before the final verdict.

That night, after sharing the news with my family, my daughter draws a picture of me in cap and gown. It has the caption: "Congratulations Dr. Mom!"

*Runner*: Thank you so much for sharing this. I think the way you presented in itself proves the power of stories to move and inform us. Dr. Gouzouasis, were you the supervisor in Karen's story?



*Peter:* Karen's defense was rough. She had the lingo and knew the literature, but didn't answer some questions in a satisfactory manner. Some examiners felt she didn't elaborate on the basic ideas that enabled her to use stories as data. When the questioning came back to me I tried to ask questions that would lead her to address the concerns raised in the external examiner's letter. The argument that followed when Karen left the room was not pleasant. I was left alone to conduct a forty-five-minute defense of the defense. Unfortunately, the missing committee member, the poet who inspired Karen to pursue arts-based research, was 3,000 miles away on sabbatical.

My major concerns with an arts-based dissertation remain. Very few music educators are involved in this approach to research. Three years after her defense and with numerous journal publication credits to her name, Karen would have an even more difficult time finding a position in a music education department in the U.S.A. And it is not an approach I recommend to everyone, because it requires a commitment to both personal artistic growth and the development of multiple research skills.

Karen's narrative, like many others of those at this conference who have dared to move out of the standard academic box, is an emotional story. I learn so much from working with all of my graduate students. I always read the material they choose for their literature reviews, and in most cases go beyond the scope of their project. In Karen's case, I initially thought her intentions were a passing fancy, a fad. Then I started reading books and articles on my own—Eisner, Connelly, Clandinin, Riesman, Richardson, Barone, Sparkes. I had begun to form my own ideas and I wanted to see where she was connecting with arts-based educational research. She was more ready to compose a creative non-fiction dissertation when I was intellectually prepared to go on the journey with her. We grew together. A supportive, knowledgeable advisor is crucial.

*Karen:* Remember Peter, when I reminded you of the cage that day in your office when I was crying and you tried to console me?

*Peter:* Yes, twelve years ago when I met Karen in a class, we were in a room that had a huge wire fence dividing it. We were trapped in there with computers. We called it "the cage." We used to say that they put us in there because of all the crazy music we were composing. Anyway, Karen reminded me of it during her stress about the dissertation, saying that she felt like she was still in it.

I just wanted to add to Karen's story that it is vital that students who are choosing to move in the direction of alternative dissertation find supportive networks among faculty and students. They also need to factor in the role of change in relationships that they might experience. People go through so much "skata," to use a Greek term, to make things work. And I mean real scatological experiences, in the name of academia. Believe me, I've been there and dealt with a lot of heavy stuff.

Some people are struck in modernism, others in postmodernism. They're hung up on dualisms and manufactured binaries. They're stuck on their own stance and afraid to change, but we have to rethink the way we see the world. When people stop growing they can't connect ideas any more. Change brings about the need to reconstruct and reconnect, to rethink the ways that we see the world, to adopt a new set of lenses. Sometimes, that doesn't happen. People stop growing, they can't connect anymore, probably because they can't get away from relativistic stances to see how the relational, the relative-relative, supercedes the mere relative.

As musicians, Karen and I live and breathe music, and our understandings of all aspects of music—performing, composing, improvising, listening, studying—are ongoing and expressed through a variety of media, in a variety of forms. For us, synthetic, split binaries of teacher-artist, teacher-researcher, researcher-artist dissolve into a relational, inclusive perspective of an understanding of the artist/researcher/teacher. Our personal experiences in music teaching, learning and performing inform our research and our research informs our teaching, learning, and performing. That music (i.e. art) informs our research and research informs our music may be further elaborated as each aspect of artist/researcher/teacher simultaneously nurtures the other—creating and being created—in an ongoing process of living inquiry.

*Rumer:* And not everyone can be a musician or a painter, right, Peter?

*Peter:* The artist is in all of us, especially the story teller. However, it takes a lifelong commitment to an art form to live up to the title of artist. And the strongest, most coherent, vibrant examples of arts-based educational research demonstrate Eisner's principle that the art informs the research and the research informs the art. The researcher's integrity and lifelong commitment to the arts is crucial in the creation of meaningful arts-based inquiry.