

**Lost in the Cloud: An Autoethnodramatic Inquiry on Digital Identity  
and Human Connection**

By

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### **Disclaimer**

The views and experiences explored in this capstone project are those of the author and do not reflect the views or opinions of the University of Alberta, the Faculty of Arts, Communications and Technology Graduate program or any other educational institution.

## Abstract

In this capstone project, I employ an arts-based research methodology to explore multifaceted aspects of digital citizenship as I have encountered them within the context of the social and educational sphere. My autoethnographic research takes the form of an autoethnodramatic play, drawing on my personal experiences and researcher-created poetry. The aim of this capstone project is to shed light on the intricate web of online belonging and its impact on educational environments.

Inspired by the format of the play *Albertine in Five Times* by Michel Tremblay (1984), I represent myself being online at three different stages in my life. Like Tremblay's (1984) work, there is a throughline character that exists within all stages of my life online. *Albertine in Five Times* takes place on the front porch of Albertine's childhood home and her bed in a private room of a seniors home. *Lost in the Cloud* takes place within the cloud, a representation of the internet. The internet is a place I found security, home, and refuge from the age of 10 years old; arguably the internet is my childhood home.

## Positionality Statement

I am a settler woman from ᑭᓃᕐᔪᓂᗵᒃᑲᓄᖅ (Amiskwaciwâskahikan) Treaty 6/Métis Territory. I am an educator and a millennial who believes that Indigenous wisdom teachings can be integrated into pedagogical practice. In communications scholarship, I am referred to as a Digital Native, for growing up online. This term reflects the colonial nature of digital spaces and the need for reimagining how we relate to ourselves and others online. The way we represent

ourselves and are represented by others matters. I prefer to describe myself as a digital citizen.

This autoethnodrama is an attempt to explore my kinship ties with technology and how I relate to others in digital places.

### **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<i>1</i>
<b>Research Questions</b>	<i>4</i>
<b>Literature Review</b>	<i>5</i>
<i>Implications of Technology in Schools</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Arts-Based Research as Methodology and Praxis</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Ethnography and (Auto)Ethnodrama in Education</i>	<i>12</i>
<b>Methodology</b>	<i>15</i>
<b>Results – Autoethnographic drama</b>	<i>20</i>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<i>67</i>
<b>References</b>	<i>68</i>

## Introduction

The 21st century is a largely transformative age, often coined as the digital age, which calls for transformative imagination to academic inquiry. Arts-based research offers an imaginative approach to academic inquiry of the digital landscape. The digital landscape, characterized by its rapid pace and continuous evolution, presents a complex ecosystem (Couldry, 2020) that students, teachers, and community members must adeptly navigate and engage with. Since the advent of social media and communication technologies in the early 2000s, there has been a significant transformation in how individuals interact within communities, both in professional and personal contexts. It can be perceived that the use of communication technology has shifted from being a choice to a necessity, fundamentally changing the nature of community participation. In the context of my Ethnodrama, *Lost in the Cloud*, explores the need for change in living and being online. The characters of *Lost in the Cloud*: Rebecca, Becca, and Becky, representing different stages of life, illustrate how digital spaces have influenced the reconstruction of identities and human behaviours online.

Throughout my lifetime, online platform societies like Facebook and Google have emerged as ruling monopolies of data capitalism, otherwise known as platform societies (Srnicek, 2017). Individual users and their engagement with these platforms are the new economic lines for companies to tap into. My early engagement with internet platforms conditioned me to become an entangled participant in data capitalism. I define my relationship with communication technologies and platform society as a *toxic entanglement* (Eppert & Conrad, 2024). The Ethnodrama created for this capstone project is set within the cloud. The cloud is my individual space, both before and after the rise of data capitalism. Platform societies

like Amazon, Facebook, Twitter [X], TikTok, LinkedIn, AirBnB, are all ruling players in what has evolved into the Chiefdoms of Data (Brij Sharma, Personal communication, 2023). These various platforms, starting from platforms such as Hotmail and Neopets, have significantly influenced my evolving relationship with the internet.

The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized our social and economic reliance on communication technologies, highlighting the profound effects these technologies have on daily life. In the post-COVID-19 era, the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on both personal and educational domains has emerged as a critical area of interest for academics and educational practitioners. Navigating the digital landscape is like journeying through a constantly shifting maze, a maze which I believe requires relational walking practice – *wâhkôhtowin* (Donald, 2021).

The *nêhiyawak* principle of *wâhkôhtowin* teaches community members to consider our kinship ties to the world around us. How can an individual be in a relationship with a place? Relational walking practice or *wâhkôhtowin* involves community members coming together and finding understanding by walking alongside one another; by being in relationship with one another. In my experiences with technology, I was left to my own devices to develop my relationship with the internet. The individuals I walked with online were my friends, not my educators or parents. Educators should evaluate their current relationships with technology and have open discussions with students regarding the strengths and downfalls of living and being online. *Wâhkôhtowin* inspired me to question: How am I living and being online? How does the way I am living need to change? How are my students living and being online? How could it change?

Colonial patterns permeate the current dynamics of technology used both in and out of schools (Smith, 2004). A pressing issue in contemporary education is its focus on shaping students primarily for roles in a capitalistic society, often prioritizing the use of technology for its own sake over fostering students as engaged, innovative global citizens (Llewellyn, 2021). Deibert (2020) points out the growing perception of public education as a mere conduit to employment rather than a foundation for developing the character needed for responsible citizenship, a trend that necessitates change. Educators must evaluate their own relationship with technology and have open conversations with students about their use of technology in order for educational institutions to be equipped to move forward with developing students' understandings of digital citizenship.

Since the 1970s, educators have sought to mitigate the impacts of media through the concept of media literacy, which serves as a framework for guiding action and reform. However, media literacy is often criticized as being "incomplete," as it may inadvertently support the negative aspects of social media by enhancing fluency with the very tools that can be misused. Deibert (2020) highlights this concern, noting that groups such as "Russian trolls, ISIS, and far-right conspiracy groups like QAnon" are among the most media literate of our time (p. 269). To address these shortcomings, educators might shift their focus toward an approach rooted in restraint. This paradigm shift would emphasize the importance of teaching students how their interactions with digital technologies can foster positive, healthy citizenship and global stewardship, rather than merely preparing them for employment. As Deibert (2020) suggests, public education should encourage citizens to embrace ethics, civility, social tolerance, and respect for diversity, all of which contribute to a healthier public sphere (p. 318).



Deibert (2020) further advocates for a localized approach to global issues, urging citizens to "think globally but act locally" by enacting restraints on businesses and municipalities to drive broader change (p. 327). However, retreating from the pervasive influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) can feel daunting, as surveillance capitalism has made such technologies seemingly inescapable. Deibert (2020) illustrates this by referencing the omnipresence of CCTV, drones, and satellites, which reinforce the idea that we cannot easily escape the reach of information technology (p. 265). Despite fragmented reform efforts, the digital ecosystem remains a complex network where individuals seek community, belonging, and identity formation. It is within this digital ecosystem that my capstone ethnodrama, *Lost in the Cloud*, is set, exploring the challenges and opportunities of living within such a space.

The need for a societal "reset," as called for by both Deibert and this capstone ethnodrama, involves implementing individual, corporate, state, and societal restraints in our engagement with communications technology. Society must begin to "think seriously about how we might need to live differently within today's media ecologies" (Couldry, 2020, p. 120–121) to ensure a better future for ourselves and generations to come. *Lost in the Cloud* emphasizes that teacher wellness, the right to disconnect, and fostering open conversations within communities are crucial first steps toward achieving this necessary reset.

### **Research Questions**

My capstone project research questions are as follows:

RQ1: In what ways has digital citizenship presented itself on the various platforms I have utilized?

RQ2: How has membership in platform society impacted my ability to cultivate and foster connection with other people?

My autoethnodramatic inquiry central to this research not only illuminates my personal experiences but also offers broader social implications. By exploring how digital citizenship and platform society have shaped my interactions and sense of connection, this study can serve as a reflective tool for others navigating digital landscapes. Furthermore, the insights gained can inform educators and other community-based support systems in understanding the nuances of student engagement in a digitally-mediated world, potentially guiding more effective strategies for fostering authentic connections and responsible digital practices among students.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review seeks to explore the current implications of technology in school and role of arts-based research methods, such as ethnography [ethnodrama], in providing a unique perspective on the complex relationships and challenges students and education stakeholders face in the digital realm. The literature review aims to examine how arts-based research methods can offer insightful representations of these interactions and issues, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of digital navigation in educational contexts.

*Implications of Technology in Schools*

The growing need to transition from a focus on digital literacy and workforce preparation to a more holistic approach in education is increasingly evident (Deibert, 2020). As educators and researchers navigate a rapidly digitizing world, it is crucial for education policymakers to embrace a comprehensive view of digital citizenship, one that encompasses ethical online behavior, digital rights, and the navigation of digital identities. Scholars like Deibert (2020), Frischmann (2016), and Llewellyn (2021) emphasize the importance of re-envisioning technology's role in education, advocating for its integration into students' holistic development.

