

Edu-Crafting Teacher Identities: Diffractive Auto/ethnography through Cartomancy

by

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Abstract

“Teacher identity” is a popular topic for discussion and reflection in teacher education programs. We ask pre-service teachers to consider pervasive cultural and personal images of teachers (as expert, caregiver, authoritarian, and so on) in order to accept or resist these images as they contribute to the construction of their own teacher identity. Discussed in theory and aspirational language, teacher identity appears to behave in a reasonably orderly fashion; however, once the novice teacher is introduced to the dynamic world of teaching, teacher identity can become an absolute mess to untangle. As an approach to research, posthumanism offers us a chance to see this mess as beautiful in its lively, evolving, and relational condition. This posthumanist project takes to heart that in order to understand concepts such as identity differently, we must also look differently. After Taylor (2018), who describes posthumanist research as “allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder” (p. 377), I conduct a diffractive auto/ethnographic study to find out what happens if I take seriously the value of play in research, wondering what can be gained, in terms of understandings of teacher identities, through cartomancy (i.e., tarot readings) as a potential source of knowledge. This unconventional approach to research allows me to give generous attention to these teachers’ identities by acknowledging their connections to other selves, other humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans. Through this project, I find an expanded sense of self-perception and an increased recognition of a teacher’s multiple, connected, changing, and changeable identities.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Angela Hostetler. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Retelling the Present: Playing with Teacher Subjectivities by Reading Tarot Narratives”, No. Pro00106358, February 10, 2021.

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Prologue

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.

—Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

This thesis begins *en media res*, by making a cut into the entanglement of existence from and into which this research experiment evolves. It embodies a process of thought, action, and interaction that I have lived, following the throughline of *teacher identity* as a course of exploration. Always incomplete, this thesis grasps at threads of significance, weaving together a tapestry of meaning in which its parts are recognizable but reformed. As a form of creativity, writing resembles and (re)assembles its matter. This thesis has agency in the assemblage of this project; Choosing to think about the process and product as a collaboration between myself and writing enables me to let go of control—the obsession of mastery—and allows me to work *with* the words that come into being on the page.

This perspective relates closely, for me, to this prologue’s epigraph, “God is Change.” If God is Change, then the evolution of this project is a process to be praised, a process with which a relationship can be nurtured, a process the details of which are to be revered. Writing down experience, as an act of transformation (from one medium to another), becomes a mystical, spiritual act of communing with God. In Octavia Butler’s novels *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) (a third book, *Parable of The Trickster*, was unfinished at the time of Butler’s death in 2006), protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina envisions and successfully

cultivates a new religion amidst a dystopian America. This religion, Earthseed, grows beyond the pages of Butler's books, as the inspiration for at least three real-world movements, Earthseed, SolSeed, and Terasem.¹ Akin to many others who have been affected by Butler and Olamina, I have held onto Earthseed's main tenet, "God is Change" (Butler, 1993, p. 3), since reading the books, and it was plugged into this project early on.

Concepts such as *cut* and *entanglement* (Barad, 2007), *assemblage* and *plugged in* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987)² signal the project's underlying posthuman interests, map the path it's currently on, and suggest the direction it might take. Posthumanism is a profuse constellation of theories and practices that I am only beginning to understand, and so I recycle Taylor's (2016) list of posthumanist approaches with gratitude: "animal studies; 'new' material feminism; affect theory; process philosophy; assemblage theory; queer theory; speculative realism; thing theory; actor network theory; the nonhuman; the new empiricism; posthuman disability studies; object-oriented ontology; alien phenomenology; ecological relationality; decolonial and indigenous theories, plus others I don't know about" (p. 6). While I cannot claim lineage in or association with any one of these specific approaches, I adhere and aspire to a posthumanism described by Taylor (2016) as a field of thought that "intersects with the anti-foundational insights of feminism and poststructuralism concerning the multiplicity of identity, the mobility of meaning, and the contestability of knowledge, supplementing those earlier insights by including nonhumans, things and materialities" (p. 7). I have chosen this particular definition not only because it describes the aims of this project so succinctly, but also because it

¹ At the time of this writing, these movements each maintain active websites at godischange.org, solseed.org, and terasemcentral.org, respectively.

² A more genealogically detailed version of these citations would read (Barad, as cited in Taylor, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, as cited in Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). The sections below titled "Diffractive Auto/ethnography" and "A Note on Texts, Including This One" address my diffractive approach to reading and writing.

shows the connection between posthumanism and other fields of thought that have been integral to my own ethico-onto-epistemological wanderings. Taylor (2016) conscientiously attends to each of these three modes (being, thinking, doing) in describing posthumanism, as illustrated in the quotation above: we identify diffractively, i.e., we understand meaning as contextual and knowledge as an uncertainty, and we act in relationship to others.³

The term *ethico-onto-epistemological* (Barad, 2007) demonstrates the interwovenness of how we think about the world, who we are becoming, and what we do as response-able bodies *in* and *of* that world. While it's actually much more complicated than this, one story of my own growth through theory connects the following threads, both chronologically and thematically: first, I found feminism, connecting it with who I am and how I am positioned (*onto*) as a woman *in* and *of* Western culture; second, I grew through engaging with poststructuralism, reshaping what and how I know (*episteme*), particularly as a student of literary theory, concept-based art, and education in the humanities and social sciences; and third, posthumanism prompted me with what we do in relation to others (*ethico*) within that position of thinking-in-being. In the denouement of this particular story, posthumanism provides the scratch to the onto-epistemological itch. Since posthumanism welcomes the new, I feel at home experimenting here, where paradigm and methodology are free to tangle and shift in the being-thinking-doing act of research.

For me, “God is Change” acts as a metonym for the vital impetus behind the growth and profusion of matter (physical and non-physical) through which we are always already acting and interacting with everything around us. Olamina admits, it's not necessarily a comforting religion.

³ Although, in a process-based ontology, being and doing aren't so different (but rather in alignment through a notion of becoming), I use them both here in order to acknowledge the different spaces they inhabit in our thinking. If I am successful in my endeavor to think more *posthumanistly*, I will increasingly interchange and confuse modes of being and doing throughout this project.

Most of this activity is outside our control. The question of ethics arises, then: *How do we live with this knowledge? What can we do?* In *The Parable of the Sower*, Olamina answers these questions in another tenet:

All successful life is
 Adaptable,
 Opportunistic,
 Tenacious,
 Interconnected, and
 Fecund.
 Understand this.
 Use it.
Shape God. (Butler, 1993, p. 148, my emphasis)

Thinking with *Parable of the Sower*, education research becomes an opportunity to become involved as active participants in an experiment that is already underway. We cannot stop change, though we often resist it; however, we can participate in it as a way of shaping it. Taylor (2016) suggests that posthumanist research does this by engaging in “dense material moments” and looking for opportunities of “creatively un/doing sameness,” thus, possibly “releasing novel learning, teaching, and research rhythms” (p. 373). We participate in change by doing things differently. So it is with teacher identity: maintaining a hold on a unified and unevolving teacher identity simply cannot be done. From a posthumanist perspective that troubles the nature of identity in the first place, we might rather imagine subjectivity as a dynamic becoming and an always-interacting assemblage. In my own experience, it is right when you think you’ve figured out who you are as a teacher that the whole thing comes crashing down on you. It may not be so dramatic for all teachers, but perhaps if we could approach education with the aim to design teacher identity to bend with the winds of change rather than resist them, we would not experience so many casualties.

Introducing Aims and Methods: The Shape of the Project

I began to recognize the shape of this project *as that of a thesis* with the articulation of the question, **What would happen if I were to read tarot with teachers as a way of exploring their identities?** This question emerged first as a daydreamy effort to place “the curiosity-driven question first” (Loveless, 2019, p. 25) as I mulled over possible avenues my thesis could take. Ultimately, the stories I share in this thesis focus around two people, myself, a researcher and junior high humanities teacher, and my friend and participant, Dylan, who teaches high school science.

Research-Creation and Edu-Crafting

Several personal, conceptual strands had to knot together in order for the question of exploring teacher identity with tarot to take shape. Allow me to take you through some of those strands now.

First, I knew I wanted the project to be research-creation, a creative, interdisciplinary approach to academic research that challenges hegemonic ideologies of research methods and products (Loveless, 2019). The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada defines research-creation as “an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation” (2021). Like Posthumanism, it is a part of a constellation of approaches to research including but not limited to: arts-based research, practice-based research, practice-led research, research-based practice, research-led practice, creative-praxis, arts-driven inquiry, and artistic research (Loveless, 2019). While research-creation has its roots in supporting fine arts approaches to academic research, it works

more as a paradigm of its own than a simple merging of these ideas, particularly in the work of Loveless (2019):

Rather than allowing discipline to tell us what questions are worthwhile and what methods are appropriate, a research-creational approach insists that it is to our deepest, doggiest, most curious loves that we are beholden, and that it is love—eros—that must drive our research questions as well as our methodological toolkits. (28)

Loveless sees research-creation as a way of looking and responding to research questions differently. Following our “deepest, doggiest, most curious loves” is more instinctual than logical, so in some ways, choosing to do research this way feels as much like returning home as it feels like doing something new. There is a childlike playfulness allowed in research-creation that is both freeing and comforting.

Traditional academic disciplines value certain forms of knowledge and knowledge-making over others. Conversely, “[Research-creation] asserts a form of making that has traditionally been understood as expressive rather than analytically communicative (often, although not always, art making), as equivalent in value (though different in kind) to the knowledge-making practices of traditional academic disciplines” (Loveless, 2019, p. 27).

Expressive communication is able to reveal knowledge beyond the cerebral: the emotional, the instinctual, the ontological.

Like Loveless, I value research-creation “as a mode of resistance to individualist, careerist, and bibliometric university cultures” (9). It is my way of taking what the university has taught me (theory) and making a world out of those theories: In a world of feminism/critical theory/poststructuralism/posthumanism, this is what research can look like. I see it as a way of enacting theory by doing research differently.

My background in performance art and literary theory opened my thinking up to the possibility that something like cartomancy—interpreting tarot cards—could be seen as an artistic practice. That is, cartomancy can be an act of storytelling shared between the reader, the querent (i.e., the person getting the reading), and the cards. Loveless (2019), referring to the ideas of Thomas King (2003) and Donna Haraway (2003), asserts that “the telling of stories is a political performative. A world-making, knowledge-making practice” (p. 21). Stories are “material-semiotic events” (p. 21) that change not only the way we see the world (*episteme*), but the world itself (*onto*), because it changes how we live in the world (*ethico*). As this project took shape, I saw it as a way I could *shape change* by collaborating with teachers to shape the stories they believed about themselves.

As I followed this curiosity in my research, reading, and writing practices, my question later entwined with Taylor’s (2016, 2018) discussion of edu-crafting as posthumanist research. This question (and its devious follow up, Wouldn’t that be fun?) has delighted and troubled me since its surfacing. Taylor describes edu-crafting as a pedagogical and research method that joins posthumanism and craftivism⁴: edu-crafting “puts bodies, things, and concepts in motion” (2018, p. 20). Interested in edu-crafting’s potential to expand what is possible in higher education, Taylor and her students have experimented with posthuman pedagogy through walking in slippers, playing with lego, considering the agency of pets, and pondering the thing-power of furniture. This approach allows/requires that the researcher/teacher/learner follows their curiosity through “knots and pulses of patchiness,” recognizing that even the smallest cut produces an infinite number of frayed ends to attend to (2018, p. 373). Considering the range of examples of

⁴ Craftivism is “a movement which uses craft for critical thinking, questioning and considered creative activism” (Taylor, 2016, p. 20).

edu-crafting Taylor gave, I wondered, would it be outside the realm of possibility to consider the agency of tarot cards as a participant or even researcher?

My own research question and techniques grew alongside my introduction to edu-crafting, so the question of which-came-first is difficult, and, as Taylor (2016) argues, irrelevant to posthumanism's aims, to untangle. It is all a part of the entanglement of research. One distinction that may be helpful is that, until I sat down to write this chapter, I never thought of edu-crafting as a limiting term. I didn't worry about whether my project was "actually" or "by definition" edu-crafting, as Taylor (2018) describes it. I used Taylor's writing as a jumping off point to *yes and* my own project. In a move that surprised even myself, I had introduced the practice of tarot reading into my research entanglement. While Taylor may not have had tarot in mind as a possible edu-crafting technique, I do hope she enjoys the extension as I have.

Are We Having Fun Yet?

It took the half-awake state of a daydream to connect the worlds of tarot to research, but the follow-up whispering promise of *fun* woke me up: I was on the scent of something. This excitement for the potential of playful research methods was initially inspired by Leach's (2000) project recognizing gossip as a counter-discourse to the normative, logocentric discourses of scientific knowledge (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). Her work takes a cue from Irigaray (1985a, 1985b, 1993), prioritizing play, laughter, and intimacy. It presents itself "as a way to disrupt the vision of subjectivity that posits rationality as the dominant mode of praxis" (p. 226). Citing Foucault, she argues that "because of [Western culture's] logocentric structure and the consequent value it attributes to scientific knowledge, it has actually become logophobic in that it fears spontaneous production of knowledge" (p. 230). Aside from being a commentary on gossip, this observation about cultural fear of intuitive knowledge could explain the

marginalization of mysticism and occult knowledge as well. Embodying the contradiction of *serious fun*, mysticism and the occult are viewed with both trepidation and humor. What happens when work is lighthearted play, and the research method itself disavows seriousness? Does it count?⁵ But of course, to play is a give-and-take that requires resistance. To play, you must understand the rules.

Perhaps it is possible, I then wondered—even generative—from a posthuman perspective to think with tarot as part of my research, as a method and as a participant/researcher. With posthumanism’s respect for the more-than-human, Taylor’s musings entangled with my daydreams, giving birth first to an idea which involved crafting a tarot deck with cards made up of culture’s burgeoning images of teachers and conducting tarot readings for teachers at teachers’ convention. Because, Wouldn’t that be fun? Following curiosity, for me, means following the scent of that trickster question. We don’t often consider fun in academic research, since it falls on the wrong side of the binary from seriousness, which is what they tell us research *should* be. *They* (and *we* are most often a part of this *them*) are invested in maintaining the direction of the status quo, moving forward on a teleological path to a predictable future where a certain type of Man (“Western”/male/white/heterosexual/able-bodied/rational/and-so-on) reigns supreme over the rest of existence. Following fun is a different way of thinking/being/doing research. It is a response to the way research *should* be, and a choice to research otherwise, in order to resist the established hierarchy of things and make room for others. I connect it to Taylor’s (2018) call to “renew the ethical-political-joyful promise of higher education” (p. 372) by experimenting with new ways of doing research. Following fun acknowledges and celebrates the surprising,

⁵ Ambivalence surfaces again. The playful researcher wants to be taken seriously. Both/and.

unconventional, new, forgotten, forbidden, messy, esoteric, and overlooked. It relies on the belief that this expansion of what's included in research will be beneficial for us all.

Following fun is also about following eros, the kind of love that is contextual, material, and sensual (Loveless, 2019, citing Haraway). The phrase, "in that moment, I loved her," which I'm sure I've read in more than one book, comes to mind. It is not unconditional, *agape* love that overarches and pervades everything and everyone, though that kind of love is important too. Eros says *I love you because you are here. I love what I see, what I hear, what I touch. I love being with you now*. Eros is situated, entwined, ambivalent (Loveless, 2019). It is the love of becoming: "when in love-as-eros, the story is never told; it is always in the process of unfolding" (Loveless, 2019, p. 27). When I am writing, reading, interviewing, or reflecting and it feels *fun*, I am in love with the research process. When the participant in my research, Dylan, tells me how much fun he had during our interview, I feel loved. When I remember the connection I felt during those interviews, I am remembering a feeling of love.

Research/Stories/Texts/Events

All methodologies come with their own onto-epistemological structures that shape the story that emerges from the research. The assumption that this story is a 1:1 transcription of "the real," perfectly conveyed by the participant, recorded by a researcher, and understood by the reader is itself a myth (Britzman, 2003). Indeed, it is a *helpful* myth, one which most of us choose to live by, because to live in a state of constantly questioning our and others' perceptions of things would be maddening. Yet, for feminist poststructuralists like Britzman (2003), it is also sometimes helpful to trouble the methodology with which we encounter the world, to pay attention to "the impossible difference within what is said, what is intended, what is signified, what is repressed, what is taken, and what remains" (p. 28). Like Britzman, I come from a

background of studying and teaching English literature and rhetoric. We've learned that there is nothing outside the text (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*); put another way, everything *is* a text that's being written, that can be read, that must be considered in that context (Derrida, 1976). When we look at the discourse of those involved in research through this lens, we see that they become "textualized individuals": "Their voices create a cacophony and dialogic display of contradictory desires, fears, and literary tropes that, if carefully 'read,' suggest just how slippery speaking, writing, reading, and desiring subjectivity really are" (Britzman, 2003, p. 28). Talking of research as mythology, including even those most sacred sources of knowledge (e.g., scientific study and the first-hand accounts of participants) as stories, I do not mean to devalue them. They are some of the most powerful tools we have in our search for understanding. Rather, I aim to point out that when we go looking for our truth, the facts we find are always contextually-bound, though those contexts are often hidden, and that fictions act much like facts whose context is more readily visible. In this project, when I refer to fictions, be they widespread myth, individual story, or the fiction of tarot, I speak with skepticism *and* appreciation, with "generous suspicion" (Haraway, 2016, p. 136). Which, I suppose, is a way of describing curiosity, "curiosity that emerges as key to our capacity to make such changes" (Loveless, 2019, p. 22).

I have come to see each of the interview/tarot readings I do during this project as a research-creation event. *Research-creation event* is a descriptor I have taken from Truman (2017), in which she builds her dissertation around three research-creation events. These events were made up of defined and intentional acts of reading, walking, and writing. I appreciate Truman's use of the word *event* because it takes the focus off of the researcher, the participant, or the materials, and instead draws the focus to the moment that these entities come together. I have a role to play in these events, but the interaction and the outcome are not within my control.

I ask the question and assemble the necessary parts. I hold the space throughout the event as best I can so that the question can do its work. I notice what comes up, and I take what I notice one step further by writing about it. The actual creative act is what happens during the reading, and is no more my possession or responsibility than it is the participant's or the card's. There is a secondary creativity that happens when I write about the event, in which I take the storyworld we created during the reading and try to translate it for myself and readers. (I'm not ready to do research so differently that I have nothing to submit to my advisors, after all.) The hyphen in research-creation references this relationship between creativity and research, that while research-creators strive to move beyond traditional research modes, we also use many of these traditional modes (e.g., reviewing literature, applying theory, interviewing, writing) in that process. Both/and.

By taking up tarot reading as a method to tinker and mess with teacher identity, I do not aim to suggest it as a tool to be taken up ubiquitously or programmatically. Rather, I present it, after Ellsworth (2005), as an illustration of an anomalous, speculative, experimental approach to the pedagogy of teacher education. I share my method(olog[ies]) as an imagining of the (im)possibilities that feminist poststructuralist, posthumanist play brings to education research. My project will not “fix” what has come before. St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) put it aptly, that feminist poststructuralist (and, I would add, posthumanist) research is not a “corrective for humanism,” but what it does provide is “opportunities for limit-work, work that operates at the boundaries of the possibilities of humanism” (p. 6). Carol Taylor (2018) says of the work that goes on in posthumanist higher education,

it is neither a wholesale reversal of what has gone on previously nor an installation of some indubitably ‘new’. It is, instead, a mixed and patchy phenomenon in which

new-old (theories, narratives, practices) jostle in entangled matterings which may, just may, be generative of more response-able ways of knowing about ‘our’ place in (relation-with) the world.” (p. 372)

I encourage my readers to imaginatively engage with this project in a subjunctive mood: let us conduct tarot readings *as if* we could learn from it. But do not participate in the conversation uncritically. Both/and. Research and play. Skepticism and appreciation. Embarking on this exploration, I hope, alongside Ellsworth (2005), “to contribute to efforts to reconfigure educators’ conversations and actions about pedagogy as the force through which we come to have the surprising, incomplete knowings, ideas, and sensations that undo us and set us in motion toward an open future” (pp. 17-18). Genuine curiosity and a desire to connect more intimately with myself and others fuels this endeavor.

My edu-crafting tarot experiment, like Ellsworth’s anomalous places of learning, St. Pierre and Pillow’s limit-work, and Taylor’s edu-crafting, is not a search that expects to teleologically end in perfection, but an ontological search that supposes that to discover different ways of being, we might need to look in different ways. Approaching teacher identity in a playful manner through tarot reading is not just meant to be a respite from the mundanity of traditional research methods, nor is it a call to revolution. It is an intimately radical effort toward making the identity of the teacher a liveable one.

Diffractional Auto/ethnography

Having evolved from that daydream, the current iteration of this project looks a little different(ly): Utilizing a diffractional auto/ethnography (Taylor, 2018; Taylor & Bayley, 2019), I conducted tarot readings for friends who self-identify as teachers; this practice produced the interviews and readings I did with Dylan, who is featured in the chapters that follow.

What is diffractive auto/ethnography? As I have followed it, the genealogy of diffraction as an optical metaphor for methodology moves from Haraway's (2004) interpretation of Trinh Minh-ha's concept of "inappropriate/d others" through Barad's (2007) integration of diffraction with her own (2000) concept of agential literacy, and on to the work of researchers such as those featured in Taylor & Bayley (2019), who take up diffraction as a methodology for reading, writing, and other modes of research. Metaphorically, diffraction stands in comparison to reflection and reflexivity. Haraway (2004) explains that, as in a prism, "Diffraction does not produce 'the same' displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction" (p. 300). Thus, diffraction highlights the manner in which subjects are interrupted and transformed by others, instead of trying to perfectly duplicate a so-called original source. Citing Barad (2007, p. 93), Geerts (2019) suggests that, "rather than employing a hierarchical methodology, diffractively approaching texts and theories means that they are dialogically read 'through one another' to engender creative, unexpected outcomes" (p. 128). Diffraction is thus both feminist and posthumanist in its flattened (rather than hierarchical) view of sources of knowledge. Although she doesn't use this term, Ellsworth (2005) illustrates the process and value of diffraction as I see it:

While the sources I reference throughout this book base their thinking in the work of so-called primary sources, they do so in ways that transcend mere description or restatement. Through the inventive ways in which they put those borrowed ideas to use, they are able to bring their sources into relation with ideas, events, imperatives, people, questions, and practices that lie outside of those sources' original optics or lived realities. They refine ideas from primary sources in ways that render problematic—better yet, render useless and uninteresting—the whole idea of a primary source as something that requires the

subordination of other sources as secondary. They employ the masters' ideas not to explain them—which is a way to embalm them unchanged and unchangeable—but to make something (else) of them. (p. 12)

For Taylor (2018), “Working with theory diffractively, then, makes a shift from an orthodox notion that theory is something that is ‘applied’, to a view of theory as a joyously messy process of differential patterns of matterings, all of which are contingent, situated, embodied and affective” (p. 375). Like with many (most? all?) theoretical terms, diffraction is itself not a wholly new idea, but a diffracted concept resulting from an entanglement of things plugged into each other. In this light, ideas take on their own life, always multiplying and evolving, always generative, always fertile. Thinking, reading, writing, and researching diffractively enable us to take a constructive, positive, and generous approach to our work because diffraction places us in an epistemological state of abundance.

Approaching auto/ethnography diffractively means paying vigilant attention to the ways that subjects are entangled in a vast web of beings. Considering ethnography as always already being a fluid relationship between self and other, all ethnographic research is always auto/ethnographic. Labels such as *researcher* and *participant* get messy when we acknowledge that we are constantly reading ourselves through each other. I interpret the backslash in auto/ethnography as a reminder of the entanglement of myself within the relationships of the research and the entanglement of others in the project's authorship. Add to the already complex entanglement of human researchers and participants the agency of the more-than-human others, in this case the tarot cards in particular, and the work becomes indeed “joyously messy” (Taylor, 2018, p. 375). For Taylor (2018), diffractive auto/ethnography “offers a possibility to attend to a more-than-human world, to tune into a more flattened ontology of non-individualized, co-

constitutive being, and to question a whole array of humanist binaries: body/mind, body/brain, self/other, emotion/reason, woman/man,” (and I would add) past/future, memory/dream, real/unreal, you/me (p. 376). In a way, I wonder if this messiness hints at why phenomenological, thick research descriptions are so treasured: when we move from an individualist epistemology to one of interconnectedness, we reveal the relevance of the individual to us all.

Myself, (Not) a Teacher

In choosing diffractive auto/ethnography as my methodology, I have taken to heart Miller’s (2005) suggestion that autobiographical work “must address issues of identity construction, subjectivity, and power relations,” because these issues “draw attention to the warmth—indeed, the heat—generated by the unpredictability, the multiplicities, the confusions, and the unknowable in education” (p. 50). Writing diffractive auto/ethnography must always be an incomplete representation, a snapshot of the author caught passing through a frame. In this case, we might see an image of a teacher, one foot out the schoolhouse door. Imagine the camera is rolling. Imagine that this is the last time the teacher will go through that door. At what point in the film is she no longer a teacher? Can we freeze the frame? Or perhaps the teacher’s departure is more of an unraveling. Having been wound into a tightly strung ball since her first practicum (or since she first played school), she rolls along, unaware that she is coming undone. She carries on until one day she looks back behind her, only to find that the end of the string is nowhere in sight. Where did she lose it?

Autobiographical work is common in research on teacher education, perhaps in part because of teacher education’s emphasis on reflection, and maybe in part because of education’s myth that everything depends on the teacher (Britzman, 2003). What sets myself apart from most

in the genre is the ambivalence of my identity as a teacher. Consider me a limit-case. As a person with chronic depression, I have had to take several medical leaves from teaching in recent years. The causes and effects of this illness have not been completely distinct from my career. Also a new mother, the difficulties leading up to the successful birth of my daughter, including a lost pregnancy, further complicated my efforts to shape my own professional identity.

On parental leave, I experienced identity limbo: I was able to postpone my decision whether or not to return to my teaching position for another year. This project comes out of my additional choice to complete a master's degree in education at that time. The voices calling me to *not* be a teacher were many (though they may all be my own), but the teacher identity is a strong one, and so I was torn with the ambivalence of (not) being a teacher. On the cusp of a possible career change, I risked becoming what Glazer (2020) calls an invested leaver. Glazer defines invested leavers as teachers who have put extensive energy into their teaching careers, are past the survival period of the first few years, but choose to leave the profession. Glazer theorizes, after Santoro (2017), that these teachers leave for reasons of craft consciousness, concerning their ability to practice teaching with integrity, within the confines of their current situation. I argue that this decision to leave complicates and is complicated by the teacher's historically-constituted and always-in-the-making identity, composed of and caught up in the emotional, material, and conceptual worlds of the teacher.