Kerrigan and Hart's (2016) arts-based research exploration of students' digital identities, analyzed the complexities of digital personhood and the issues surrounding dual identities, private and public, in online spaces using biographical film. In the biographical film, research participants explored the dramaturgical approach to the representations of our idealized and multiple versions of self on social media. These research participants felt they could represent themselves in the most authentic way online and there was empowerment in holding multiple identities online.

The dual identities students develop online have significant impacts on interactions between students online and offline. Online behaviour of youth has significant real-world impacts in the greater community. Slater's (2023) novel explored racist social media posts made by teenagers and the legal implications for the school and the students. Slater's creative writing, used the medium of a novel formatted in journal entries of different characters. As art-based research the narrative explored the complexity of online/offline behaviour in an accessible and

data driven methodology. Slater's (2023) novel *Accountable: The True Story of a Racist Social Media Account and the Teenagers Whose Lives it Changed* and Kerrigan and Hart's (2016) biographical films both underscored the need for comprehensive digital citizenship education and the mental health impacts on students.

Ruckenstein's (2013) discussion on children's responses to digital environments and Subrahmanyam and Greenfield's (2008) findings on identity development and interpersonal relationships in online spaces further informed the narrative of *Lost in the Cloud*. Ruckenstein (2013) argued that young children interact with technology as means to expand their spatial environments and use virtual pets, for example, to mitigate their real-world needs. My childhood virtual pet on the platform Neopets became another source of comfort for me, as I aimed to “meet its ‘biological needs’ in a way that [was] mediated by technology. The pet ‘want[ed]’ closeness, food, and cleanliness” (Ruckenstein, 2013, pp. 481), all things I too wanted as a child.

In a digital environment children have more autonomous control of their environment. Real world risks and fears such as fears of “car traffic, fears of ‘stranger danger’, and other risks increase the likelihood of spatial restrictions of children’s independent mobility” (Ruckenstein, 2013, p. 478). Digital platforms offer children a place to explore their identity in a way that is free from restrictions and potentially adult oversight in the offline world. The removal of spatial restrictions that digital platforms provide allows for children to develop and explore their independent mobility (Ruckenstein, 2013). Subrahmanyam and Greenfield's (2008) recognized the challenges teachers face as they attempt to navigate the negative impacts of communications technology in today’s classrooms while maintaining the significant benefits they bring to pedagogical practice.

ICTs provide adolescents with “opportunities to explore [identity] as well as to practice self-disclosure and self-presentation” (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008, p. 139). The author noted that adolescent relationships are increasingly dependent on online spaces, and this dependency is seemingly unavoidable. While the value of identity exploration in online spaces is valuable for teenage development Subrahmanyam and Greenfield also recognized “cyberbullying illustrates how traditional offline adolescent issues are moving to the electronic stage” (p. 128).

The capstone autoethnodrama reflects the idea that membership in digital society occurs at a younger age than in previous generations, influencing social interactions and identity formation. Frischmann's (2016) analogy of technology's subtle yet profound impact on pedagogy is mirrored in the autoethnodrama's portrayal of how digital spaces become seamlessly integrated into the characters' lives, shaping their behaviors and interactions. Frischmann critiques the complacency of digital platform users and the exploitation in surveillance capitalism, citing an example of a school integrating FitBit into their Physical Education program without adequate parental consent. This raises important questions about how technology shapes student behaviour and social interactions.

Deibert (2020) highlighted the distress students experience when asked to abstain from digital media, likening ICTs to addictive mechanisms. This resonates with the experiences depicted in *Lost in the Cloud*, where the main character struggles with reliance on digital devices. The play draws from these insights, portraying how digital addiction can overshadow real-life connections, as emphasized in the popular Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020). Social media algorithms are addictive in nature and designed to keep us engaged with our technology. Teachers and students alike are impacted by these algorithms and struggle to maintain a healthy relationship with communication technologies.

In advocating for a shift towards digital citizenship, Deibert (2020) emphasized the need for a comprehensive understanding of how students interact with technology. This perspective is echoed in *Lost in the Cloud*, where the characters navigate both the opportunities and challenges of their digital environments throughout different stages of life. The ethnodrama aligns with Zhao and Watterston's (2021) call for cultivating human qualities and social-emotional intelligence in the face of increasing technological integration, highlighting the tension between digital spaces and real-world connections. Zhao and Watterston (2021) warned of the increasing digital divide between students in a post-covid era, highlighting the importance of moving away from technological dependency and fostering human connection.

In the era of smart machines, Zhao and Watterston (2021) emphasized the importance of cultivating human qualities and social-emotional intelligence, such as creativity, artistry, and humanity, which differentiate us from algorithms and Artificial Intelligence. Curriculum development should nurture these attributes, preparing students to thrive in today's complex world. Deibert (2020) warned of the dangers to democracy and economy if students become complacent in distinguishing fact from fiction. Therefore, educators should promote a healthy relationship with technology, emphasizing its use to meet human needs rather than technology for its own sake, as Llewellyn (2021) also suggested.

However, while these scholars provide valuable insights, there is a tendency in the literature to emphasize the dangers of digital spaces without fully exploring the potential for positive, transformative experiences. *Lost in the Cloud* seeks to address this gap by illustrating both the challenges and opportunities of digital environments, ultimately advocating for a balanced approach to technology use that integrates online and offline experiences.

*Arts-Based Research as Methodology and Praxis*

The internet certainly raises many new and complex issues, in particular for ethnographic work (Beaulieu, 2004). Arts-based research is an effective response to multiple and complex challenges (Douglas & Carless, 2018). Arts-based research (ABR) offers a unique blend of methodology and praxis, combining practical research techniques with a philosophical and reflective approach to understanding the world (Leavy, 2018). This approach is central to *Lost in the Cloud*, where the play itself becomes a medium for exploring and communicating complex social issues related to digital identity and citizenship. Through autoethnodrama, this capstone project experimented with my evolving identity online and the impacts it had on my own personal development. This approach to research not only offers innovative methods for conducting research but also embodies a transformative process that deeply values and prioritizes human experiences in all their complexity (Banks & Banks, 1998).

Springgay (2004) and Banks and Banks (1998) highlighted the capacities of ABR to uncover unknown voices and realities in curriculum construction and pedagogical practices. By utilizing artistic forms like visual arts, performance, and creative writing, ABR provides alternative ways to gather, analyze, and represent data. Chilton and Leavy (2020) and Custer (2014) emphasized the integration of creative arts into social research to enhance the accessibility of research findings and engage audiences on an emotional level. Performance theatre allows for a deeper emotional connection with the audience, making complex social issues more relatable and impactful. I am hopeful that those who read *Lost in the Cloud* or witness it through performance will discuss the material with others and critically reflect on their own relationship with communications technology.

Recognizing the importance of integrating arts-based methodologies into research, scholars such as Chilton and Leavy (2020), Connelly and Clandinin (1990), and Custer (2014) have led a shift towards methods that enhance the accessibility of research findings and deeply engage audiences on an emotional level. This integration of social research with creative arts, narrative inquiry, and autoethnography goes beyond stylistic choices, fundamentally reimagining how research can connect with and influence its audience. Gray (2022) argued relational and aesthetic accountabilities in arts-based research can offer an important foundation for considering how theatre-making and theatre traditions can influence scientific research more broadly.

Chilton and Leavy (2020) champion the integration of creative arts into social research to dismantle the barriers between conventional academic research and the expressive power of the arts. This approach makes research findings more accessible and relatable, enabling researchers to communicate complex social issues in ways that resonate with people's experiences and emotions. The arts can further our capacity to communicate ideas and multisensory feelings in a variety of mediums (Geoghegan, 1994).

However, the literature also points out challenges in ABR, particularly regarding the validity of creative expressions as research and the necessary expertise in artistic domains (Woo, 2008). These challenges highlight the need for rigorous methodological considerations. Scholars like Morris and Paris (2022), Spry (2001), and Norris (2011) advocate for clear criteria and ethical frameworks to guide and evaluate this innovative research approach. *Lost in the Cloud* addresses these challenges when considering the "Great Wheel" model introduced by Norris (2011), which evaluates ABR across four dimensions: pedagogy, poiesis, politics, and public positioning. This model guides the play's development, ensuring that it not only entertains



addressing poiesis) but also educates (pedagogy) and engages with broader social issues (politics). This model of research evaluation, along with Leavy's (2018) discussion on the philosophical foundations of arts-based research, emphasized that this ethnodramatic approach involves more than just methodology; it requires a deep philosophical commitment to authentically representing human experiences.

As both a methodology and praxis, arts-based research becomes a tool for personal and societal change, encouraging deep engagement with the subject matter and frequent reflection on personal experiences and beliefs, offering a nuanced, multidimensional expression of data.