Even before she *begins to unbecome*, the teacher's identity is troubled. It is polysemic, open to interpretation, "fractured, multiple, contradictory, contextual" (Zembylas, 2005, p. 29). She is mother, expert, tyrant, fool. She is safety, and she is danger. The teacher, as a subjectivity, is historically constituted by our cultural and social imaginations, and, whether we as teachers realize it or not, these idea(1)s can overwhelm us. Yet Britzman reminds us of the precarity and

hope within this stance: “as a discourse and as a practice, the word *teacher* and the subject positions it produces always have the potential of producing disavowal within the subject who lives this discursive category as a crisis of representation” (2003, p. 37). As subjects caught up in relationships of power, we are able to choose to accept *and* resist the identities thrust upon us. Indeed, our subjectivity lives within this struggle (Britzman, 2003; Zembylas, 2005). In this sense, then, Glazer (2018) may be correct in suggesting that the choice to leave one’s teaching career can be an act of resistance. Kelchtermans (1999) puts it most clearly: “If, in fact, ‘leavers’ are often good teachers who burned out in a frustrating job situation, can we judge their decision to leave as a positive coping strategy? In effect, are they stepping out to find new perspectives and opportunities for their own development?” (p. 190). The pressure to be good enough can be oppressive in a profession within which attempting to mirror theory in one’s practice resembles entering a funhouse. So, it was with relief that I first read the conversations between academics like Glazer and Kelchtermans, who opened up, through retellings of leavers’ narratives, possibilities in my imagination to revise my interpretations of leaving as failure.

It was Elizabeth Gilbert, author of popular books like the coming-to-love-oneself memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, who initially showed me what leaving could mean through the eyes of the trickster, rather than through the eyes of the martyr (the martyr being an identity good teachers take on all too often). In a blogpost that later influenced her book *Big Magic*, Gilbert explains that while the martyr romanticizes suffering, the trickster “sees through our delusions of seriousness” (2014, n.p.). These delusions cast away, the solution seems obvious. The trickster puts their oxygen mask on first. The trickster is a creative force that survives. The trickster reveals the truths hidden in the margins of the narrative, revealing alternative ways to live and to be with others. Garrison (2009) writes about the trickster as a helpful archetype for teachers to

consider as they navigate the structurations of school and the classroom. He cites studies finding that teachers want “creative autonomy” and the “psychic rewards” of nurturing students and their learning, and he suggests that teacher burnout is an effect of “rigid, hyper-rationalized bureaucratic structures and mindless technocratic management” that block teachers from creativity and connection (p. 70). As such, he gets at the crux of my desire and my loss.

So, what does a trickster do in a desperate situation? Get out! Perhaps, then, it could be a trickster move to leave, for what martyr would follow through with a plan to save herself from a breakdown? Unlike the martyr, when the shit hits the fan, the trickster doesn’t dig in her feet to wait it out, she steps out of the way of the shitstorm. She doesn’t trust the system to take care of her. She trusts herself. Recognizing the trickster in oneself is not a cure for oppressive systems. What the trickster made possible for me was a way of seeing and thus enacting my own experience of leaving as empowerment.

I did go back to teaching for another year after parental leave, and I felt more comfortable in the role than I had for the past few years. In my sixth year of teaching, I found myself in a position similar to my first three years of teaching, in which I enjoyed many parts of teaching in spite of a large amount of stress. I could imagine myself teaching for the foreseeable future without accompanying visions of catastrophic ends. Yet, as I worked on this thesis, interviewed other teacher friends, and contemplated my own teacher identity, I continued to hesitate to commit to teaching wholehog. My actions were demonstrably ambivalent: I simultaneously planned for future years of teaching (developing curriculum materials and investing in classroom supplies with the next few years in mind rather than just “making do” until I left) and applied for other jobs in education-adjacent fields. I learned to be comfortable in this liminal space, and

though it was frustrating at times, I no longer felt the humiliation that had previously come with these doubts about teaching as my life's work.

Friendship as Method

As for my choice of friends as participants, I realized early on that the current COVID-19 pandemic made in-person tarot readings a health risk that few local teachers and myself would want to face, and this disappointed me. Looking on the bright side of things meant noticing that since my research would inevitably take place via video conference calls, location was of little concern. It had already been suggested to me that “convenience sampling” could mean conducting research with teachers I already knew. Suddenly a lot more of the world became convenient. Growing up, my friends in high school and university were part of a close-knit community with a shared cultural heritage. We went to school together; we were taught together; we taught each other. We now live across North America, many of us working in helping professions, many of us teachers of one kind or another. While I had originally had aspirations of working with teachers who represented a wider breadth of racial and cultural identities, effectively zooming out to include teacher experiences different from my own, I am also intrigued by the idea of zooming into the experiences of one seemingly homogenous group of teachers to find the differences within. Our shared histories as longtime friends (with predictably complex attachments) could also lead to a different kind of researcher-participant relationship than those formed under the conventions of distanced, even anonymized research. And besides, researching with friends—Wouldn't that be fun?

Friendship is an important factor to consider in this research, for its implications in the homogeneity of certain features of my group of participants, for ethical considerations (How might our relationships affect the project, and how might the project affect our relationships?),

and also for the topic of the project—identity—itself. Discussing friendship as method, Tillmann-Healy (2003) considers the way friendship adds to the emotional and identity resources of research: “Conceptions of self and other are formed, reinforced, and altered in the context of ongoing relationships” (p. 731). Since the participants in this project are friends who played a significant part in my daily life more than fifteen years ago, but who I have interacted with significantly less in the past fifteen years, how does the interrupted nature of our relationships impact our perceptions of each other? Tillmann-Healy explains that friends tend to reinforce rather than disrupt our own sense of identity, because (as I have already noted) we tend to befriend people who we see as similar to ourselves. Due to this pattern, I have a tendency to imagine that these friends, who were so similar to me fifteen years ago, are also similar to me now, growing and changing in the same ways I have grown and changed. Perhaps they have a similarly constructed version of me in their own minds. To what extent are our conversations taking place between those imagined persons? Dylan and I even talk about this question in a later interview, and that fact that, as you’ll see, our stories parallel and/or mimic each other’s is one reason I chose to focus on his story’s relationship to my own in this writing.

I chose to focus on the interviews I conducted with Dylan in this thesis because (1) pragmatically, involving more participants would make the project unwieldy, and (2) Dylan’s story parallels my own in ways that were exciting and fun to explore, talking together and in writing. I am hugely grateful to the other teachers/friends who participated in my project, entering into its entanglement and impacting it (and me) significantly.

Tarot: A Trickster Text

As a technique for self-exploration and an object with agency, tarot is fascinating to me. My history with it is short, for I have only recently become familiar with the practice of reading

tarot. First introduced through a friend, I quickly became stuck on tarot as an object rich with artistic, cultural, spiritual, tangible, and textual meaning. Its complex cultural genealogy and the proliferation of modern decks make it immensely alluring (and collectable).

Historian Helen Farley (2009) documents the plentiful theories of the origins of tarot. Her reasonings for tarot's most likely history are based on empirical evidence, and so discredit theories that argue otherwise, such as those that argue that the tarot was created as a way of passing down the hidden knowledge of an oppressed people. Whether tarot's history is an example of the successful colonization of a pre-Christian artifact, or whether it is an example of the romanticization of the other is a valuable question. While the story of esotericism is appealing, Farley's arguments are convincing for the historical version of tarot's past.

She writes that tarot's very early history is intertwined with the history of playing cards, and theories of the origins of those cards span the Eurasian continent, most likely coming to Europe from the Mamlūk Empire of the Middle East. The first recognizable deck of tarot cards (meaning that they included the face cards now known as the Major Arcana) were designed by Duke Filippo Maria Visconti in renaissance Italy for use as a card game.

Then, in eighteenth-century France, tarot cards began to take on a purpose of fortune telling. Popularized in the English-speaking world by two members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley and Arthur Edward Waite, the Rider-Waite deck has become an iconic representative of esoteric knowledge. The Rider-Waite deck was named after the publisher, Rider and Company, and Arthur Edward Waite. This is still its most common name, though, increasingly, Pamela Colman Smith is credited for her involvement as the artist of the deck.⁶ Today, tarot continues to be engaged with for divination, but rather than direct fortune

⁶ See Kaplan (2018).

telling, modern tarot use is more accurately described as a ritual of self-transformation and healing (Farley, 2009). While it is strongly associated with the New Age movement, and to some extent with contemporary Paganism, tarot has become ubiquitous and accessible in popular culture.

Farley emphasizes that, though many esotericists try to ascribe continuity to tarot's history and use, there is no underlying scheme of secret knowledge, constancy of purpose, or consistency of structure to tarot decks historically or today. Rather, they have evolved to fit their context. While individual tarot decks vary, they do have a certain family resemblance of traits: they are usually composed of seventy-eight cards, divided into four suits and trump cards called the Minor and Major Arcana, respectively. Many modern decks imitate the imagery of the Rider-Waite deck, and others do not. Thus, like most cultural objects and identities, upon inspection, it becomes apparent that tarot decks and practice are grouped by their similarities, ignoring (even problematizing) their differences. Authenticity and accuracy of tarot reading is therefore not of much concern in this project, so much as what resonates and feels true to the reader and the querent.

In the interpretation of tarot cards, different cultural and spiritual traditions are plugged in such that abundance of meaning is favoured over essentialism. In eighteenth-century France, it was imbued with ancient-Egyptian lore, Hebrew letters, Indian motifs, and astrological signs. The New Age movement brought the addition of feng shui, Buddhist, feminist, and environmental viewpoints. Today, it seems like you can find a tarot deck relating to nearly any cultural persuasion or spiritual tradition. This abundance of cultural mythology and connections is exciting, and also requires that we use tarot decks with a conscientious awareness of the difference between cultural appreciation and appropriation.

In this project, I see myself as following in the footsteps of many education scholars (e.g., Sumara, 1996; Janzen, 2015; Lewkowich, 2019) who look at teacher identity alongside a literary companion, with the assumption that books can be refractions into surprising versions of our selves. However, I have chosen to engage in the ultimate trickster of texts: the tarot. The tarot is not considered by most to fit the criteria of a piece of literature, but tricksters like to have fun with these types of categorizations. Tarot cards, drawn from the deck and arranged on a table into spreads, are *indeterminate, endlessly rearrangeable* narratives (Tatham, 1986). When cards are shuffled and drawn during a tarot reading, a new story is formed—“And no reading can be final: the spread leads [the reader] to make one story today; tomorrow, [they] may return to it and craft a quite different story, the change a function of circumstances” (Tatham, 1986, p. 582). Tarot readers and querents (i.e., the person getting the reading) layer the archetypal images of the tarot cards upon their own identities and situations, focusing but not limiting the scope of self exploration.

Fairfield (2002) emphasizes a choice-based approach to tarot readings that empowers the querent rather than directing them. I find Fairfield’s interpretative approach useful because she emphasizes insight rather than prediction: “With new insight, you can re-create the past, re-structure the present, and re-align the future” (p. 5). Most of us aren’t used to living with a sense of multiple subjectivities day-to-day. We construct our self-image by emphasizing elements of our past, present, and future according to who we believe we are, who we are told we are, and who we wish to become.

In this manner, a deck of tarot cards operates as a narrative device (although not always a *linear* narrative) to make visible, even tangible, diffractive discourses surrounding a person’s identity and the intermingling of entities that makes our identities shift and grow. It might even

fulfill—in an unexpected way—Zembylas’s (2005) call for “An approach that recognizes that discourses and performances are not absolutely determining” and that might “begin to provide teachers with spaces for reconstituting themselves and their relations with others” (p. 40). No tarot text is authoritative. This project hopes to give teachers the opportunity to participate in an intentional (re)design of their identities, more fully aware of the embodied and collaborative process that is always already occurring. As a researcher, my job is to enthusiastically facilitate, participate in, and observe this process. The methodology of auto/ethnography suggests that I also consider the ways the process is transforming me.

Inna Semetsky’s Edusemiotics

Inna Semetsky is the foremost scholar of tarot in education studies. Through decades of work, she has formed a comprehensive theory of semiotics and educational philosophy called *edusemiotics* (2013). Through edusemiotics, Semetsky’s aim is to study and utilize tarot as a system of signs that can transform subjectivity and heal the spirit, arguing that “Tarot signs are educators *par excellence*” (2020, p. 134). In my project, I see tarot as a useful collaborator in the exploration of teacher identity as an important part of teacher education.

Semetsky describes this process of subjective transformation as an example of *semiosis*, the evolution of signs. In a tarot reading, the reader and the querent draw cards and interpret them, either individually or together. This process invokes openness to change:

Due to the mediating function of the narrative constructed during interpretation, the psychodynamic process tends to become integrated into the person’s consciousness. The interpretation creates a self-reflective feedback that renders the present structure of consciousness unstable, eventually reaching a certain instability threshold. This leads to “producing a change in the subject’s mental life which, in turn, changes his or her

disposition to act ... in ways dependent on the content of the representation” (Semetsky, 2020, p. 156, citing Von Eckhardt, 1996).

The point of tarot reading, according to Semetsky, is to reveal multiple stories of what’s going on in a person’s life. Prior to the tarot reading, these stories may still be hidden in a person’s unconscious. The reading reveals relationships we may not have considered before by juxtaposing cards with each other and whatever current narrative we are buying into, thereby enabling us to more fully participate in the change process that is daily life through observation and choice.

Tarot is especially well suited to subjective transformation because it is both iconic of the material world and symbolic of more abstract concepts:

Each Tarot sign stands for something else (as signs, by definition, do), something other than itself – and not for an observable “thing” but for structural entities as archetypal modes of existence including behavior, emotional state, way of thinking, believing, feeling and so on. (Semetsky, 2020, p. 133)

Each card has a number that can be interpreted numerologically and a suit that represents one of the four elements (and its symbolic associations). Most cards include a figure whose expression, clothing, and actions hold literal and symbolic meaning. Colours, plants, animals, and orientation can all be interpreted, each in many ways. Besides being iconic and symbolic, tarot is also indexical “to the whole gamut of human experiences and habits, which are presented to consciousness in the symbolic form of typical patterns permeating the collective unconscious” (p. 133). Tarot cards represent a vast array of experiences, especially when you take into consideration the hundreds of varieties of artist-made decks there are and books upon books interpreting those decks. Relating these tarot signs to a querent’s real-life, specific experiences

enables a kind of embodied practice—or gameplay—that otherwise remains abstract or hidden in their subconscious.

Tarot reading can be a way of exploring teacher identity that engages with signs as iconic, evolving, transformable, and re-interpretable. Semetsky's work allows us to see tarot reading as semiosis, as a way of empowering participants to act *with* change, accepting it and affecting it.

Tarot as researcher/participant

Together, my friends and I explore concepts of teacher identity alongside and with the tarot cards, who also participate as teachers themselves. Rather than making a deck of my own as I originally imagined, I have involved a variety of existing decks in the project, realizing that (1) making a tarot deck of teacher images and reading tarot with teachers was enough for at least two masters theses, (2) the profusion of existing tarot decks gave more than enough opportunity to explore teacher identity, and (3) there is something valuable in *not* limiting teachers' exploration of self to only images of teachers, since teaching is only one aspect of a person's identity.

Posthumanism brings attention to the material side of the mind/matter binary, attempting to flatten out the hierarchy implied therein. Posthumanism is what happens when we deconstruct binaries such as human/non-human (or more-than-human), alive/dead, agent/object. Like poststructuralism, posthumanism works through the faculty of the subjunctive mood, the grammatical term for behaving *as if* something were true. In the case of this study, what happens if we stop assuming that tarot cards, as a human-made object, have no agency of their own? Rather, we might look for "liveliness" in their presence, movement, and effects (Bennett, 2010). And with this turn, the tarot cards are revealed as not only the tools of research, but as

participants—even researchers—themselves. They are not only the tokens of the game, but fellow players. An example of how this liveliness might be recognized is common amongst tarot practitioners in their awareness of “jumper cards.” These are cards that somehow make themselves known during a reading, most often by “jumping” out of the deck while it is being shuffled, or falling out when a card is pulled. These cards are read beside the pulled cards as additional harbingers of meaning. When we open ourselves up to stories outside of those which claim to be factual, experiences outside of what seems real, relationships outside what seems possible, we open ourselves up to new forms of understanding, new forms of being. If tarot is a living fiction, then perhaps it can help us understand, through its multitude of stories, the complex lives we lead, teachers and/or otherwise.

Semetsky (2011) has introduced and expertly explored the use of tarot reading in education theory as a semiotic system that can be engaged with to transform education and heal the human psyche. In my own work, I have built a practice that takes cues from Semetsky and also departs from her work, in the spirit of research-creation (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012), forging its own unique method and artistic path. Semetsky describes the tarot deck as a unique object that functions as an iconic index to human experience:

Understanding and bringing to consciousness the symbolic meanings embodied in the archetypal images of the [the tarot cards] contributes to *creating semiotic subjectivity* in the process of gradually removing Ego from its privileged central position and enriching the human mind with other ways of knowing that complement its rational function.”

(Semetsky, 2020, p. 134, my emphasis)

This movement away from Ego further develops the posthumanist interest in cultivating a diffractive awareness of the entanglement of our identities, with each other, with tarot cards, with

whatever is out there. It is not just that our identities are added to the cauldron of entanglement and stirred; rather, our identities are like a fermenting pot of sauerkraut, made up of bacteria grown up from their environment, inseparable, indistinguishable from the other ingredients, transforming the other ingredients into something new. Identity (a term which I will further trouble below) is not a singular or separate entity, but made up of that with which it is entangled. We might further draw on the metaphor of microorganisms to consider that even our body is not fully our own, but composed of a whole microbiome of living beings, both part of us and not us, at least not in the way we most often think of our selves. Just the same with our identity. Yet, we have a need, or at least a tendency, to want to set ourselves apart when thinking of identity. We focus on uniqueness, what is “me” and what is “not me.” Even while embracing posthumanist ideas of assemblage and entanglement, I still find myself thinking with and shaped by the idea of identity as fixed, unified, and distinctive.

Diffraction Teacher Identity

This habit of isolating the self in terms of identity is entrenched in language itself. The etymology of the word *identity* reveals its limitations when thinking about posthuman subjectivities: first recognized as from the latin *idem*, meaning “same,” around 1600 it came to mean “The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition of being a single individual; the fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality,” (OED, 2010, n.p.). I will speak to three problems that this definition makes for us.

The Single Identity

Even in common parlance, we often speak of a person’s *identities*, recognizing that one person can inhabit many roles (mother, daughter, teacher, friend, etc.), and so the tension in the

word is often apparent: How can one have *multiple single* identities? Imagine the culturally-constructed (i.e., Western, colonial, patriarchal) job description for the *identity* of the teacher. To be a teacher is to inherit a backlog of cultural images one must navigate, embrace, or avoid. The struggle to make sense of and live with and as the signifier *teacher*, if one chooses to take it up, demands attention in every sense: inner and outer self—intellectually, creatively, emotionally, and physically. To get an idea of these demands, think of the array of teachers portrayed in popular culture and the tropes they represent: Snape in *Harry Potter*, the sadistic teacher; Ms. Gruwell in *Freedom Writers*, the white savior;⁷ *Matilda*'s Miss Honey, the fragile child-whisperer, Mr. D, the apathetic slacker; Coach Steve in *Big Mouth*, the creepy gym teacher; *Riverdale*'s Ms. Grundy, the lonely (and therefore dangerous) spinster; *Dead Poets Society*'s John Keating, the inspirationally countercultural (and then fired) teacher. Alongside these tropes, the teacher must consider (consciously or otherwise) more subtly culturally pervasive images that feed into a kind of mythology of teacher identity, such as champion of the global economy, agent of social justice, critical intellectual, conduit of knowledge, nurturing caregiver, and strong but loving disciplinarian (MacKenzie-Dawson, 2019; Garrison, 2009). Weber and Mitchell's (1995) cultural study of teacher images defines *image* as "an idea, a mental representation, or a conception that has a visual or physical flavour, an experiential meaning, a context or a history, and a metaphorical, generative potential" (p. 21). I use this term because it suggests the depth of meaning in signifiers such as *teacher* goes beyond the denotation of the word. Imagery is culturally and historically situated; it has an embodied and emotional presence. As the scorn and fear generated by the tropes above demonstrates, "we not only create images, but are shaped by

⁷ The scorn with which we often view these tropes is hard enough to digest for any teacher not wanting the negative connotations of the image. They become even more hurtful when the trope is associated with a real person like Erin Gruwell, who certainly wasn't trying to embody a stereotype when she engaged her students in English Language Arts lessons successful enough to be noticed by the media.

them” (p. 21). The power of language and its connotations goes beyond communication. It tells us who we already are, who we should be, and who we might become. These images are part of the entanglement we must consider when looking at teacher identity.

For teachers measuring themselves against this oxymoronic multitude of singular ideals, we come up lacking. Thinking with psychoanalysis, Bibby (2011) likens the expectations put upon teachers to social fantasies of the perfect mother: “a near telepathic ability to know their learners, super-organizational powers, creative ideas for engaging all children at all times and, above all, boundless love and self-sacrifice” (p. 139). These demands are the hidden connotations within the legal directive for teachers to function *en loco parentis*. With implied requirements such as these, the suggestion that we might be better off looking to images of the “good enough,” rather than the perfect, becomes radical (Winnicott, 1989). Where does this expectation of perfection come from, and what are we to do with it? It seems to me there is something familiar in this futile search for the ultimate *one thing*, that a teacher must herself be everything, have everything. This sense of scarcity reminds me of my earlier discussion of secondary and primary sources; it hints at a culture of ownership and competition that I’d rather not play a part in (although of course, I do). What could happen if we were to look at teacher identity diffractively, abundantly?

Authors working in such fields as research-creation, cultural studies, feminism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and posthumanism frequently work to deconstruct images and trouble culture’s (and our own) tendency to try to enforce hegemonic mythologies (Loveless, 2019). In particular, Taylor (2018) argues “Posthumanist research, as an embedded and embodied materialist and experimental emergence which is immanent, contingent and conditional, deconstructs the fundamental assumptions underpinning dominant ways of

producing knowledge” (p. 372). With contradictory images of teachers abounding, the paradox is that the bounty of images only further limits teacher identity, rather than freeing it. That a teacher must fit not one but many ideal images (or *not* fit the negative images) is an impossible feat, for these images are often at odds with each other. You must be loved by all your students, but don’t you dare smile until Christmas! At least, one might say, there is more than one image to look to: when it comes to ideals and stereotypes, teachers have options. Yet, when we consider the layering effect of these images, the effect is still stifling.

If so far this discussion has painted images of teachers in a bad light, it has done so to prove the point that teacher identity is in crisis. Indeed, it is in crisis by design. Language is trying to pin us down, to name us, to give us shape, *and* language is also shifting, mutating, growing in ways that make words like *same*, *single*, and *identity* a fiction. Images are not inherently harmful, however; rather, in their endurance and fecundity, they are how language expresses its vitality, how language stays alive, through both denotation and connotation simultaneously. Images are what give language its magic—that our ever-shifting lexicon not only names but shapes the world around us and within us.

So, what about the images above is problematic? Britzman (2003) observes that images like the ones previously mentioned are essentializing and repressive, while others “open us up to the dialogic,” presenting us with possibilities rather than limits (p. 6). As an example of the latter, Britzman suggests an image of teachers as “negotiators, mediators, and authors of who they are becoming” (p. 6). This image not only redefines the teacher, but reframes the notion of identity itself. Becoming, rather than being, is a dynamic and unpredictable position, and the teacher is a participant in not only choosing, but in constructing these identities, in shaping

change. Mediation is involved, implying that this image of the teacher accepts the multiplicity of her identities, not as a problem, but as an opportunity for agency.

It is well past time to put aside the struggle to maintain a singular identity. In a world that inundates us with images of what it means to be a teacher, what would happen if we stopped fighting it? Could we approach our identity, instead of as a battlefield, as a field of play? Wouldn't that be fun? Tarot's makeup as a deck with 78 cards, each of which can represent an alternate identity or aspect of subjectivity for the querent, provides more than enough room for us to explore multiplicity.

Identity's Relationship to Space and Time

The familiar OED concept of identity further refuses to acknowledge that a person's identity might change over time or in different contexts, a claim which most of us have surely observed in ourselves as untrue. So let us take for granted that identity does in fact change over time. I have already discussed some ways in which time and space play a part in the interpretation of identities in this project. Reuniting old friends across thousands of miles via videoconferencing and virtual documents involves a crashing of memories of past identities and places with imaginings of new identities and new places. Additionally, we often speak of future identities and "where we want to be" in particular when discussing our careers. And in general, I have noticed a strong tendency to refer to future imaginaries when picturing our selves. In one interview (not otherwise included in this paper), a teacher voiced concern that she hadn't been teaching long enough to be relevant to the project; "We won't limit ourselves to only present identities here," I reassured her. This freeing pronouncement released a tension we hadn't realized was there. She could be both a teacher and not yet a teacher. She is (not) a teacher. There is a sense of freedom in the recollection that we are not static beings but dynamic

becomings.

In this project's interviews, we (the participants/researchers) further play with timelines and timeliness in one of our tarot reading layouts, which is called a "past, present, future" reading, and appropriately designates a three-card spread to represent the past, the present, and the future. Semetsky (2020) observes the power of the tarot to consider the past, present, and future both separately and concurrently, overcoming the past/future binary via the mediation of the present. The concept of *both/and*, which presents itself throughout this project and was hinted at in reference to the body and its microbiome earlier in this chapter, requires us to go beyond linear concepts of change in identity to also consider how past/present/future concepts of identity exist more so as a polarity (Semetsky, 2011), including both extremities and the in-between in their coherence, rather than a binary. When we think linearly and with binaries (I once was lost, but now am found / Was blind but now I see), we lock ourselves into a teleological journey of self-improvement with the underlying assumption that we must always be better than before, rather than giving ourselves room for self-acceptance in all moments of our lives. I wonder if this future-driven emphasis is partially responsible for the flood of emotion that often comes when we're encouraged to consider our "inner child," for we so rarely allow ourselves to acknowledge that past selves still exist within us. This, too, resonates with the absolute necessity for trauma-informed practices (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019; Brunzell, et al., 2021); they not only require us to note the effects of past events, but can also make visible past selves' presences in our present selves.

In this project, the tarot readings are dialogues between all entities present, and this includes not only the present teacher-querent, but also their "future self," "as a newly constructed semiotic subjectivity" (Semetsky, 2020, p. 150). This future self is itself an entanglement,

situated within the entanglement of the dialogue. It may, in fact, be an irrelevant distinction to try to define where the entanglement of the future self begins and the entanglement of the dialogue ends—this definition is in many ways a mythical construction we find helps us make sense of the world in some ways, but limits our understanding of its interconnectedness in other ways. Tarot constructs a unique space (which I will later link to Winnicott’s [1989] concept of *transitional space*) with different borderlines of definition with which to understand our subjectivity with, ones that make space for past, present, and future selves, for entire, contradictory polarities of experience, for surprising thoughts and emotions, for that realm of subjectivity called the unconscious.

Identity is the Loneliest Number

Perhaps most harmfully, with its premise of isolation, the OED’s definition emphasizes in identity the separateness of one person from all other things, disregarding the relational nature of existence, that we are never truly isolated from a context of others—people, animals, plants, objects, places, concepts—that influence us. *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*; nothing is outside of context. This interrelatedness has ethical implications, which Braidotti illuminates in a 2016 interview:

A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or “earth” others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism. [...] The posthuman recomposition of human interaction that I propose is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but it is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others. (Veronese, 2016, p. 99)

Braidotti makes the significant distinction that we ought to try to consider this interconnection

positively rather than as a danger to ourselves. This shift in thinking allows us to transform the economics we live by: we can share rather than compete for identity resources. Moreover, when we think of ourselves not as a singular entity but rather as an assemblage, we can never be alone.