### *Ethnography and (Auto)Ethnodrama in Education*

Ethnodrama, as a qualitative research method, incorporates theatre techniques to transform research data into a performative script to convey lived experiences of individuals and communities. Ethnodrama allows for an "experiential understanding and evolving construction of self" in society (Mieniczakowski & Smith, 2001, p.100). Autoethnodrama is a distinct form of ethnodrama that represents the researchers' lived experiences as the primary source of data. This approach to research examines the overlap between personal and cultural narratives while providing a unique lens to examine broader societal issues. My play, *Lost in the Cloud*, is an autoethnodrama, reflecting my own journey and insights as I navigate(d) the complexities of identity and technology in the digital age. The securing of academic legitimacy in arts-based research requires a performance ethic if it is to be taken seriously within the academy (Bagley, 2009). Bagley recommends ethnodramatic researchers aim for a performance ethic that respects the content, art form, participants, and staging. The methodology should be rooted in integrity, responsibility, purpose, and quality of the art. These considerations help maintain disciplined practice. This ensures that ethnographic educational research avoids self-indulgence and contributes meaningfully to the complex landscape of qualitative inquiry.

Turner and Turner's (1982) foundational work in performance ethnography established the groundwork for ethnodrama, using performance as a tool to understand and represent cultural rituals and social behaviors. Vanover (2016) provides a compelling example of using ethnodrama to understand and communicate teachers' experiences in challenging educational environments, particularly in inner-city schools. Turner and Turner (1982) highlight the value of an 'inside view' in performances as a powerful means of understanding and critiquing social structures. This concept paved the way for ethnodrama's role in educational research, showing how performance could be a potent tool for learning and inquiry (Turner & Turner, 1982). This concept is central to *Lost in the Cloud*, as the audience experiences an "inside view" of the digital world. The characters' interactions and experiences are dramatized to explore the complexities of digital identity and citizenship through the cultural rituals and social behaviours experienced online.

Delamont and Woods's (1987) exploration of ethnography in educational settings aligns with the medium of ethnodrama to capture the complexities of educational environments, particularly in the context of digital spaces. Their work aligns with Turner and Turner's (1982) early emphasis on performance's ethnographic roots, demonstrating the evolution from traditional ethnography to dynamic methods like ethnodrama in education. An example of this is illustrated in Duncan's (2005) ethnographic inquiry into an urban elementary school regularly subjecting its students to dated curricular materials and supplies.

Saldaña's (2008) expansion of qualitative data in ethnodrama to include poetry, interviews, and personal artifacts is reflected in *Lost in the Cloud's* narrative, which incorporates various forms of digital communication to deepen the audience's understanding of the characters' experiences. The personal artifacts central to the ethnodrama, *Lost in the Cloud*, were the old email addresses of the author. These real-life digital artifacts allowed me to tell an

authentic version of my own digital personhood as it evolved.

Balabuch's (2021) work on ethnodrama in applied theatre for social justice education further supports the play's approach, demonstrating the power of performance in fostering empathy and critical thinking. Participants in Balabuch's ethnodramatic creation felt the medium allowed them to tell authentic stories in their own words. Smith and Hendricks (2011) supported the claim that ethnodrama, as a performative arts-based representation, allows the human condition to be portrayed symbolically and aesthetically to facilitate spectator engagement and reflection. *Lost in the Cloud* utilizes autoethnodrama to not only entertain but also provoke reflection on the social and ethical implications of digital citizenship.

Bird and Donelan (2020) further discussed performance ethnography's application in adult professional learning, showcasing ethnodrama's utility across different age groups and educational levels. Similarly, Cranston and Kusanovich (2017), along with Donelan (2002), demonstrated how ethnodrama can be a valuable pedagogical tool for exploring classroom dynamics and cultural nuances, thereby enhancing teachers' abilities to manage diverse student populations effectively. Moore and Lemmer (2010) examined ethnodrama's role in South African secondary schools, finding it effective in facilitating discussions about intercultural relationships, identity, and social issues. Moore and Lemmer's exploration of ethnodrama in schools underlined ethnodrama's significance as an instructional tool for cultivating cultural competence among students. Wallin (2011) argued that arts-based research has the potential to liberate thought from the restrictive habits of traditional education and representational thinking.

However, while the literature on ethnodrama is rich, it often focuses on the educational and performative aspects without fully addressing the potential for broader social impact. *Lost in the Cloud* seeks to bridge this gap by using autoethnodrama as a tool for both education and advocacy, aiming to influence not only individual perspectives but also broader societal

conversations about technology and identity.

In summary, this literature review provided a solid foundation for the development of *Lost in the Cloud*, offering valuable insights into digital identity, arts-based research, and ethnodrama. The development of my autoethnodrama is an innovative approach, supported by the literature, as a powerful method of advocating for a balanced approach to technology use and exploring the potential for positive, transformative experiences in digital spaces. Through the medium of autoethnodrama, *Lost in the Cloud* aims to engage audiences in critical conversations about digital citizenship and identity, ultimately contributing to a more holistic understanding of our increasingly digitized world.

### **Methodology**

As an arts-based researcher with a background in theatre education, communications, and a love of poetry, my expertise and unique life experiences significantly influence my methodological choices. My proficiency in these art forms is crucial in ensuring the quality of my collected qualitative data and the effective representation of my findings (Leavy, 2018). In my capstone project, the ethnodrama draws on my professional experience and strengths in creative art forms as a drama teacher. The data collection for my arts-based research project included researcher created poetry and narrative drawing from my personal experiences and field observations in educational settings, to inform a range of arts-creation practices, culminating in an autoethnodramatic presentation of my research.

My methodological approach is inspired by the innovative approaches in arts-based research discovered through my literature review. Furman et al. 's (2007) exploration of expressive, research, and reflective poetry as qualitative inquiry provided a creative framework for initially understanding and analyzing data. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) advocated for

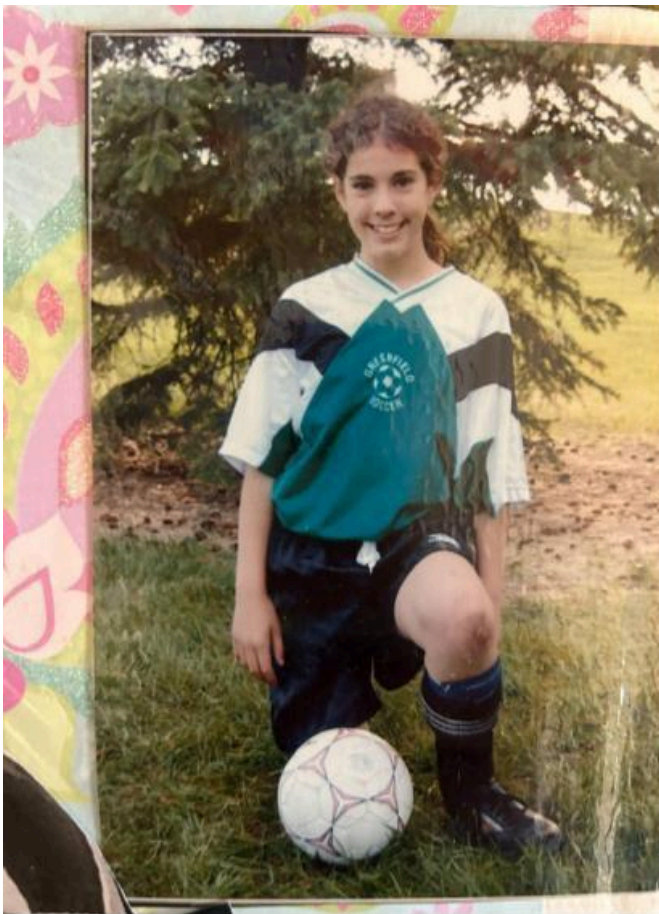
narrative creation in research, emphasizing storytelling as a powerful tool to convey research findings. Arts-based researchers aim to delve into the lived experiences, narratives, and cultural nuances of individuals and communities (Vanover, 2016). Saldaña (2008) broadened the scope of qualitative data in ethnodrama, encompassing elements such as poetry, interviews, and personal artifacts.

In my research process, I began by analyzing a poem I wrote in 2023 and integrating it as a prologue for my script. Scholars like Raingruber (2009) advocated for the use of poetry reading and writing to support interpretive analysis of qualitative data. I used the poem as a springboard for thematic exploration, incorporating a circular plot structure to the dramification of my data (Saldaña, 2003). Beginning with a poetic framework, my opening prologue poem may be subject to critique as a poetaster (Piirto, 2002), or simply poorly written poetry. Regardless of the subjective evaluation of the poem's quality, it served as an essential starting point for contemplating how to develop my plot and dramatize my data as Saldaña (2003) suggested. Scholars pursuing inquiry through ethnodrama look to Saldaña's expertise for insight (Bhattacharya & Gillen, 2016).

Saldaña's (2003) recommendations for a methodological approach were most significant to this arts-based research project. According to Saldaña, methodological considerations for ethnodrama were: plot development, character work in the participatory framework, transforming collected data into the medium of monologue and dialogue, visually considering the play space, and heavily focused on the significance of collaboration in this work. All of Saldaña's considerations for working with ethnodrama were essential to the development of *Lost in the Cloud*. My ability to successfully complete this project is due to the collaboration and

support of my supervisor Dr. Diane Conrad. She challenged me to further explore my plot, to create character sketches, and reminded me to visualize the stage in my writing. She read four drafts of the play and provided feedback throughout the drafting process.