The boundaries between ourselves and others are not so strict as the word *identity* might have us believe. Yet, we continue to use this word, indeed some of us obsess over this word, all the while trying to reconcile it to our becoming. Living by the words of Olamina, that God is Change, demands that we would be better off to either abandon or redefine this word.

Throughout this project, I continue to sometimes think with the term identity, but when I do, it includes with it a connotation of clinging to that sameness, and a searching for the singular self. Otherwise, I flip between terms such as subjectivities, assemblages, entanglements, becomings or that ironic compromise, identities. I use the language of polarities, both/and, and (not) to further open up possibilities for ways of thinking of identity more expansively.

A Note on Texts, Including This One

When we relate to texts, writing or reading them, we have as much opportunity to choose how we engage in that relationship as we do with the rest of the relationships in our lives. I think sometimes we forget that choice in higher education, where the primary mode of reading and writing is criticism, and where criticism often means the deconstruction of one argument in order to replace it with our own. Wanting to work within a context that is more community-oriented in its entanglement, I have found the concept of reciprocity described by Zoe Todd (2016) to be more positive, generous, and conscientious of the relationships between authors and texts: “Reciprocity of thinking requires us to pay attention to who else is speaking alongside us” (p. 19). Todd encourages us to consider the entanglement of systems, relations, and legal orders we are a part of, that requires constant vigilance in attending to our relational responsibilities. She

gives the example of herself as “a citizen of the Métis Nation with duties and responsibilities to the many different nations/societies/peoples with whom I share territories” (p. 19). We all have such citizenships and responsibilities to those with whom we share territories. These citizenships and responsibilities are a part of our affirmative bonds of interaction. Todd goes on to explain that “This relational approach means that my reciprocal duties to others guide every aspect of how I position myself and my work, and this relationality informs the ethics that drive how I live up to my duties to humans, animals, land, water, climate and every other aspect of the world(s) I inhabit” (p. 19). When we think of the texts we read and their authors as fellow researchers and collaborators inhabiting shared spaces in the world, it encourages us to respect the relationship of reciprocity because it is what’s best for us all.

It’s important for me to note that Todd’s perspective as an Indigenous scholar immensely informs my understanding of posthumanism. Posthumanism is greatly indebted to Indigenous ways of thinking and being. In fact, to me, this is part of its appeal. At its best, posthumanism is humble in this relationship, acknowledging its entanglement with other scholarly lineages including Indigenous scholarship, eco-feminism, poststructuralism, and so on. Because of this, no part of posthumanism is wholly new. Posthumanism is also entangled with that which often contrasts itself, e.g., Western, colonial, patriarchal, capitalist, ableist, humanist thinking. Even in trying to define posthumanism itself, we must trouble the tendency to identify as *not that*, and become comfortable in an entangled space of *both/and*. So, while I may have regrets that this project remains Euro-centric in many ways, I believe it is more important to try to do *something*, as small and imperfect a step as it may be, toward dethroning hierarchical thinking than to avoid making any mistakes at all, which is what so many privileged people do (Including myself at times).

And so, taking this discussion of reciprocity vs. hierarchy and applying it to texts, including this one, and considering it alongside Ellsworth's use of secondary sources to "employ the masters' ideas not to explain them—which is a way to embalm them unchanged and unchangeable—but to make something (else) of them" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 12), I turn to Bozalek et al. (2019) and their proposal for a diffractive methodology of reading:

A diffractive methodology focuses on reading one text through another rather than juxtaposing one text/oeuvre/theory/set of ideas against another. It is an affirmative reading of texts which can produce new insights and new patterns of thought that matter, acknowledging the entanglements of reviewer/author/text and the ideas which are produced from the processes of reading and writing. (p. 352)

Though Bozalek et al. refer to peer review in particular, their methodology can be applied to any kind of reading, even tarot reading and the way we "read" each other during interviews or daily life.

Diffractive reading also suggests its companion, diffractive writing. Writing becomes a way to discuss ideas (including but not limited to the argumentative we so often see in academic discourse). Diffractive reading and writing are a complement to and a part of diffractive auto/ethnography, serving as a guide in this project.

Writing [as] Posthuman Research

In this project, writing cannot be extracted from the research itself; it participates as another actor in the assemblage of things. Writing can create and transform meaning even as it works to preserve it. Traditionally, ethnographies are written as if they are true and full accounts, and at their best, they read seamlessly like novels (Britzman, 2003): ethnography's "textualized qualities appear seamless because they blur traditional distinctions among the writer, the reader,

the stories, and how the stories are told” (p. 243). In this project, as much as is possible while preserving some coherency of the text, I want to encourage the reader to maintain awareness of these elements, to include uncertainties, miscommunications, hesitations, and mistakes that shine a light on the production of it all.

Each of the research-creation events (in which I interview Dylan and read tarot cards with him) shape the vignette’s writing. In this way, the tarot cards are part-authors of the text. The included images represent this partnership. My writing also shapes what the research-creation event *was*. The writing of the vignettes is part of the context of those tarot readings, and they cannot be wholly separated from it. The thesis itself was an actor in the project. I explained it to my friend-participants and its presence added to the conversation, to what was said or not said. In Dylan’s reading, he interpreted the Two of Cups as a marriage between himself and teaching—the act and concept of teaching itself an agential entity that one can have a relationship with—based on what he understood of my posthumanist approach. What Dylan understood of the thesis shaped his thinking and made him think differently. I talked about *The Parable of the Sower*, Deborah Britzman, concepts of identity, etc. to participants during interviews and readings as they came to mind. The thesis is not just the product; it had an active role in shaping the project.

This thesis is messy. I include long quotations, transcriptions of conversations, and portions of followup letters from research participants in order to remind myself and readers of the fiction of the singular author and the unbroken linear timeline. Attempting to isolate my own voice is similarly complicated: the writing is multivocal and diffractive across time and space, sometimes overtly, (through italicization, parenthetical asides, footnotes) and always in hidden ways (such as the iterative combing-through process of revision). The thesis, as a medium and a genre, conveys its own message. I’d like to suggest that, like a person identifying as a teacher,

perhaps a piece of writing can knowingly and unknowingly accept and resist a label, pushing the boundaries of what the word *thesis* signifies. This idea might disturb you. I think the text itself feels ambivalent about its identity. It's (not) a thesis.

The following vignette features a series of research-creation events conducted by myself, one participant (Dylan), and a deck of Morgan Greer Tarot cards, recorded over video conference. This vignette does not stay neatly packaged, however, and other sources (memories, follow up conversations, auto/diffractive diversions) are included. The vignette is arguably as much about myself as it is about Dylan. Jamie, a character/participant from Britzman's (2003) *Practice Makes Practice* makes a cameo appearance as well. I choose to call this case study a *vignette* to emphasize its ethnographic modesty. It does not claim to be a full account, factually or narratively. Rather, it is a cutting from the vine that reaches out in multiple directions with its tendrils. It is meant to be propagated, to grow new roots and be replanted elsewhere. During the pandemic, cultivating houseplants (sometimes to the point of obsession) has become somewhat of a trend among people as an effort to—what?—I'm not sure. Along this vein, though, it is my hope that this vignette will bring something new and alive into some reader's world that makes it more liveable for them.

Vignette: Dylan

Dylan's First Interview

Dylan⁸ has been a public school teacher for about ten years, mostly teaching science at the high school we attended together in the early 2000s. We watched the Twin Towers fall together in grade eight algebra. We played ultimate frisbee on the college green. We sang a duet from *Avenue Q* at our senior recital. We dated on and off. Now, he lives in the city we grew up

⁸ All names of participants throughout this project are pseudonyms.

in, a few blocks away from his parents' old house, with his wife (also a high school science teacher), their son, and their dog. We try to see each other when I go home for Christmas, though we're lucky if our plans overlap. His interview is the first one to take place in my project.

Dylan introduces himself by saying it's a good time to be interviewing him, since he is at a bit of a crisis point in his career, asking himself if he wants to continue teaching, "staring down the barrel of twenty-five more years." This question of imagining future identities and the ambivalence it lends to present conceptions of self comes up in each of the interviews I conduct in this first round. Each time, it sends off fireworks of self-recognition in my mind, as I've just completed an autobiographical paper on the same subject a few months before.⁹ There's something about Dylan's idiomatic turn of phrase that resonates too. I myself have had thoughts linking stagnation in teaching to ideations of death. As much as we often resist change, there's something terrifying in imagining life without change, even when things are "fine." Identity as a fixed state of being is a trap.

For Dylan, it comes down to the catch-22 of doing it well or doing it at all, and how the ideals of teaching do not match the reality. He reminds me of Jamie Owl, the student teacher from Britzman's (2003) narratives of student teaching in *Practice Makes Practice*, who Britzman describes as being "between past and present images of teachers and her own deep convictions about what a teacher can be" (p. 122). Dylan wants to innovate, to push the boundaries of what's possible, to give students an education that is relevant to their lives, but it's *so much work* that it becomes unattainable, especially as he tries to balance his professional and personal lives. He is aware that teaching is a career that asks for all of you, and he admits, a bit defiantly, that "I like to do different things" too. Like Jamie Owl, Dylan seems to feel repressed by the idea of being a

⁹ See Appendix F: (Not) a Teacher

teacher. Britzman (2003) points to the larger dynamics surrounding this feeling: “Such positioning [...] is an effect of how power is lived within the school context and of the normative discourse of teacher education that reduces the complexity of learning to teach to that of merely accepting the teacher’s role” (p. 121). Since the identity of the teacher does not make Dylan feel complete, he questions whether he is meant to be a teacher at all. This problem is not just Dylan’s, Jamie Owl’s, or mine, but a problem based in the normative discourse itself and how it uses its power to shape our conceptions of ourselves: in stereotypes, “identity is expressed as a final destination rather than a place of departure” (Britzman, 2003, p. 27). Teacher identity as the result of learning to teach rather than the experience of it, is a death of the dynamic and interconnected self rather than an opportunity for life. Again, I ask, what can make teaching liveable?

Dylan has other professional passions that he isn’t able to explore fully because of his position: he’s done some work as a technology lead with the district, and he wishes he had more room in his work to create products he could share with others, perhaps as a curriculum developer. He has this sense as a teacher of “What do I have to show?” and, on the flipside, he acknowledges “that’s capitalism talking,” emphasizing production as what’s valuable.

But in just a general sense, How do you prove yourself as a professional? It’s important to begin to dismantle [ideologies like capitalism] but at the same time, I like milestones. I also like to have things I’ve done, to feel like I’ve accomplished something. So yeah, I’m having this crisis. Then I just go and split wood, and feel like, “Great, now I have a woodpile,” something to show for my work.

Throughout the interview, Dylan talks like this, weighing his own experiences with his intentions and the societal pressures he’s feeling, always one to see multiple sides of a situation. He’ll say

something then backtrack, careful to present a fair picture. He's identified a struggle between being a good teacher and getting things done, but like Jamie Owl, he sees it as a personal ambivalence rather than a systemic problem with the way society views teacher identity:

Ambivalence as a discursive process is not so much descriptive as conscriptive; to name a phenomenon ambivalent compels one to render practice into dichotomous categories and then view such categories as inevitable rather than understand them as the social constructions they are. (Britzman, 2003, p. 225)

It is hard to see hope from a place of ambivalence, because it depends on the existence of two poles which one is stuck between. In my own experience grappling with teacher identity, ambivalence has played an important role in my trajectory toward understanding identity as an entanglement of relations, such that I see ambivalence as a valuable position to pass through.

I wrote a paper as a pilot project for this thesis titled "(Not) A Teacher: An Ambivalent Tarot Project." Taking time to read it again now is like a cut in the entanglement of this project that gives a glimpse into the thinking that can go on in a space of ambivalence. In that paper, I describe ambivalence as a step toward a healthy understanding of teacher identity. I had read Miller's (2005) *Sounds of Silence Breaking* and wanted to take up her call for autobiographical work to "address issues of identity construction, subjectivity, and power relations" (p. 50), and at the same time, I was overcome by my own emotions around my precarious sense of teacher identity, since, as Britzman (2003) describes, the pressures to assume a unitary identity can be, at times, unbearable. I sought ways to see myself, as a teacher, as a "site of permanent openness and resignifiability" (Butler, 1992, p. 160, as cited in Miller, 2005, p. 50) and feel comfortable in this position. So I found particular significance in one of Miller's epigraphs:

Perhaps there is something healthy about claiming the right to ambivalence. Or at the very least, there may be something deadening about having to renounce one's ambivalence too soon, on someone else's terms. If resistance is always the sign of a counter-story, ambivalence is perhaps the state of holding on to more than one story at a time. (Johnson, 1998, p. 2, as cited in Miller, 2005, p. 97)

I found it freeing to accept the moniker I gave myself, (not)-a-teacher. I hadn't yet read Jamie Owl's story or recognized the similar strategy she applied to herself when her student teaching placement began to challenge her own sense of teacher identity, when she felt like a failure and a fraud. When I did read Jamie's narrative, I empathized immediately with her desperate move to construct an alter identity in order to be able to continue with her student teaching. She says, "I have finally decided when I enter that school building in the morning, I am not a teacher. I'm a human being" (Britzman, 2003, p. 101). Jamie felt forced to denounce teaching as a part of her self in order to perform the role: "when things go against my grain, I don't want to do it, I don't believe in it, or I just don't know, then I can admit that. And that way I can save my own piece of mind and I can deal with the situations that arise" (p. 101). Britzman argues that Jamie is still trying to transcend societal discourse, identifying in a very humanist way as a human being who can "rise above the messiness of the classroom" (p. 101), and I see the value in this analysis. And, I also recognize that my own efforts at reidentifying myself are subtly different. As ambivalent, as (not) a teacher, I seek to acknowledge that societal images of the teacher are a part of me and I am also other than those, both/and. And, I don't mean to transcend the classroom in a hierarchical sense, but merely find a sense of calm in the chaos, a respite from the tensions pulling me every which way. The desire for Jaime and myself is recognizably similar, to make teaching liveable. While Jamie is able to survive for a few more weeks, she walks away

from her teaching identity at the end of Britzman's narrative. In contrast, I am still teaching, but not because I've learned to separate myself from the classroom's fray (though I do still depend on these strategies of displacement sometimes in a pinch), but because I'm occasionally able to play along with it, as part of it, rather than continue to the struggle to conform with it. Will it last? I don't know. I'd like to think the Britzman who wrote *Practice Makes Practice* would recognize these subtle differences between myself and Jamie and applaud my efforts to stay with the trouble until the ambivalence transformed into something more palatable. Thus, Dylan's ambivalent attitude toward teacher identity feels like it could swing him in many directions. He seems open to change in his thinking and in his life. It's with that openness that Dylan approaches our tarot reading.