Figure 1. Character sketch of Becca



### Becca

Age 10

- dislikes the dark
- loves to sing, play soccer, and recently play on the computer
- frequents website **Neopets**
- Internet is a playground, [the cloud is rolling in]
- Plays in the field and the trees, doesn't spend all her time online
- Adults know internet better than her
- Has dial up internet
- Best friend Lena
- Doesn't like class, she can't see the board.
- Overly trusting
- Empathetic
- Playful
- Loves after school drama class at the community hall
- Doesn't think much about the future, thinks 30 is old.
- Wants to be a lawyer, singer, marine biologist.
- Grandma's bestie



Figure 2. Character sketch of Becky



### Becky

- Dislikes feeling trapped
- Starting to gain confidence in self and hair
- Performed in school plays
- Enjoys singing and poetry
- Parties too much
- Texts on her phone using T9 (mostly Lena)
- Used MSN before nexopia [enternexus]
- Facebook just arrived [the cloud begins to spread, more points of light ignite]
- Nearly didn't graduate
- Phone and internet are gateways to freedom
- Phone and internet impact interpersonal relationships
- Adults do not know the internet better than her
- Has no idea what she is going to do when she grows up
- Grandma's bestie

Figure 3. Character sketch of Rebecca



### Rebecca Age 34

- Loves her cat and backyard
- Addicted to her devices [trapped]**
- Phone is gateway to professional and personal pathways
- Stimming on her phone is a problem
- Professional teacher, majored in drama
- Graduate student!
- Primary adult in family unit
- Phone negatively and positively impacts interpersonal relationships (disconnecting while connecting)
- The great net expands new pockets of clouds emerge almost daily.
- AI fears rampant in education space
- Data capitalism has emerged: data is the new oil* [Chiefdom of Data]
- Multiple digital identities in multiple platforms
- messaging, whatsapp, linkedin, instagram, tiktok, facebook,
- Digital divide a prevalent problem (online banking for one)
- Misses Grandma
- Trying to figure out how to untangle the knots in the net, how to organize the cloud, can it be organized?

Custer's (2014) work on autoethnography suggested autoethnography explores an individual's unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions. Considering my unique life experiences with digital technology in relation to the cultural institution of school, *Lost in the Cloud* utilizes Saldaña's (2003) dramatization techniques to create an effective ethnodramatic presentation. Indigenous scholar Sarah Auger said that creating art can aid in the process of academic thinking (Personal Communication, 2023). These methods of character sketching, plotting, and redrafting led to an autoethnodrama that offers relevant insights into the human condition. Echoing this sentiment, Piirito (2002) and van Luyn et al. (2016) highlight that rich qualitative data emerges through poetry, impacting both the research process and its findings. Poetry and theatre are multisensory in nature making them ideal mediums for arts-based research.

This technique of using art, both as a process of exploring thought and representing research findings, not only engages but also relates the human experience to the research context. The human experience is complex and cannot not be codified simply as *real or not real* experiences online. Wallin (2011) and Fassin (2014) both argued that arts-based research need not be exclusively data driven, that there is power in fiction narrative for representing primary data. Fiction allows for creative exploration and merging of multiple experiences into a narrative arts research inquiry. Spry (2001) explained that autoethnographic performance makes us acutely conscious of how we "I-witness" our own reality constructions. *Lost in the Cloud* is an attempt to "I-witness" my past digital identities and examine their influence on my current relationship with technology.



In Shenfield's (2018) ethnodrama *Waiting for Me: Exploring autoethnodrama*, the author explained their drawing from the play *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, 1953). Shenfield's methodological approach inspired me to draw on the plot structures of *Albertine in Five Times* (Tremblay, 1984) for the development of my own ethnodrama. Shenfield offered an apology to Beckett for her autoethnodramatic work and brought forward the challenge that autoethnographic writing can feel self-indulgent at times. Throughout my writing process, I was faced with the challenge of drawing on the work of an influential Canadian playwright like Michel Tremblay. At times I felt embarrassed by the appearingly self-indulgent nature of writing a play made of four characters, three of which are varied versions of myself. I, too, offer my apologies to Tremblay, but thank him for his work that made an impact on me as a theatre practitioner.

## **Results – Autoethnographic drama**

### *Lost in the Cloud*

#### **Characters:**

***Rebecca** is in the cloud. Age 34 in the year 2024. She uses an iPhone 14. She is a public-school teacher.*

***Becca** is in the cloud. Age 10 in the year 2000. She sits at a desktop computer.*

***Becky** is in the cloud. Age 17 in the year 2007. She has a Nokia flip phone.*

***Lena** has no age, she acts as a friend and confidant to all. Lena's age and mannerisms are fluid between memories, changing and evolving to fit the space she occupies, like water.*

**Setting:** The Cloud. The cloud is brightly coloured, a game-like environment. The set is painted a pastel cotton candy like colour. The floor is marked with pathways, designed to act as a connected network. Lights of various colours are used to highlight areas of the network throughout the play. There is a scrim for projections, which display notifications, messages, and changes to the environment. Stage boxes are stacked upstage right, like play boxes. Upstage the boxes are shaped to create a *computer room* space. These boxes are moved throughout the play to shift with the digital network. The cloud transcends time and exists both before and after the rise of data capitalism – referred to in the play as *the Chiefdoms of Data*.

*The stage is dark, the dial up sound of modems in the 1990's and early 2000s – transmitted via telephone signal, is heard. Lights flicker on the grid. The scrim reads "Position in the cloud."*

*Lights flicker across the network grid on stage between each stanza.*

### Prologue

*An audio recording of Rebecca's voice plays.*

I am the stories that come before me

An upgrade: the modernization of

femininity User error coded: neurodivergent

My experiences are unique and call for a resurgence —

A new digital renaissance. The procedural upgrade is loading.

I was born in 1989

The year the Berlin Wall came crumbling down  
And commercialized internet rolled into North American towns  
Much of my personal growth and the internet's growth aligned  
My personal narrative is complex and spread out like the interweb

Just a girl living in a paradoxical world  
Seeking out light and connection  
This world requires a new direction  
Will my voice be heard amongst all the noise?  
Or will I fall into the void of the dark dark web?

Standing in solidarity I seek clarity  
A new way of understanding myself and those in my communities.  
Questioning my own epistemology.  
We all just need a safe space to belong.  
A place to write and share our songs.  
Can that be found within the cloud?

Be patient with me, I'm still in the process of upgrading too. (Collins, 2023)

## **SCENE ONE**

*Lights up. Rebecca stands centre stage inside the cloud.*

**REBECCA**

*(Rebecca speaks directly to the audience.)* I am like a mouse. I can easily get out of difficult situations and find retreat in a variety of spaces, both inside and outside the cloud. But sometimes, I scurry around from platform to platform just finding a place to be. I am overstimulated, over notified, and over doing my screen time. I have to be online – for both work and play. At least I think I do. Maybe that is what the rulers of the Chiefdoms of Data<sup>1</sup> want me to think. The Chiefdoms: Amazon, Facebook, Google, all the platform societies ... all these different pockets of space offer different and enticing places to retreat. *(Rebecca walks along the pathway on the stage floor from center stage to downstage left. She reaches for her phone.)* Sometimes, I'm just staring blankly at my little black box mirror. I've just got to check on my SnapChat, my Instagram. *(She stops to scroll.)* Sometimes I don't even think I'm reading Facebook. Just scrolling, just putting my energy somewhere. *(She walks along the network path upstage.)* I can't check my email right now. My overloaded inbox makes my heart rate go up. It's mostly advertisements anyways. Emails used to be more fun. I used to have more fun. *(She fiddles with her phone for a few moments).*

*Becca at age 10 enters. Becca plays on the stage space, miming drawing on the ground with chalk, playing hop scotch and skipping rope.*

*An image of a smiling young Becca is projected on the screen.*

## REBECCA

*(Rebecca playfully moves out of Becca's path of play on the network. She is observing Becca from stage left.)* I've come pretty far since I was her *(she gestures at her phone screen)*. She's

<sup>1</sup> Brij Sharma, Personal Communication, March 13, 2023.  
(Introduced the term *Chiefdoms of Data*.)

still riding her bike and walking to her best friend's house every day after school. She knows exactly where she is, in her little neighbourhood tucked away in the south side suburbs. She's pretty lucky too. She's got dial up internet at home, even if she doesn't really know what that means yet. It wasn't always necessary, being completely connected. We used to meet each other on our front door steps or on the street corners with our bikes in tow. Now we send a text, make plans in advance, check locations on snap chat maps, and watch each other's stories. I used to see my friends all the time, but I am starting to feel like I've run out of time and space for ... a lot of things.

*The image of young Becca fades. Lena playfully emerges stage left and moves across the stage.*

*She looks at both Rebecca and Becca.*

**LENA**

You've got space for me?

**REBECCA & BECCA**

Lena! You found me!

**LENA**

Of course, I always know where to find you after school. You've got your head in the clouds!