Dylan's First Reading: Past, Present, Future—With a Jumper Card



Figure 1

XVIII—THE MOON. Darkness magnifies fears and dangers. Harsh realities. Disillusionment.
 TWO OF CUPS. Two become one in love or friendship. A union based upon respect.
 KING OF RODS. A noble man, honest, conscientious, and just. Spiritually aware and in control.
 KNIGHT OF CUPS. A confident and amiable young man bearing invitation to a new beginning.

—Morgan-Greer Tarot

As I shuffle the deck and before we've drawn the first card, a card falls from my hand: the Knight of Cups. When this happens, the card is called a jumper card. In tarot lore, it's said to be a card that is asserting itself in the reading, not into any one position, but in order to be considered separately. It's possibly the most agential thing the tarot cards can offer: a good omen during the first reading of this posthumanist project. We set it aside to consult later.

Following my instructions, Dylan tells me when to stop as I trace my finger across the spread out cards, drawing The Moon to represent his teaching identity in the past. Since Major Arcana cards like The Moon are meant to represent forces greater than ourselves, I imagine COVID-19 as the dark presence suggested by this card. It's hard *not* to think of the pandemic and its impact on teaching in the past year. In the image on the card, a lobster emerges from the depths of a pool, sending ripples through its surface-level placidity: the cutting insights of the pandemic make the systemic issues in education unignorable, perhaps a catalyst for Dylan's disillusionment with the profession. The pandemic has influenced the world of education, and recognizing this underlines the ways that external powers and circumstances do influence our teacher identity. It is a reminder that not only are we as individual teachers always changing, but social practices, pedagogy, and conceptions of the teacher are changing as well.

The second card Dylan draws, in the position representing the present of his teacher identity, is the Two of Cups. Dylan identifies the emotionally-driven "union based on respect" in this card to be that of himself and his teaching career:

You touched on quite a bit, or maybe this is more thinking that I've done, how much of yourself you do have to give to teaching. To do it well, you have to be committed to it. It has to be a good fit, and you have to respect that aspect of the job. But at the same time, if you don't also respect yourself, and remember yourself, you can't bring as much to it.

There's a coworker at school who does an excellent job of only working during school hours. I don't do that. I think of that as a goal. This is a job. It's a really important job, but it's not more important than other aspects of your life. When I think about this kind of relationship, you're both there for each other, and you give each other the space that you need to meet your own needs.

I offer the word *reciprocity*, and Dylan agrees. Dylan even suggests, applying his new understanding of posthumanism (since I'd given him a Cliff's Notes version of the theory earlier in the conversation), something I'd never considered: Rather than thinking of teacher as a label, what if we thought of teaching as an entity, and therefore thought of our teacher identity as a *relationship* with teaching? A "marriage," Dylan suggests. This idea feels both obvious and radical to me: If our identity is made up of an entanglement of relationships, and if we are able to *think with* certain concepts as a way of constructing knowledge, why couldn't we talk about our relationship to teaching as *thinking with teaching*? While I find that there can be a burdensome sense in taking on too many roles in my life—teacher, mother, wife, housekeeper, researcher, etc.—because each one comes with ideals I must fulfill, I've never grown concerned about having too many relationships in my life. An abundance of relationships is a blessing. And relationships resist ideals more so than roles, maybe because they are always partially out of our control because they involve an other. The teaching identity is *not* an individual's role, but involves social and cultural others (a fact that is often hard to remember). It is made up of others. So while considering the teacher identity a marriage between the self and teaching may still be simplistic (the self and teaching being overlapping and dynamic entanglements themselves), being *in relationship* to teaching brings about new ways for Dylan and me to think about our

teacher identities that free us from some of the deadening views of teaching we had previously used.

As I write this months later, his reflection on his relationship with teaching reminds me of a passage from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letter to a Young Poet* (1986) that I shared with Dylan and his wife on their wedding.

The point of marriage is not to create a quick commonality by tearing down all boundaries; on the contrary, a good marriage is one in which each partner appoints the other to be the guardian of his solitude, and thus, they show each other the greatest possible trust. A merging of two people is an impossibility, and where it seems to exist, it is a hemming-in, a mutual consent that robs one party or both parties of their fullest freedom and development. (Rilke, 1986. p. 68)

This passage, in relation to teacher identity, suggests that a kind of codependent relationship between a person and their teaching identity in which they were completely inseparable is both undesirable and impossible. In such a relationship, the teacher would indeed be trapped, as Dylan appears to be, “staring down the barrel” of his teaching future.

The last card Dylan draws for the future position is the King of Rods. I describe the suit of Rods to Dylan as one that has to do with spirituality, play, and creativity as parts of his identity, and I wonder aloud about how he imagines that relates, in terms of the creative output of his teaching as he sees it. He responds, making his own associations:

Yeah, I've often thought of teaching, as someone would describe it, as a spiritual career, which I thought was interesting, and I have definitely resonated with as far as choosing what I do for a job, something that was positively impactful. I think a lot of that was influenced by values from the church and my parents that I grew up with. And so

thinking about that being an act of being Christian is an interesting way to think about it. None of the things that were used to describe this card were like, wise, or all-knowing or any of those things that I think reflect a transition that's happening, or that's been happening for a while, about going from someone who knows a lot to someone who can be a guide. More like a beacon that other people can kind of try and follow as opposed to someone who's dictating direction.

The Mennonite community Dylan and I grew up in was not particularly evangelical, rather, it encouraged leading by example, so this rings familiar with me. I hear in Dylan's words, especially when he's describing the teacher the card *doesn't* represent, the teacher as expert (Britzman, 2003), the teacher he's resisting being. It makes me think about how resistance is tiring. It's not fun.

The last card we talk about is Dylan's jumper card, the Knight of Cups. I suggest that we think about it as an overarching card. I describe the card as being focused on emotions (because it's a cup) and action (because it's a knight). "Is that how you feel right now, or do you feel like you're in a phase of taking a step back?" I ask. He works through these ideas as he speaks:

Every time I say, I'm gonna take a step back, I just try and think of something else to do instead. I don't know if you feel the same way. Okay, so the way I'm going to describe this is the way that my mom described herself one time. There was a picture of her when she was fairly young, in elementary school, that she was doing something silly and wearing this fun dress. Oh, it's a really cute picture. And she said that's how I see myself. That was really interesting for me to think about. Her, as an adult, as a 50-year-old woman thinking of herself as this child. And that was really eye opening for me in a way to realize that the people that we know, if you've only known a section of their lives, are

so much more than that. I know my mom, so much better than almost anyone but only this specific part. So the reason I thought of that is that thinking about this character as a confident, amiable--because I when you said that is how I think of you, I'm like, yeah that is often how I describe myself--I like to think, How is that present in the future when I'm not--how does that still continue to filter through? How do elements come through as a teacher but also in my personal life. I'm a parent, I want to play with my kid and have fun. And how do you honor that? That part of yourself that's still there. But, think about how it needs to change or, or sit out for a little bit or simply be present in a new way?

It's a lot to take in, but I'm right there with him. His memory of his mother touches me, especially because I had a meaningful relationship with her, and because she died a few years earlier from breast cancer. I'm pretty sure I've heard this story of his mom before, and I make a note to myself to send him this poem—another text by Rilke (1984)—which I do a few days later.

Child in Red

Sometimes she walks through the village in her
 little red dress
 all absorbed in restraining herself,
 and yet, despite herself, she seems to move
 according to the rhythm of her life to come.

She runs a bit, hesitates, stops,
 half-turns around...
 and, all while dreaming, shakes her head
 for or against.

Then she dances a few steps
 that she invents and forgets,
 no doubt finding out that life
 moves on too fast.

It's not so much that she steps out

of the small body enclosing her,
but that all she carries in herself
frolics and ferments.

It's this dress that she'll remember
later in a sweet surrender;
when her whole life is full of risks,
the little red dress will always seem right. (p. 69)

In the moment, though, I respond,

Yeah. Because I'm not one to think that we have this one authentic self that never
changes. But like your mom said, and like you're saying, there are strands of us
that linger. And that we can attend to in different ways. And, also, I love how you said
that they can sit out sometimes. And you don't always have to be the Knight of Cups.
That doesn't have to be on the forefront. He might be part of you. I feel like all the tarot
cards are kind of part of us. And maybe that one's extra strong for you?

Being in relationship with teaching allows us to get away from the idea that if we are not
focusing wholeheartedly on teaching then we shouldn't be a teacher at all. Relationships have
ebbs and flows, and the kind of attention one relationship needs can change from time to time as
well. There are things we need to do to maintain a relationship, to be a good enough mother
(Winnicott, 1989) or a good enough teacher (Bibby, 2011), but, in a healthy relationship, there is
flexibility and space to breathe.

I reflect more on Dylan's jumper card later, and more connections between what he's
said and the Knight of Cups come up. In general, knights are the warriors of the deck, seeing the
task before them as a divine mission. This reminds me of how Dylan spoke about his teaching as
connected to his faith. Though he didn't exactly say it was a calling, the word came to mind for
me. In particular, the Knight of Cups is like a knight of King Arthur's court who is in search of

the Holy Grail. The problem with the grail is the question of reality: are you seeking a real thing, or an illusion? Is the teaching you're aspiring to pragmatic or idealistic? As I write now, thinking with posthumanism, with Britzman, and with teaching, I'll answer these questions with a resounding, "*No.*"

Second Interview: Catching Up with Dylan

I'm excited to meet with Dylan for our second video conference interview and tarot reading. The first round of interviews invigorated me with the sense of real connections happening between my old friends and myself. To get to have an in-depth conversation with them again just a few months later, it felt like maybe I was, for a short time, a significant part of their lives again. Dylan is once again the first up in this round of interviews.

We check in about how our summers went and what our teaching assignments are for the fall. It's August, so Dylan started school three weeks prior, and I start in about a week. We're both going to be part time this year. "Part time is good," Dylan says, describing the pros and cons of his situation. Then he pivots: "I'm still not super—I don't know." Dylan is still ambivalent.

So I actually applied to a different position. It's for a national organization and they do a lot of stuff with curriculum development in science. There's this guy who's been doing research about genetics education to high school students for a while focusing particularly on the ways that we teach it in ways that reinforce racist and sexist mindsets and students' thinking.[...] I just kind of threw it out there to see what would happen, but I would be shocked if I even got an interview. [...] I think part of the process for me is just trying different things out and putting feelers out there and seeing, does this feel like I would be really excited about it or I'd be sad about leaving teaching high school. And so

I'm just kind of starting that process to see what if I'm really feeling good about staying in teaching, if I really want to do something else.

I'm excited for Dylan, not because I want him to leave teaching, but because I'm seeing movement out of a stagnant ambivalence and into an attitude of experimentation with his teacher identity and how it translates into his career. I link this new event with our last conversation:

I'm not surprised with you applying for this other job or you having that thought, "I don't want to be doing this exact thing for the rest of my career," based on our discussion last time. We were moving towards that a little bit, almost.

Dylan seems surprised, "What stood out about what we talked about that made you think that way?" and it's funny to me how memory works.

I remember you were talking about that tech position that you had been interested in and had done a little bit of. So that was one thing, and you were kind of wrestling with feeling of, here's what's good about being in the classroom, but these are all the things that are challenging about it, and are these the challenges I want to face every day, or would I be happier in a job where there were different kinds of challenges? You talked about how teaching has all of these routines and in some ways you see the product at the end but that so much of the time is just, take the test, next time, next thing. Whereas, if you're doing curriculum development or something, there's a product at the end that you can put on your CV and you can market it or share it with people and say, I made this thing. I'm sure I'm elaborating in different ways because it was a long time ago, but that's kind of how I remember it.

I remember these things clearly because I was primed to hear them, through the nature of the project, my own ambivalent experiments in teacher identity, and of course the focused act of

transcribing the first round of interviews. Dylan admits, “You remember more specifics about that conversation than I do.” We talk for awhile about memory and strange ways it can act. I tell him about some of the other ways memory has affected the project, particularly how memories of my time as a student in high school and university, back when the participants and I spent a lot of time together seem to infiltrate the project. I tell him a silly story about searching for a conversation in an interview’s transcript that instead had happened ten years ago. We talk about the emotional weight of such memories, and how the persistent “burden of feeling” (Lewkowich, 2013) is often palpable but hard to articulate in words. I bring up as an example how a play I saw in university left me speechless and my gratitude to the friend I’d seen it with for walking home with me in silence rather than trying to unpack it. This anecdotal banter doesn’t seem to have much to do with teacher identity or the project, but when I later read over the transcript of my storytelling, I get a sense of reverence for the memories I’ve shared, and I have a hard time knowing what to do with them. They don’t “fit” the project, but I want them to be treasured, not left on the cutting room floor. Lewkowich (2013) writes about the way that telling seemingly insignificant stories is a way of “working creatively with the uncanny, even as it does its work on us” (p. 82). I’m reminded of the way keeping a journal or a notebook saves up trivial memories like these and turns them into a physical form, a keepsake. Such practices highlight the value of the mundane. Perhaps reminiscing with old friends, sharing insignificant stories back and forth, has a similar function. In terms of what the stuff of our teacher identity is made of, it seems to me it is “forever populated by multiple species of memories, both meaning-full and meaning-less, interpretative terms whose suffixes remain threateningly ambivalent and disturbingly variable” (Lewkowich, 2013, p. 81). These insignificant stories point to the multitude of beings inhabiting this thing called “my teacher identity” over space and time.