*Lights flicker on the grid. Rebecca and Becca move together in a circular movement, back to back.*

**BECCA**

I'm feeling hungry. Do you think your Mom has after school snacks? *(Rebecca holds her stomach as she feels a sense of hunger.)*

**LENA**

Yeah, there will be plenty of fresh baked cookies – and I have to show you this website: Neopets.

You'll love it.

*Streams of 0s and 1s appear on a projection screen upstage. Lena and Becca move upstage centre, where boxes are set to create the computer room. Rebecca moves downstage and sits on the grid.*

**REBECCA**

*(Addressing the audience from stage left.)* This was my entrance point into the great big net. Before this, the computer was just something the adults used, or something we practiced typing on at school. We would carry our floppy discs from our desk, and take it down the hall to the computer lab. We'd visit the computer room at home after school.

*Lena leads Becca into the computer room. They are playing on Neopets forums. The audience is the computer monitor.*

**BECCA**

What's Neopets?

**LENA**

The most fun game to play online right now! You get your own virtual pet you can feed and love.

You earn coins and put them in the bank; you can even buy stuff for your pet.

**REBECCA**

Consumerism 101 for kids, through gamification.

**BECCA**

Awesome, how do I play?

**LENA**

You just have to sign up here. Enter in your email.

**REBECCA**

But I don't have an email yet.

**LENA**

You need an email. Here move over. We'll sign you up on hotmail.com. Having an email lets you use the internet in so many different ways.

*A mouse sound clicks. The typing of a keyboard can be heard. Lena walks along the grid network. surferchick\_78@hotmail.com appears on the projection screen. Rebecca and Becca make eye contact for the first time.*

**BECCA & REBECCA**

surferchick\_78@hotmail.com

**REBECCA**

*(To Lena.)* I tried to log in recently. The internet says the email doesn't exist anymore. It's faded away into the digital abyss of unfrequented accounts. But I know that was me. That was her.

**LENA**

*(Speaking to Rebecca.)* I know, it's okay to talk to her. Even if her digital imprint isn't as firm –she's here. In your memories. Surfer chick and you can visit in the cloud.

*Rebecca and Becca look at one another. Becca inspects Rebecca's face. She touches her hand to her chest. Rebecca touches her own chest)*

**REBECCA**

*(Rebecca approaches Becca by reaching out her hand; she is disappointed.)* Surfer chick? But we have never lived by the sea.

**BECCA**



*(Comforting Rebecca.)* I was born and raised on the prairies. I hadn't been in the sea since I was a baby.

**REBECCA**

Had I ever surfed a day in my life?

**BECCA**

I wished I could surf one day!

**REBECCA**

*(Rebecca jumps up and poses like a surfer and sings.)*

*“Tell the teacher we’re surfin’, surfin’ USA!<sup>2</sup>”*

**BECCA**

Ya, like that old Beach Boys song my Mom loved to play? *(Lena nods.)* My email helps me play and make believe. You can pretend you are anywhere! Even *(Becca sings)* “surfing’ USA!” *(Becca takes Lena’s hands and they pretend to surf together. Then Becca stops looking out to the audience.)* This place looks like it came out of a dream ... my Neopet lives in a little village floating on a cloud! *(Becca physically explores the network grid. She hops to different grid points, like playing hopscotch, bouncing around the cloud. Lena is entertained and encourages Becca. Lena claps, like a mouse click, with each of Becca’s jumps.)*

<sup>2</sup> The Beach Boys. (1963)

**REBECCA**

*(Addressing the audience.)* Neopets let Becca bring her dreams into a cyber reality. Becca could be a surfer chick. Becca could finally have her own pet. This virtual pet became a new source of comfort for me. I aimed to meet its needs in a way that was mediated by technology. The pet wanted closeness, food, and cleanliness<sup>2</sup>.

**BECCA**

*(Stopping hopping.)* Just like me. That's all I really want too.

**REBECCA**

Just like everyone really. We all want to be cared for and care for someone in return. It's all a part of belonging. Being safe, being warm, having friends, loving and being loved.

**LENA**

But you didn't always feel safe.

**REBECCA**

That's true, but I feel much safer now.

**BECCA**

*(Approaching Rebecca along the grid.)* Do you promise?

**REBECCA**

<sup>3</sup> Ruckenstein, 2013, p. 481.

Time will tell. We still have lots of storm clouds that roll in. Sometimes we're safer than others.

But just like the mouse, we always seem to find a way out.

**BECCA**

I always felt safe at school.

**REBECCA**

That's because you had friends and the internet hadn't gotten quite so complicated. The net doesn't always make school a safe place to be. Kids don't always know how to navigate digital space.

**BECCA**

Seems pretty easy to me, all you have to do is click around and you're surfing the web! (*Becca begins to hop along the grid again. She strikes a pose, miming surfing.*)

*The sound of computer mouse clicks are heard. Lena moves along the network, joining Becca back in the computer room.*

**REBECCA**

(*Calling to Becca.*) It was easier for you. The internet gets complicated. It was complicated back then too, but you didn't see it clearly. There's lots of flashing lights and fun in the cloud but it's easy to get tangled up in the net.

*Part of the grid lights up centre stage. Rebecca stands centre and receives a notification. She looks at her phone. “App: The Call Back - Memory Notification #growinguponline” is projected on the screen. Rebecca moves stage right along the grid. The lights flicker. Lena stands behind Becca in the computer room. They are taking turns playing on Neopets forums.*

## **SCENE TWO**

### **LENA**

I love this Neopets fanfiction group. It’s a blast to write in. I’m glad you’re enjoying the forums too.

### **BECCA**

I’ve made a friend from Texas. We’re sending messages back and forth. *(The computer chimes.)*  
She asked if I would give her my phone number so we can talk on the phone.

### **LENA**

Give it to her. It’d be cool to connect.

### **REBECCA**

*(Addressing the audience and Becca.)* But was it really cool to connect?

### **BECCA**

It was fine. She was just a girl living in Texas.

**LENA**

*(Lena walks out onto the grid, moving as if walking a tightrope.)* But it could have been a 40-year-old man trying to lure and trap you.

**BECCA**

It wasn't. She was just a nice girl I met while surfing the Neopets forums.

**REBECCA**

*(Rebecca walks along the grid toward Lena.)* But that isn't always the case. Girls are taken on their way to school by men they met online, even here at home.

*Becky enters stage right. She emerges with a soft pink light; she stands on an intersecting grid point. Becky snaps her Nokia flip phone shut as she begins to speak.*

**BECKY**

I've met plenty of friends online, and I've been fine. The internet is a safe place to be.

*Rebecca looks at her phone. She smiles at an image. "App: The Call Back - Memory Notification #girlsday" is projected on the screen with a photo of Becky and Lena smiling together. She looks back at Becky and sighs. Rebecca double clicks on her device, a heart is projected on the screen.*

**REBECCA**

It can be one of the safest places to be, if you're experiencing it with the right people.

**BECCA & REBECCA**

Like Lena.

**REBECCA**

It's all fun and games when you know who you are playing with. That's the problem with today. Digital space is packed to the brim with people. The digital bubble has grown so big. Even with privacy restrictions trolls can get in.

**BECCA**

Trolls?

**BECKY**

Bullies. People who will say and act cruel online.

**LENA**

*(To both Becky and Becca.)* People who like to poke and prod, like to get a rise out of people.

Some folks just don't know how to live and be together online.

**REBECCA**

Living and being together is a nice way to phrase it. The cruelty can start online but doesn't stay there. Many threads of the web bleed into the offline world. In schools now they call it cyberbullying. But there are more bad actors online we teachers need to talk to kids about. Bots.

Cyber fraud artists. Hackers. There's an evolving list of things kids are unprepared to face. Everyone who lives in the Chiefdoms of Data, the various platform societies, needs to know how their online behaviour impacts the world around us.

**BECCA**

I don't understand what you mean. What is a Chiefdom of Data?

**REBECCA**

*(To Becca.)* There are major platforms that people join online. You were a citizen of Neopets. *(To Becky.)* When you joined Nexopia or Facebook, that was the first step towards me becoming immersed in the Chiefdoms. Facebook is considered a “*social media monopoly*”<sup>4</sup>. They are a company that has a lot of control of people's information. There are other Chiefdoms too – like Amazon, Google, and Apple, and they make money off users' data and engagement. A lot of people say data is the new oil. A person engaging with the internet is a resource, and these Chiefdoms want to keep you online. Kids don't even have a choice anymore on whether or not they will be part of the Chiefdoms of Data. They're given an email as soon as they start kindergarten. If teachers are going to bring kids into this world, we better help them navigate it.

*Becky moves around the grid, walking strategically around Rebecca, as if trying to assess Rebecca from a distance.*

**BECKY**

We teachers? You're a teacher?

<sup>4</sup> Srnicek, N. (2017)

**REBECCA**

As unbelievable as it may seem to both of you, (*gesturing to Becca and Becky*) yes I am a teacher now.

**BECCA**

(*Becca dances towards Lena.*) I loved my teachers. Even if I didn't always listening to them ... had my head in the clouds ... (*She spins along the lines of the grid. Lights flicker following her pattern.*) The teachers at school always make me feel safe and cared for.

**BECKY**

My teachers didn't love me. They just saw a loud-mouthed teen who couldn't seem to focus in class.

**REBECCA**

That's not true. Well maybe some of them didn't love you, but there were a few who saw you, and wanted more for you.

**BECKY**

Yeah, but I've never believed there was much more for me. Life was just one storm cloud chasing the next.

**REBECCA**



You will. You'll believe one day ... or at least there will be more days when you'll see the light behind the clouds. There were good teachers who would help you see that light shine in you and around you.

### BECKY

Teachers couldn't see what was really going on though. They only saw what they wanted to see. They didn't know how terrible some of the kids at school could be. How could they know what was happening at home on the computer? But all that drama in digital space flooded over into the hallways and some of us were left drowning. It's hard to keep your head above water when surfing the web. *(To Becca.)* I wasn't much older than you when they started to come for me online. It started off fun, just a bunch of friends playing together online. But in the digital playground people sure aren't afraid to throw sand in each other's eyes.

*"App: The Call Back - Memory Notification" is projected on the screen. Rebecca and Becky look at their devices.*

*Rebecca walks along the grid centre stage. Looking at her phone, she sighs. Lights flicker. Rebecca, tapping the screen of her iPhone, moves towards Becky along the grid. Rebecca pauses, looking at Becky.*

### SCENE THREE

*The screen projects the text: "You have a memory from today 17 years ago: #hallwaymeetups"*

**REBECCA**

Has it really been 17 years since high school? (*Rebecca moves towards Becca.*)

*Lights shift. Lena and Becky meet on stage right in the hallway. Becca and Rebecca observe Becky and Lena's interaction from stage left.*

**LENA**

Becky, I don't want this to eat you up. Don't let it get to you. But ... you know the other day after school how we were hanging in the field with the other girls taking pictures with Ashley's new digital camera?

**BECKY**

(*Generally confused.*) Of course, I've been waiting for Ashley to post them on Nexopia or at least Photobucket ever since. I can't wait to see them!

**REBECCA**

(*Addressing the audience and Becca.*) Nexopia was the social media platform we were using before Facebook emerged on the scene. Photobucket was another platform we used before Facebook. Its purpose was literally dumping the photos taken – typically from a time with friends or vacation – all in one place. I've really dived into so many platforms in my life online, it's hard to keep track of them all. But Nexopia – that was a big one. (*Directly to Becca.*) Neopets  
big

**LENA**

You might not want to see the photos Ashley posted, but you definitely should. She edited them and she took a bunch from your Nexopia page too.

**BECKY**

What do you mean she edited the photos? What did she do to them? Show me!

*Becky and Lena move along the grid. They enter the computer room. Becca darts down stage along the grid trying to get a look at Becky's face.*

**LENA**

It's really bad. She posted them on everyone's blogs. She took the images offline too. She printed them out and put them up in the hallways.

*Messages appear projected on the screen as Becky receives these messages via the computer. The monitor is still the audience. Photoshopped images of Becky appear on the screen; they are defamatory in nature. Hateful messages appear one after the other filling the projection screen. Becky reads these messages on her Nokia flip phone. Lights flicker along the network floor.*

Figure 4. Defamatory image of Becky



**Messages on the screen:**

You better watch your back this summer.

You're not safe wherever you go.

If we see you, we'll hurt you.

Ashley said you're a bitch.

*Lena swipes her arms in a downward motion, clearing all the incoming messages in the cloud.*

*Becky puts her phone back in her pocket.*

### **LENA**

You can't listen to that stuff. It's all talk. They aren't going to hurt you. Better to just get offline for a bit. Take a break.

### **BECKY**

Doesn't make me any less scared though. Mrs. Bramford put me next to Ashley in Science class.

### **REBECCA**

You should have told her what was going on. You should have told any teacher what was going on! *(Rebecca begins to scroll on her phone.)*

*“App: Health and Wellness – Heart Rate Alert” appears on the screen. Rebecca gestures an exaggerated swipe on her iPhone, ignoring the notification. Becca moves towards Rebecca with concern. Rebecca continues to scroll on her phone.*

**BECKY**

I didn’t even understand what was going on. One minute I was friends with Ashley and not the next. All over a stupid boy. I know there were bigger issues online that were bleeding into the hallways than mine. What about the photos of Mary that went around? *(Pause.)* But I didn’t know how to talk to anyone about any of this. We didn’t even have a word to describe it yet.

**REBECCA**

The teachers should have known to talk about it, but they didn’t. They didn’t understand our digital space. It was just emerging. I promise we do talk about it now. But we need to do more to support kids, to openly discuss intimate photo sharing and cyberbullying. We have the words to describe it now. With words we communicate best.

**BECKY**

Do we? Did Mrs. Bramford not notice my head was in the clouds every day? If she did, then she assumed I was a space case. I think she could tell something was up. If she couldn’t, she needed to get her eyes checked. I tried to ask her for a new spot ... but she just wouldn’t listen. Becca understands.

**BECCA**

I could never see the board in class. My head hurt after a while, so sometimes in class the clouds were a better place to be.

**BECKY**

And when they did put me up front to help me see, I ended up sitting next to Ashley. (*Becky begins to speak sarcastically.*) Ashley was such a good student – she was bound to rub off on me.

If only you were more like Ashley maybe you'd have an easier time with getting to class.

**BECCA**

It doesn't sound like Mrs. Bramford saw you very clearly. Why would you want to be a bully like Ashley?

**BECKY**

I didn't want to be anything like Ashley. I had other friends, friends like Lena. I didn't need the rest of them to like me. I could stay safe in my own pocket of space.

*Rebecca receives a notification. "App: The Call Back – Ashley has requested to be your friend" appears on the screen.*

**REBECCA**

Is Ashley divorced now? Oh my ... a custody battle? Oh great, she's in multilevel marketing ... and wants to meet for coffee. I'll be leaving that on read. We don't even know each other anymore.

## SCENE FOUR

*Lights flicker. Becky and Lena move to the computer room. The screen projection reads: “Enter your email address.”*

**BECKY**

xbroken wingsx@hotmail.com

**REBECCA**

*(To the audience.)* This email is gone now too. Out of service. Retired in the Chiefdoms of Data.

Those who make the choices about what stays in the cloud and what doesn’t – the platform operators – sent it away. Use it or lose it ... I don’t have a hotmail anymore – but she used it

*(indicating Becky).*

**LENA**

*(Speaking to Becky.)* You can change the email for your other accounts with your settings. You’re such a noob sometimes.

**BECKY**

Maybe I am – but I get by alright online with you by my side.

**LENA**



Happy to always be your tech support.

**BECCA**

*(Approaching Becky.)* Why did you change my email account? What was wrong with surferchick?

**BECKY**

That's not me, that's you. Surferchick is lame. Broken wings is ...

**REBECCA**

*(Interjecting.)* Embarrassing. Cringe.

**BECKY**

Artistic! It's Emo – emotional rock poetry vibes.

**REBECCA**

*(To Becky.)* A reflection of your emotional state. You were struggling. Life wasn't easy. Every day at home was hard. But you were just a kid. You thought you were a bird that couldn't fly away. You couldn't go anywhere ... but you could log online. It was quieter and lighter in the cloud and an escape from the din in the house.

**LENA**

I love it. Reclaim your online image. Make a new one for a new digital era.

**BECKY**

Rest in Peace surfer chick. Hello broken wings. And Lena ... don't give my email to Ashley. I don't want her on my MSN. I don't want anyone stupid or lame on my MSN or Nexopia anymore.

**BECCA**

You know I'm not gone. I don't care if you think surferchick was lame or stupid. I'm still here beating inside your chest. I'm not going anywhere. You can't make me even if you ignore me Becky.

**LENA**

*(Comforting Becca.)* I'll always love you surfer chick. *(To Rebecca, Becky, and Becca.)* You'll get to surf in the sea someday and it won't be lame at all.

**BECCA, BECKY & REBECCA**

I hope I can.

**SCENE FIVE**

*Lights shift. Rebecca scrolls on her phone. Images of AirBnBs in Tofino appear on the scrim.*

**REBECCA**

For now, I'll just surf the app for places to dream about.

**LENA**

Let's make a plan. Let's take a trip. You and me – we can go to Tofino and learn to surf in the cold Pacific Sea (*Lena mimes surfing and shivering*).

**REBECCA**

I don't know what's holding me back. Maybe it's the money. Maybe it's the distractions.

*Rebecca receives a notification. There is a pause in the conversation. Becky, Becca, and Lena all watch Rebecca as she looks at her phone. She is scrolling on her screen but the projection screen is blank. Lights flicker around Rebecca. She is increasingly getting agitated by the notifications.*

**LENA**

Ground control to major Tom, Hello?? Where have you gone?

**REBECCA**

Sorry. I do that sometimes when I get anxious – just scroll on my phone. Let myself fall into the void and escape for a moment. I don't mean to. It's a way to stim that feels more socially acceptable these days.