Back to my conversation with Dylan, we segue into discussing my current teaching role (clearly, we've diverged from an interview format, and are just talking, as friends do, at this point) "So it's your first year with grade six," Dylan confirms. I let my thoughts meander as I reply:

Yeah, but I'm excited about it, I think. I love grade sevens at the beginning of the year, but I can't stand them by the end. Which makes sense because I was a horrible kid at that age. I wasn't really getting into that much trouble or anything but I was at my worst in grade seven and grade eight. So I just recognise my bratty self in them.

Dylan's response inadvertently points again to the key relationship these stories I'm telling have to my conception of myself: "I have no memory of you that way and so that's interesting to have you think of yourself that way."

I was a know-it-all. I remember my grade seven English teacher. I was like, this is my favourite subject and you suck at teaching it. I didn't say that, but that was my attitude toward it. He was pretty good about it; he would deal with me by giving me his professional letters he was writing and having me proofread them, things like that. That was smart. And then I remember Miss [B] and being kind of, we were kind of brutal to her. I don't know if you remember that we had that day where we all hid in the cupboards, and then—

Dylan interjects with a balancing perspective, one that incorporates his experience as a teacher into his interpretation of past events, "I also remember that her reaction to a lot of the things were not what I would have done."

"She was very reactive."

"Yeah. And that there was not a lot of effort on her part to adjust to the class was my

impression of her.”

Citing Britzman (2011), Lewkowich (2013) names memories like these *fossils* because when they surface, they have transformed, “as paleontologists burden through layers of dust to extract hidden kernels of value” (p. 68). Yet, these fossils are valuable only because they have changed, since to become preserved, their innate makeup must be converted into stone. Memories which meant very different at the time come to mean something else in the future through a process of “self-translation, detranslation and retranslation” (de Laurentis, as cited in Lewkowich, 2013, p. 81).

For me, these middle school memories are ones that pop up uninvited fairly regularly, but for Dylan, they’re less familiar. He reflects on this.

Wow, that's really interesting to go back to. I haven't really thought about some of those specifics in a long time. And it's interesting because you're probably not around anyone you would have known in middle school or high school. Whereas, I went to the dunes with [an old friend of ours] and her husband and their daughter last weekend. We see them on a somewhat regular basis. And so there's this really interesting mix of people now that we've met since we've lived here and that we knew from when we were in college, and a couple that I knew from high school, and it's an overlap of all these different parts of my identity and phases of my life. Layered on top of one another.

I’ve definitely thought about this before, and so I continue to build on Dylan’s ideas.

I think that's so interesting. And like you can integrate those parts of your life in a way that I cannot because my early childhood was in Florida, my grade school years were in the midwest, my university years were in eastern Canada, and my adult life has been in western Canada, and like none of the people overlap except for Lola and [another

friend who was from my hometown and went to the same university]. And [my husband] because I met him there. So they're not integrated at all. I have very vivid dreams, and they're mostly about high school, and a little bit about university. It's kind of like this alternative timeline of my life. They are so vivid that sometimes I'll be confused about what happened in real life and is a memory and what was a dream. It feels like an alternate timeline. [...] It's just making me think about how I have no way of integrating these parts of my life. And making sense of them together, whereas I feel like you can remember [our friend] as a kid, and like have those memories of her but you've also seen her grow up and become the person she is now. And that certain things might be different and certain things might be the same. And that's normal. Whereas for me, I can imagine what she's like now, and I can think, well I changed in these ways, so I assume she also became more mature and whatever, but not really.

It feels good to tell Dylan about these struggles to integrate these parts of my life, like a kind of confession. He mirrors back what I'm saying, "But it's still imagining, like you're not actually witnessing," and it feels sad to me. I push past this feeling into an optimistic and gratitude-filled connection to the present moment:

This project has been kind of interesting, like integration, but also an experience, and trying to understand someone who I knew ten years ago, and I can imagine what you're like now as an adult, but exactly what you just said, I may not be accurate. And I can interact with you for an hour now and it's awesome. And I do feel like I get a sense of you. And I'm also putting things into the conversation from years ago and my imagining of you now too.

I think Dylan senses that sadness too, though, because he says,

Sure. Yeah, I was really bummed to not be here in [our hometown] when you were here this summer, particularly because I feel like that's kind of how we've interacted for the past ten years or so. You know, you get an hour at a time. Then it's a couple months or a year and, and that's hard with someone you have a really good friendship with. And then, that so much of a friendship is just having experiences together. So when you don't get to have experiences together, and it's just like crashing in to contact again every now and again, you know, are you are you basing the friendship off of who you were before, or do you try and like catch up every time so that you can do that again or you just accept the thing. And it's almost something to mourn when you can't continue them the same way that you were able to before. So all that to say that it's been fun to see you a couple of times.

The word mourning is part of a constellation of concepts for me—loss, depression, reparation, creativity, learning, art... and so I seek out my copy of *Psychoanalysis and Art: Kleinian Perspectives* (Gosso, 2004) to see what connections can be made. But I put it away, because I know, without looking (I've interpellated these theories in my efforts to make sense of my own depression and its relationship to my teacher identity), that I'm seeking out some kind of insight into the healthy depressive position in which loss is repaired through the reconstructive process of learning by rebuilding from the rubble of the world fallen down around you. Learning not only changes your perception of things, but changes you. I not only know this process from reading about it, but from going through it, self-consciously, over and over. I know it by heart. This project itself is an intentional means of reparation, coming out of my own crisis of teacher identity. What is happening here with Dylan is a part of that reparation, this piece-by-piece look at how long-past memories of my own schooling and teachers, my relationships, my memories,

my dreams, and anxieties are the rubble from which my constantly changing, every-day-new sense of teacher identity is being formed.

How precious for Dylan and I to be able to share this process, not only of teacher identity formation, because as we have seen that not-so-simple term is itself only a small part of the entanglement of beings that we are. And in the Venn diagram of Dylan and myself, we share more than teacher identity. We also talk of parenthood, marriage, hobbies, and friendship. Our well of shared relationships is deep, which makes our conversations generative as a means of reparation.

Dylan's Second Reading: Embrace, Accept, Let Go



Figure 2

NINE OF RODS. Strength and readiness to meet opposition boldly. A victory after a struggle.
TWO OF RODS. Though power and dominion are within one's grasp—still one is forlorn.
SIX OF SWORDS. A smooth passage from difficulties.

—Morgan-Greer Tarot

I wanted our second reading to focus on the present, which is why I chose the layout “embrace, accept, and let go.” In this spread, each position represents your relationship with something in your life, possibly something in your teacher identity more specifically. In the embrace position, Dylan drew the Nine of Wands. This card is about meeting conflict boldly, or on the flipside, experiencing indecision. Dylan associates it with his decision of whether to stay in teaching or not:

What’s at the forefront of my mind is about teaching and whether or not to keep doing it. What makes me nervous about not teaching is that there’s a lot of stuff that I know works well for it, and it’s safe at this point. The adversity piece, or that indecision—Do you stay with something that works or do you try and find something that might be better but could be worse?—That’s hard for me to make that kind of a jump to embracing—either embrace that struggle or embrace the possibility that something else could also be a good thing.

Dylan is testing the waters of thinking about careers other than teaching, and I love where he’s heading when he starts to wonder about embracing possibilities of something *other*. I don’t want him to feel stuck anymore.

As I write now, I wonder about the different trajectories Dylan’s and my teaching paths take, because—spoiler—he ends up getting that curriculum development job, and I remain a teacher, though not for lack of applying to other jobs myself. He is able to make the jump to embracing “something else” and maintain his conception of teacher identity as something that is not him, to end his relationship with teaching, at least for the time being (although teaching remains close by in his role as a curriculum developer, of course). From my perspective, Dylan barely had time to embrace the struggle of (not) being a teacher because the struggle only lasted

a few months, between the first interview and the second. But this is unfair, since Dylan's relationship with teaching started years ago, and I cannot know how long the seeds of ambivalence were germinating before they sprouted. In the several years I've had to waffle around in ambivalence about teaching through various circumstances that have kept me one-foot-in/one-foot-out of the role as a teacher on medical leave, a teacher on parental leave, a teacher-grad student-researcher, a teacher looking for other jobs, and a part time teacher, I've had plenty of time to get comfortable with the contradictory realities of (not) being a teacher. I wonder if getting comfortable with struggles over identity is ever a thing people choose to do, or whether it's something you're forced into by circumstance. But with Dylan, in the moment, I riff on his hopes for something else:

Embrace the possibilities within change. Embracing the idea that classroom teaching is one part of your identity. There are parts of your identity you can like put to the forefront sometimes and ones that you can like let go on the sidelines, you know sit out for a round.

I'm playing around with ideas we'd talked about in our last interview, of his jumper card, the Knight of Cups, and how Dylan might be able to see his identity as having different players, that he doesn't always have to put some one-and-only authentic self forward. Identity as a team sport. This suggestion clashes with the idea of the teacher as an all-encompassing role you must devote your whole self to, however, and Dylan picks up on that.

Ever since I started, I felt like this was something that I could do. And in talking with a lot of people and reading teacher testimonials who are like, This is what I wanted to do, this is who I am, I feel like this is the job that I want to be doing, and I love seeing my kids every day. And that's not necessarily the case for me. And I know that I don't need to

feel that way to stay with teaching. I don't need to feel that way to be a good teacher. But it does make me wonder, is there a different job that I would feel that way about? That I would love, that is just really life giving. While it's tiring, and I'd rather just be at home than go to work, this thing still makes me really excited. And yeah, teaching is definitely a thing that I can do. But I wonder if I'm losing steam, sometimes. So embracing. I guess back to embracing the possibility that there are other things out there that I could also be good at and also enjoy.

This card and Dylan's response to it brings Jamie Owl to mind again, and Britzman's (2003) position that "the problem is that the available discourse provides Jamie with a language to describe herself to herself in times of relative stability [but] does not provide her with a language that can deal with contradictory realities" (p. 102). For Dylan, he's forced to think that if he can't entirely fulfill the role of a teacher, he shouldn't be in that role at all. Dylan's mentioning of teacher testimonials reminds me of the way some people are seemingly "born again" as a teacher, all in, no doubts. And I'm jealous of that ability to make things so black and white, cut and dry, so simple and so pure.

Sometimes when people talk about being in love, it's like, is this really love or am I settling? That's kind of how it feels like with a vocation like teaching, that some people are head-over-heels in love with teaching. And I'm like, well, I don't know if I feel that way about it, but also, how much of that is a myth, or is that just not the kind of love or passion for a job that I will ever have. Are my passions more for my family or my hobbies or my faith or whatever is your other thing, and teaching gives me the opportunity to embrace those other parts of my life. And gives balance to my life and money in my pocket.

If I look now at teacher identity more as a relationship between the other parts of myself and teaching, what kind of a relationship am I willing to commit to? And if I am willing to go all the way, to what another teacher participant called her *allegiance to teaching as her soul's work*, there are still an uncountable number of ways to look at that marriage. Like marriage advice, I think whatever perspective I take, it must be one that aligns with my overall philosophical worldview, and I wonder what I could learn even from my own marriage that could apply to my teaching, if taken as an analogy.

The next card we draw is supposed to represent what Dylan should *accept*. Dylan jokes as we prepare to choose this card, "I feel like I'm accepting teaching right now." I shuffle the cards and Dylan draws the Two of Wands. We describe the card's imagery of the orb and the hands, and the themes of spirit and duality/balance that this card portrays. We read the Morgan Greer interpretation, which emphasizes an opportunity for power and domination, but a lingering feeling of forlornness. We admit we're both uncomfortable with words like "dominance," so we brainstorm related words we like more: control, autonomy, agency, empowerment. I ask him what he feels like needs acceptance in his life right now, related to what this card represents. He talks about accepting a lack of control he has in his life right now as a parent and as his body ages. I'm not worried about this inversion of the card's meaning—it's whatever it brings to mind for him that is important.

I'm thinking about this card in terms of it being a Wand, a card of identity and spirit, and how there is often a struggle or binary in trying to get ahold of myself and figure out who I am, what works for me, what routines are best for me. And then things change, right? And then you're scrambling. In psychoanalysis, [Klein] talks about mourning the structures that you've built around you when they fall down. You're building your identity

and your routines and your world and your worldview. And then something happens, something changes, and how you see someone else, or how you see how the world works or whatever changes, and you have to deal with the rubble that you're in and so it's your job then to rebuild a new structure or fix a structure that you've had, or maybe just play in the rubble. Maybe it's a little bit of all of those things, but it's also a process of mourning and reparation, repairing, of all those things. I think about that task of identity formation. I've been really aware of it. As I grew up, and I think especially with depression, you know, I'd figure out a way to deal with my depression, and then it'd come again. Was it because I wasn't doing this one thing anymore that was working for awhile or was it inevitable? It comes down to how do you address change, or embrace it, or accept, it or whatever? So back to the card. There's how much you can control, but then there's also parts that are still forlorn. And I guess it's just making me think about how it's okay to be happy and sad at the same time. [...] Maybe that's where the "forlorn" part comes in, that you're like, I know this is all okay. And I accept that it's normal and healthy to be happy and sad at this time, or whatever opposing emotions you have. But then you're still forlorn about the fact that you're not one hundred percent in control.