**BECCA**

What's a stim?

**REBECCA**

It's a way people cope with stress and anxiety. There are different levels of it. Some people tap their legs, chew their nails ... I just blindly scroll or tap my phone.

*Rebecca receives three notifications consecutively. A notification sound is heard and the network lights flicker on three different places on the grid. The screen flashes red light, then reads: "Your heart rate appears to be elevated during at least 10 minutes of inactivity."*

**BECKY**

Looks like the internet is starting to stress you out.

**LENA**

Maybe you should consider spending a little less time online. Come see me; meet me in the park by our tree. We can have a picnic and ride our bikes. Make future plans. I'll send you a message.

*(Lena mimes sending Rebecca a message.)*

**REBECCA**

*(To the audience.)* Sometimes I find myself in the cloud all day long. It's an easy out when I'm surrounded by storm clouds. It's not always blind stim scrolling. *(To Lena)* I'm trying to improve my heart health right now. I'm going to the gym. I'm looking up exercises. I want to get active

again, be strong enough to surf ... Digital space offers more than dreams, it can be a place to transform – to engage in metamorphosis.

**LENA**

But you're not improving your heart by scrolling on your phone. You do that by showing up, being present in the gym ... or active anywhere. Why won't you show up for me at our tree? Why can't we walk together? You never responded to my message. I find myself locked up here, mostly in your memories.

**REBECCA**

I don't know Lena; I don't know. Sometimes I just feel so low energy I don't know which way to go, so I just sit still. I look at my phone and I fall into the scroll. The cloud is a space for expression and connection. A place to make plans for the future. This place is enticing! With the click of a mouse or a tap on the phone you can reimagine yourself into being someone new – a new username ... a new account, or a new location. At least that's how I want it to be. Now, maybe it depends on the platform...

**LENA**

But you're looking at your phone. I know you can see my messages. It's time we go on that trip, that we finally hit the waves before the rest of life comes crashing down. I don't think I can wait for you anymore...

*Rebecca receives a notification. She stops to type on her phone.*

**REBECCA**

Just a second Lena ... you're not the only one sending me notifications you know. It'll just take a second ...

**BECCA**

*(Growing increasingly concerned over the tension between Lena and Rebecca. Approaches Rebecca along the grid.)* You have to respond to Lena. How could you ignore her messages?

She's always been there for us!

**REBECCA**

I'm overwhelmed, over stimulated, over notified. I don't think you could possibly understand. I'm being pulled in so many different directions in the cloud. You two would hardly believe how many different digital hats I have to wear today.

**BECKY**

*(Trying to ease the tension in the air.)* That's a fun idea: digital hats. Like different characters we play online? I'm pretty sure we did something like that in drama class last year. I guess I never realized that I kinda explored my identity online: who I am and who I hope to become. On Nexopia, Lena and I were on the forum. We posted, shared, and belonged in our small online spaces. MSN and Nexopia let me and Lena connect online and offline. It was a place to belong. It helped me know who I could depend on when I was exploring the teenage wilds offline. But the best part was always Lena. How has the cloud made you grow so distant?

*Becca moves along the grid playing with Lena for a moment as she moves across the network grid. Becca mimes placing a character hat upon her head; she sits at the desktop computer.*

### **REBECCA**

It was simpler back then (*indicating Becca*). Digital space was still coming alive. We used to be so chained to the desktop computer if we wanted to be online. The distinction between online and offline was easier to navigate. I think you'd be surprised to know that most of my internet use is mobile now.

### **BECCA**

What's *mobile*? Is that what that little box your holding is called? I've noticed – it keeps sending you buzzes and beeps. You get a lot of them.

### **REBECCA**

Mobile means my phone and the internet comes with me where I go. It means I can connect to the cloud from anywhere! (*She turns away and attends to her phone.*)

### **BECKY**

Phones have been mobile forever, even before you were born Becca. But texting wasn't around when you were playing online. I found myself texting with Lena more often than direct messaging. She always answered when I called. We both were on Rogers contracts, so we had free calling and texting between us. We spent hours talking or texting back and forth. It was a

better way to spend time at home, a great escape when it got noisy and overwhelming. *(To Lena.)*

I'm thankful you always answered when I called or texted. *(Lena and Becky embrace).*

**REBECCA**

*(She concludes her message checking. She sees Lena and Becky embrace and feels a tinge of pain.)* I have four different conversations going with the same person on four different platforms.

These different mediums<sup>5</sup> – texting, calling, online platforms. They help us find each other in digital space. But it gets a little exhausting sometimes.

**LENA**

You have four different conversations going with one person on four apps, but you can't respond to my single email...?

**REBECCA**

I'm sorry you haven't been able to find me online lately Lena. I'm easily distracted by multiple notifications.

**BECCA**

Have you forgotten how to have fun online? You need to relax, live in the moment. Why can't you just be someone else online for a little while? You are too serious these days. It's okay to live and be online. Play an online game!

**REBECCA**

<sup>5</sup> Subrahmanyam & Greenfield (2008)



Lots of people use the internet to pretend to be someone else – to escape into games through avatars. *(To Becca.)* An avatar is what we call the character you play online. Some of our friends can spend the whole day plugged in online, escaping into a social game. The kids I'm teaching today are losing sleep and coming to school tired because they are so plugged into their own digital spaces. Even if I do choose to play a game, I find I play too long ... even when I was young.

*Becca is plugged in from the computer room. She cheers for the screen. The projector reads "New High Score." Becca cheers for her win.*

**LENA**

I wonder how long Becca was online to get that score ...?

## **SCENE SIX**

**REBECCA**

Sometimes I feel like the cloud pulls and tugs on me and makes me feel more disconnected rather than connected. The cloud snuck up on me. Like I'm being slow boiled in a soup<sup>6</sup> so the rulers of the Chiefdom of Data can dine on my data use. I don't even know I'm being cooked until my pot is boiling over.

**BECKY**

<sup>6</sup> Frischmann (2016)

You sound like such a dork. Anyway, what do you care if teens are online all night? That's the best time to be online! We could be up to worse. It's not like they're out there doing drugs.

They're just playing a game.

**REBECCA**

But the cloud is a drug and everyone is using it. These notifications release serotonin and oxytocin in our brains. These neurotransmitters fire around our brain and make us feel good.

There is a sense of reward when we swipe. Most of my life occupies space in this digital ecosystem – the Chiefdoms of Data. It's an overwhelming hub that has infused itself into my personal and professional life. It's not just us and Lena having fun with our friends anymore. I

am living within the boundaries of the Chiefdoms of Data.

**BECKY**

You're saying you've become a drug addict ... and the drug is the internet? And you feel like you can't leave the cloud because the leaders of the Chiefdoms of Data don't want you to?

Sounds overly complicated ... connecting with friends should be freeing, not confining.

**LENA**

Are the Chiefdoms of Data keeping you online and away from Tofino?

**REBECCA**

I don't know Lena.

*Rebecca receives a notification, a beating heart is projected on the screen, Rebecca swipes it away.*

**BECCA**

Oma and Opa are on the island. Opa sent me an email saying I could come and spend my summer days on the beach!

**BECKY**

*(Quietly to Rebecca.)* Don't tell her we don't get to go to the beach with them.

**REBECCA**

We do go to the beach with them. It's just several years away.

**BECKY**

Any surfing by any chance?

**REBECCA**

Not yet. Lots of web surfing – maybe now more than ever.

**LENA**

You should take a break from the screen time. Come outside and greet the sunlight.

**REBECCA**

Sometimes I can't tell if my device allows me to plug into living or plug out of living. Even going outside isn't an escape from it all. I get caught up in all the digital noise. This little black box pulls me in and I can't put it down till my eyes start to hurt and the night starts to turn.

*Becca walks along the network lines, trying to see Rebecca's phone.*

**LENA**

Rebecca, I am tired. Tired of hearing that you're caught up in the noise. You need to take a break from your device. I'm telling you again, we need to take some time away from here. Have a digital detox, get in the sea water. Finally learn to surf! You look exhausted. Were you on your phone all night again?

**REBECCA**

Everyone is on their phone every night. It's not just me. I'm not the only one losing sleep at night.

**BECKY**

I didn't always get enough sleep. I'd stay up all night long on MSN chat. Mom would go to bed but the computer was in the basement, so she didn't notice how late I'd stay up.

**BECCA**

Mrs. Spirit says that it's important to get 8 hours of sleep a night.

*Rebecca starts tapping on her phone. Projected on the screen: “Siri, set a reminder, go to sleep at 10:30 pm”.*

**BECCA**

*(Becca approaches Rebecca.)* Can I play with your little black box – your mobile phone? Does it work like an alarm? It’s hard to imagine something so small doing so many different things.

*(Becca reaches for Rebecca’s phone, her hand touches the phone and lights flicker across the grid.)*

**REBECCA**

*(Suddenly harsh.)* No, don't touch it – this isn't meant for you. You're too young for something like this. I am in the middle of setting a reminder and I can't be interrupted!

**BECCA**

*(Becca is visibly upset by the sharpness of Rebecca’s voice.)* I thought it was okay to share. I didn't mean to upset you.