Last, Dylan draws the Six of Swords for what he should be letting go of. The image on the card is an individual in a boat, facing forward toward the future, rowing away, signifying, the booklet says "a smooth passage from difficulties." I spitball off the Morgan Greer interpretation, mentioning that swords is the head suit (as opposed to heart, soul, or body):

That would make sense to me as letting go of overanalyzing everything. Knowledge and anxieties, cyclical thinking, those kinds of things. I mean, letting go of trying to make sense of teaching. Letting go of questions like, Is teaching perfect for me? Do I want to

be a teacher? Is this my calling? Letting go of that is something we could, I feel like both of us share the need to let go of that, and just do what we're doing in the moment, but also be open to changes, and embrace possibilities that could come up.

Dylan's interpretation focuses more on the future orientation of this card, and letting go of the past:

Yeah, there was a choice fifteen years ago about what career I wanted to go to. I chose this one and that was my choice at that point and I kind of believe that something else could have been a possibility, but now being at this point in my life, What then is still a choice?

My interpretation of this card held true for me, and Dylan's interpretation was true for him.

Dylan *did* have a smooth transition from difficulties, away from his struggle with teacher identity, because he got the job he applied for and is, as of this writing, loving it.

Loose Threads: (Not) a Conclusion

A conclusion wants to conclude, sum up, pare down a project to its most pithy and important parts. And so I try to imagine what that might look like here, even as I resist the idea of essentializing anything in this paper down to its supposedly intrinsic parts or making any over-generously universal remarks about how this project's work could be applied elsewhere. I have a few ideas to share, though, to be taken with a posthumanist grain of salt, given that this vignette provides only partial and imperfect understandings of Dylan and myself as teachers, and the two of us are in no way representative of any larger group of teachers.

The Surprise of Friendship

As I write this now, the thing that feels most valuable about this project is the impact that preexisting friendships had on the conversations—interviews and readings—that took place, with

Dylan and with the other teacher/friends not described in this piece. Talking with them about teaching was like reading a poem with infinite allusions to deeply formative personal experiences in every line. I was able to reflect on my friends and my own teaching (and lives otherwise) in a way I had not anticipated. While I said in my introduction that I had no intention of suggesting that tarot be picked up as a common research technique, and I stick to that, I would wholeheartedly encourage researchers who are looking for ways to produce thick, narrative, autobiographical texts to consider working with longterm friends if possible. While I have found some examples of educational research with interests in incorporating friendship into research projects (Appleget, et al., 2020; Blake & Gibbon, 2021; Salazar, 2021), I have not yet had success finding examples of research projects conducted with friendships of twenty-plus years, likely because mine was a fairly unique situation in which I have a wealth of longtime friends whom I have had little chance to connect with over the past fifteen years and are now teachers.

Researching with friends produces a certain quality of data. It also requires a certain kind of ethic. Tillman-Healy (2003) writes about this ethic in her work on friendship-as-method.

Friendship as method goes beyond the ethics board's requirements for research approval:

Perhaps the most important aspect of this methodology is that we research with an ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love. Friendship as method is neither a program nor a guise strategically aimed at gaining further access. It is a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project. [...] We consider our participants an audience (see Ellis, 1995) and struggle to write both honestly and empathically for them. We lay ourselves on the line, going virtually anywhere, doing almost anything, pushing to the furthest reaches of our being. We never ask more of participants than we are willing to give. Friendship as method demands

radical reciprocity, a move from studying “them” to studying *us*. (Tillman-Healy, 2003)

According to participants like Dylan, there were significant ways this project improved some of my friends’ lives: most dramatically, two of them (Dylan and another friend whose interview is not shared in this thesis) chose to leave teaching in the midst of interviews, both sharing that our discussions played some part in that decision—a decision they were pleased with. Participants more generally expressed gratitude for time and space to talk with a friend about their career and identity. The phrase “this was fun” came up a lot. There are things that emerged during interviews I have chosen not to share—things they said or I inferred—that I don’t talk about in this thesis because my friends and those friendships are more important to me than whatever research value those details might have had, because those omitted ideas are not part of the story of *us*. Ultimately, conducting these interviews and tarot readings, as well as writing Dylan’s vignette, has been a practice of studying a friendship and its overlapping teacher identities much more so than studying a certain participant’s identity as a teacher.

Tarot Reading as a Transitional Space

Learning takes place when we’re introduced to something new and give it a chance to change us. Hosting the tarot readings in this project was my attempt at introducing some new idea of self to my teacher friends and facilitating, in the name of the posthumanist research-creation event, a space of learning amongst us all in which we could feel comfortable and free to experiment and play with new ideas of self. Winnicott (1989) and Ellsworth (2005) describe such places of learning as *transitional space*. For Winnicott, a psychoanalyst, the mother provides this space for the child; she is a safe anchor from which the child can venture out into the unfamiliar and then return to orient themselves. Ellsworth focuses her discussion on architecture’s ability to provide these spaces to us in places such as museums. For both of them,

these external spaces enable internal change within us: “inner transition is made possible only when we dare to move into relation with the outside worlds of things, other people, environments, and events” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 30). It is the relational aspect of the tarot reading and its ability to provide the reader and querent opportunities to explore both connectedness and separateness, consider interpretations of “me” and “not-me,” and experiment with those very labels that makes tarot reading a transitional space.

Tarot can provide a space that is both/neither inner or outer because of its semiotic significance: the cards are physical, material things outside of ourselves, yet they represent events, feelings and identities within us. The tarot signs reside in a liminal, third space through which they can travel back and forth as the reader and querent wonder, *is this me or not me?* Through its status as transitional space, tarot reading can disrupt our sense of past, present, and future identities because it literally shuffles the cards of how we look at events and definitions. As we conduct a reading, we are making and remaking the meaning of what was before, what no longer is, and what will be. Like Ellsworth, I see the transitional spaces of research-creation events such as tarot readings as opportunities for “interactive openness” wherein “change itself can then be seen as something other than opposition” (2005, p. 34). Research-creation events are opportunities to “Shape God.”

Identity in the Ruins

Haraway (2016) uses the imagery of compost to represent a posthuman way of living and telling stories that value a non-hierarchical or teleological view of kinship and abundance. In a garden, the compost pile is a place of intermingled death and life, of surprising relationships and constant, if hidden, change. While Haraway’s (2016) writing progresses to using this metaphor as a premise for science fictional speculation on what kinship independent from reproduction

could look like—“Make kin not babies” (p. 137)—I also see a beautiful usefulness in the analogy, like the metaphor of fermentation that I used in this project’s introduction, for identity. Identity as compost allows us to consider “how to live in the ruins that [are] still inhabited, with ghosts and with the living too” (Haraway, 2016, p. 138). The identities we construct are strung up between past experiences and images and future hopes and possibilities. It’s not a matter of defining our position apart from these specters. And yet, if identity is an entanglement of relationships shaped by Eros, past and future, it would be nice to identify ways to mediate this mess when it feels overwhelming. Haraway suggests that we focus on “cultivating the capacity to reimagine wealth, learn practical healing rather than wholeness, and stitch together improbable collaborations without worrying overmuch about conventional ontological kinds” (2016, p. 136). How can we reimagine what is valuable to our teaching identities, heal our teacher-self relationship without requiring wholeness, and approach teacher identity with new ways of connecting and being? These queries require further exploration.

Arguably, I consider one outcome of this project—or perhaps continuation of it—as having something to do with this task. An unexpected delight and “improbable collaboration” that came out of my interviews has been a new sense of excitement toward making plans with these friends in the future. With Dylan in particular, we both expressed feelings during his interviews about how long distance friendships based solely on infrequent catch-up conversations are not our cup of tea. *Doing something together*, i.e., reading tarot as part of a research-creation event was much more valuable to us in terms of our friendship. So we’ve recently decided to have a semi-regular games night with another old high school friend and participant in this project over videoconference. The game we have in mind, Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), is a collaborative adventure roleplaying game, and so we imagine it will have a

similar feeling of accomplishment and memory-building built into it. In my experience, improvisational roleplaying grants opportunities to explore identity through its use of creative, self-conscious performance. Since this game night is linked so tightly to this project, it is likely that the curiosity I followed throughout this project will make its way next into this game, and thus, my exploration of identity will continue, in a somewhat tangential manner.

Loveless (2019) states that “Research-creation, as an emergent, ethico-erotic form, allows us to tell new stories in new ways in the university landscape—stories that demand, in turn, new research literacies and outputs, modes of assessment and accountability, and new pedagogical modalities” (p. 28). Perhaps playing D&D with teacher-friends, as a response to this project that highlights its emphasis on long term relationships and shared meaning-making experiences as a mode of teacher education, is a new form of research output? What if research output is not about an end report or published paper, but about the impact it has on the lives of those people involved?

Reading Myself Through Reading Others

It is impossible to be sure what I would have come to understand about my teacher identity had I not taken up this project. The experimental aim of the project, to look at teacher identity in a new way, *feels* successful, which is enough to satisfy me. There were moments of delight as I recognized patterns in the cards that resonated with my experience (even when I was reading for others), that gave words to my experience in the way a poem or a novel might. Whether this new knowledge was pulled from my unconscious or pieced together from the fragments of discourses that forever surround us, surely, “Without a phantasy of knowledge, without that motivating fiction, and without an admission of something on the tip of one’s tongue, with what one almost said, there is hardly a way to enter into mental worlds” (Britzman,

2006, p. 18). In order to play with my identity as (not) a teacher (and perhaps befriend it), I needed a game to play with it, a toy we could share.

I will not argue that the tarot gave me a more “accurate” view of my life, but that was never my intention, for “Poststructuralism disturbs the ethnographer’s confidence in “knowing” experience or in possessing the writerly power to do anything but else but borrow discourses and tack them onto other discourses” (Britzman, 2003, p. 247). When we read tarot, remembering all the while that tarot is a fiction, it loosens our grip on the teacher images we cling to as markers of our selves. In this experiment, tarot became an object that playfully mediates between different potential versions of my teacher identity so that I might ponder them and choose to accept or resist them. It presents alternative selves that disturb and delight, and it encourages the use of other ways of knowing, such as intuition and the senses, to experience feelings of joy as a self, the making and in relation.

It often seems like identity is built up and torn down in cycles of love and grief—at least that’s how we often interpret it—and that interpretation can be helpful in dealing with the emotions that come with those cycles. Through this project, I’ve come to more clearly see identity as always already in a state of flux, flow, entanglement, growth, decay, play... and I have been able to reach a place of detachment about that. I can participate in the game, I can *shape God*, but, well, it’s God who’s in control after all, isn’t it? This detachment has allowed me to experience change, and the *God who is Change*, with a sense of harmony rather than struggle, a dance, not a fight. In the narrative of identity, these metaphors matter.

As I work with this piece of writing now, rearranging and revising, adding and subtracting to shape a good-enough story to share with you, reader, the dance continues. What I mean is, I got a new job. Yes! After a few months of low-key jealousy for Dylan’s new position,

I was offered and accepted a new position as a curriculum consultant. Since I haven't started it yet, I can't say much except that I expect it to be different, and that's exciting. The title "curriculum consultant" comes with fewer cultural stereotypes and identity markers than the title "teacher" does. That alone makes me think it will be easier to see myself as relational to my job rather than identical to it. Along with that hope, I come prepared with a bag of tricks of my own to resist such a trap.

Playing Tricks

Speaking of tricks, one archetype that no one tarot card represents perfectly is the trickster. Trickster figures can be helpful when approaching teacher identity because tricksters "break, bend, and remold the structures and identities (including personal identities) that hold a society together" (Garrison, 2009, p. 67). They blend fantasy and reality in ways that have us questioning everything we thought we knew, as they make the world fresh and magical with a flourish of their cloak. The mythology of the world-creating trickster may help the teacher in her efforts to mediate between her own inner and outer worlds, between cultural myths and unconscious fantasies of identity. Moreover, tricksters have fun doing it, savoring the "playful delight of floating fiction in the face of stern reality" (Hyde, 2010, p. 108). For once you know that the rules are just rules, and the man is just the man, why not make a game of playing the system? From the beginning, I infused this work with playfulness, fun, and laughter. And so it should be. Often associated with the feminine and thus dismissed, that which makes our lives joyful is worthy of attention. By choosing edu-crafting as a methodology in order to prioritize play, I did not negate meaning, but created a both/and relationship that electrified the tension between play and meaning.

Ellsworth describes learning as beyond the kind of utopia that functions as a blueprint, because learning cannot be anticipated, cannot be fixed. Other scholars (Gordon, 2004; Cvetkovich, 2012; Levitas, 2013, Cooper, 2013) define a kind of utopia Ellsworth would surely appreciate, in which utopia functions as “the expression of the desire for a better way of being[...] a (sometimes) secularized version of the spiritual quest to understand who we are, why we are here and how we connect with each other” (Levitas, 2013, p. 12). Introducing utopia as *method*, Levitas argues for a conceptualization of utopia as “the attempt not just to imagine, but to make, the world otherwise” (xiii). We can do this through research-creation events such as tarot readings. In my project, I am looking for a way to make life, as a teacher or not, more liveable, seeking out pockets of utopia in everyday life. Not an impossible utopia, but one that is grounded in the present. One that recognizes that “Staying alive is a practice and not just a momentary feeling” (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 206). My tarot experiment, like Ellsworth’s anomalous places of learning and St. Pierre and Pillow’s limit-work, is not a search that expects to teleologically end in perfection, but an ontological search that supposes that to discover different ways of being, we might need to look in different ways. Approaching teacher identity in a playful manner through tarot reading was not just meant to be a respite from the mundanity of traditional research methods. It has been a radical, utopian move.

In this project, I was aiming for my own kind of *jouissance* (Sumara, 1996, citing Barthes, 1975): a playful eroticism, a joyful and utopic pleasure, and a taking in. *Taking in*: an act of hospitality, exquisite attention, a trick. By taking us in, the trickster does not just create knowledge, she creates worlds—worlds of friendships rekindled, a thesis written, a new job begun. It feels like a delightful trick has been played, and I had some part in shaping it. This is enough.

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