**BECKY**

Woah no need to snap at her; she’s just curious. Give me the phone. It can’t be that different from my Nokia...

*Becky reaches for the phone and pulls it hard from Rebecca's grasp. Lights flicker as Becky holds the phone. Startled by a surge of energy, Becky drops the phone. A shattered screen is projected on the scrim. Rebecca screams at the sight of the shattered screen.*

**BECCA**

I hate your *mobile*. You don't know how to play right anymore.

*Becky wraps her arms around Becca in a protective way.*

**LENA**

Rebecca ... what's come over you? You can't even imagine giving up your phone when immersed in the cloud. This inability to put your phone down, it's hurting you and those around you. It hurts your inner child! I can't keep watching you hurt yourself. If you can't get this under control, I'm unsubscribing to your drama.

**BECCA**

*(In a hurt tone.)* Lena and I promised each other we'd always be there for each other. We used to hold hands and spin in the park together when we'd walk home from school ...

**BECKY**

*(In a harsh tone.)* No time to hold hands and play in the park now though ... Not when you've clearly got your hands full.

*Rebecca stares at her shattered screen for a moment. She looks at her younger selves, then at Lena, and back at her phone.*

**REBECCA**

I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me. I just ... got overwhelmed. The truth is, this black box is a toxic addiction machine<sup>7</sup> and has completely taken hold of me. I have plenty of games on my phone, a lot like Neopets too. Lots of tapping, collecting resources, wasting time ... a place to escape. But I'm not just escaping anymore. I'm drowning in my data. I can't be apart from my phone. It physically pains me ... I'm in a toxic entanglement with my device and the internet. I'm completely tied up in the net.

**LENA**

Then untether yourself from it. Break free.

**REBECCA**

It's not that simple, Lena. Everything is online. My art, my friends, my schedule, my lessons, my meal plan ... everything. I don't know if I have a choice anymore.

*Projected on the screen is the image of a beating heart. Text reads: "Health app: It appears your heart rate is above normal while appearing to be inactive."*

**BECKY**

Sounds like you're as tired and stressed out by the internet as the kids you teach.

<sup>7</sup> Deibert (2020)

**REBECCA**

I wish I had known when I was still the two of you what a few games and chats with friends  
would grow into being ...

**LENA**

My friend, you need a digital detox.

**BECCA**

A digital what?

**BECKY**

*(Explaining to Becca.)* A detox is a painful process someone addicted to drugs has to go through  
to get better. It all sounds and feels a little extreme.

**LENA**

Am I being extreme, Rebecca?

**REBECCA**

Honestly, I'm not sure I can do it Lena. I am addicted to all of my devices. If I don't stay  
connected, I could lose out on work opportunities. What if someone needs me?

**LENA**



Are you really trying to tell me you spend most of your time on your phone productively?

Helping others?

**BECKY**

Most of my time online was entertainment not productivity.

**REBECCA**

No, no, no. It's a lot of everything all at once. Notifications don't discriminate between fun and productivity.

**LENA**

If you're on your phone so often, why haven't you responded to my email about Tofino?

*Becky and Becca look at one another, then at Rebecca, then back at each other. They sing together: "Tell the teacher we're surfin'... surfin' USA!"*

**REBECCA**

I just get so distracted. I started to type out an email ... but I didn't press send.

**LENA**

Well, I'm going to need you to try to send it for me. Make plans with me. Please, there is so much more to our friendship than sharing funny videos.

**REBECCA**

Lena ... I'm sorry. I didn't realize I wasn't prioritizing you. *(To the audience.)* It really did just start off as fun and games. The internet made Becca better. She would tap, tap on the keyboard, trying to earn high scores for typing skills in class. Becky thrived and suffered strife online. She formed strong social bonds on beta social media forums while simultaneously getting threats in her inbox. Me ... I'm caught up in the mess of 2024. Doom scrolling between Zoom meetings and forgetting to live in the moment. The digital noise is distracting and suffocating. A digital detox is not extreme enough.

**BECKY**

Not extreme enough? Are you calling for a revolution!? That's pretty punk.

**BECCA**

What's a revolution?

**REBECCA**

Maybe not a revolution per say ... but a reset. I wanna reset my relationship with digital space.

**BECCA**

So, like ... getting rid of the bad stuff and keeping the good stuff?

**LENA**

Yeah ... by creating boundaries, prioritizing real-world interactions, and using digital tools to enrich our lives rather than control them.

**BECKY**

So, does this all fall on the individual to achieve?

**REBECCA**

I don't think I can do this all on my own ... I do need to do this for myself though.

**BECCA**

I'm worried about you, Rebecca. Can we still play games with our friends? Can we still chat?

**REBECCA**

We can still play, but I need to find a balance between playing online and offline. And when I go offline ... you can't come with me.

**BECCA**

I don't want you to go though ...

**REBECCA**

It's okay Becca, you're still with me wherever I go.

**BECKY**

You know ... I never imagined I'd want to go back to school.

**LENA**

You're capable of imagining more than you think.

**BECKY**

Rebecca ... how do you hope it will be different for your students to live and be online?

**REBECCA**

What I dream of is a future where people consider themselves digital citizens. Kids need to grow up learning about the complex ways we exist online and offline. We can't continue to leave kids to their own devices. Schools need teachers to help guide students on what citizenship looks both online and offline. We need to hit the reset button and involve students, parents, teachers at the table to discuss what that reset looks like. *(Pause.)* First, I need to walk the talk. I need to reset my own digital use, redefine my relationship with technology. Maybe I can even be a part of the conversation. Maybe recovery includes helping other people tangled in the net too.

**LENA**

Will you still have space for me?

**REBECCA**

*(Rebecca takes her phone and briefly taps on the device, the screen projects: "Confirm Booking Now.")* I just sent you a link to the AirBnB in Tofino. I made the booking. I'm ready to get away with you, if you still want to go ... If I didn't wait too long to finally commit.

**LENA**

It's never too late to reconnect with me.

## **SCENE SEVEN**

*Becca and Becky take each other's hands and move stage left. Rebecca stands centre and Lena moves stage right. There is a split light on the stage between.*

**BECCA**

I'm really glad we had this chance to play together. It is nice you can visit us in the cloud.

**BECKY**

But there is a whole world out there, waiting to be explored. You can't have your head in the clouds all the time.

**REBECCA**

*(Nodding.)* I need to let go of my past selves and live in the present. I can't just keep dreaming in the cloud. It's time to remember I can thrive offline. I think it's possible to do. But don't worry.

You are both always with me.

**BECCA**

That's right, we're right here (*Becca places her index finger on Rebecca's chest*).

**BECKY**

Take care of that heart of yours; we like being carried around with you.

**REBECCA**

Thank you both for being a part of me. I couldn't have gotten here without you and your dreams.

But it's time for me to step out of the cloud and into the real world.

*Rebecca takes a breath. She turns off her phone and the flashing stage left stops. The scrim reads: "Power OFF."*

**SCENE EIGHT**

**REBECCA**

It feels very odd to be offline right now, odd but freeing.

*Crashes of waves are heard from stage right.*

**LENA**

Can you hear it, Rebecca? The ocean is calling! Are you going to answer?

*Rebecca takes a big deep breath. She looks back at Becca and Becky.*

*Becky and Becca step back off stage, waving goodbye as they go. Rebecca steps forward and the light shifts. The sound of the waves grows stronger.*

**REBECCA**

Alright Lena, I'm ready. Let's go surfing.

**LENA**

*(Calling out to Rebecca.)* Welcome to the real-world surfer chick! Hurry up and get in the water!

**REBECCA**

Be patient with me Lena, I'm still in the process of upgrading, but I'm coming in.

*Rebecca and Lena laugh. Rebecca runs towards Lena stage left. They join hands and step off stage together. The lights dim. The sound of the waves is heard and the screen has a projection of the horizon over the open ocean. Lights shift to cool blue. The waves crash. The sound of the waves begins to fade and the lights fade to black.*

## Conclusion

*Lost in the Cloud* serves as an exploration of digital citizenship, utilizing arts-based research to illuminate the complexities of my/our evolving relationship with technology. Through the characters of Rebecca, Becca, and Becky, the play captures the transformation of digital identity across different life stages, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges that digital environments present. With the throughline character, Lena, we witness the different impacts communications technology can have on human relationships and the importance of human connection.

Ethnodramatic inquiry allows for a nuanced presentation of research findings that engage the audience emotionally and intellectually. By integrating personal narratives and poetry into a performative piece, the play invites reflection on the broader societal implications of digital engagement. This ethnodramatic inquiry reveals the pressing need for a paradigm shift toward fostering responsible and balanced digital engagement in both educational and personal contexts.

Ultimately, *Lost in the Cloud* is a call to action. It challenges us to critically assess our digital practices, how we connect with others and the world around us, to seek balance, and engage in meaningful dialogue about the future of digital citizenship and human connection. As we navigate the complexities of the digital age, this arts-based research advocates for a more thoughtful and responsible approach to living together both online and offline.



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