



***NAVIGATING CONVERSION: AN ARTS-BASED INQUIRY  
INTO THE CLOTHED BODY AND IDENTITY***

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**Abstract**

Rooted in habitus, clothing reflects a sense of self through visual identification with gender, religion, culture, and ethnic identity. The clothed body is a mediator of social and physical capital. In this case study presented via arts-based forms, I focus on challenges and agency experienced through the habitus of attire in the lived experiences of a Christian Caribbean sports-woman, aesthetician, and trophy wife living in Canada, who, after divorce and re-marriage, converted to Islam. The malleability of habitus in shifting identities through life changing events such as marriage, re-marriage, and religious conversion is wrought with seemingly ironclad societal aversion that cloaks offspring as well as self.

*Keywords: arts-based research, identity, social theory, body, clothing, habitus, religious conversion*

**Lived Experiences of the Body and Clothing Contextualized  
in and through Habitus**

This case study is situated in scholarship on the aesthetics of youth culture (Coupland, 1991; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Ulrich, 2003) through arts-based research (Blaikie, 2009, Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008; Cole & Knowles, 2008), and the theoretical lens of social theory on the body and clothing (Braziel, 2001; Butler, 1993, 1999; Davis, 1997; Keenan, 2001; Lurie, 1981). I focus on the habitus of attire to signal shifts in situated identity articulated through personal agency and challenges within social contexts. Through prose and artworks, I generate data for analysis, and also present in prose and artworks my interpretation of one woman's experiences surrounding the decision to wear the hijab and other Muslim attire.

Gemma<sup>1</sup> responded to a call that I posted at a university in Canada. I sought participants, aged 18 to 25 for a study on identity expressed through their selected attire. I selected Gemma for a study on habitus of the clothed body because she had embraced religious conversion, which embodied a concomitant overhaul of her ontological and visual identity<sup>2</sup>. Through prose and visual images, I narrate the challenges Gemma experienced as a model, trophy wife, and then, through re-marriage, religious conversion. I present the clothed body as a negotiated expression of self, that is, a cultural identity with the body and clothing as mediator (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001; Holliday & Hassard, 2001).

The study is informed by Bourdieu's (1985) conceptualization of the body as representative of social and physical capital, and Connell's (2002) argument that bodies are agents and objects of social process. The study raises issues of identity, culture, ethnicity and gender, and a sense of belonging to and with particular groups and with the world (Jackson, 2010). Our clothed accessorized bodies shape our interactions and engagement with ourselves and with one another, contextualized by places and spaces: We inhabit our bodies, our skins and our clothes just as we

1. The participant chose the pseudonym Gemma.

2. Although I argue that this participant emerged as "unique" as if this were an objective judgment, as Goodall (2000) states, the research topic chooses you. In this case, the topic is shifting identities, conversion, and the malleability of habitus (Wacquant, 2013).

inhabit places and spaces in felt and visceral ways. Through our clothed and accessorized bodies we un/consciously conceal and reveal who we are, creating and re-creating our identities, and, by extension, ourselves. As Lurie (1981) asserts in *The Language of Clothes*, we read very quickly from the clothed accessorized bodies of ourselves and others a sense of belonging, or not, within particular contexts. Our clothed accessorized bodies tell stories of situated dis/ordered subjectivities, expressing identities and values contextualized by time, space, place and specific events; revealing gender, social class, health, politics, religion, age, ethnicity, and cultural and sexual affiliation.

Extending this further, the managed, accessorized, clothed body is contextualized by habitus (Bourdieu, 1985; Wacquant, 2013). We are the gendered, socialized products of created lived experiences within family, school, and work environments, including culture, religion, and ethnicity. In habitus, via *transposability*, our choices, Wacquant argues, are pre-programmed. Transposability means that from early life, the ways in which we will live our lives is inscribed ontologically. From early childhood, our families and immediate social and cultural circles shape the ways in which live our lives. The ability to choose is compromised.

The broader concept of habitus is composed of cognitive, conative, and affective elements. Through these elements we construct lived connections with beloved objects, ideas, feelings, values, spaces, places, and people, resulting in a particular lived aesthetic expressed through context based taste choices. Through habitus children learn how to be and perform as human beings in the world, in relation to limitations and possibilities.

The function of habitus is, precisely, to restore to the agent a generative and unifying power, a constructive and classifying potency, while at the same time reminding us that this capacity to construct social reality, itself socially constructed, is not that of a transcendental subject but that of a socialized body, which engages in practice organizing principles that are socially constructed and acquired in the course of a social experience at once situated and dated. (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 24)

Wacquant (2013) argues that habitus is malleable; it is amenable to empirical inquiry. If it shifts in a significant way from situated roots, early life provides the lens for change and possible return, because in deep and often unconscious ways we are loyal to our roots. Habitus embraces carnality.

I am an artist-researcher. I embrace the lived lush and visceral experience of the embodied self as a resource for and not an impediment to my engagement in scholarship and creation. This is because we are all sentient beings “of flesh and blood, bound to a particular point in physical space and tied to a given moment in time” (Wacquant, 2013, p. 6). This is the context for my engagement in and with *arts-based educational research*.

### An Arts-based Inquiry into Navigating Conversion

Grounded in qualitative inquiry, arts-based educational research (ABER) draws from the idea that descriptive narrative<sup>3</sup> that includes the visual and performing arts as co-narratives articulated alongside and through research processes and findings is not just valid but a very rich and powerful form of knowledge production. ABER as methodology offers imaginative understandings and insights unique to particular art forms that are not typically affordable in statistical or descriptive forms of scholarship. Eisner’s work, from the emergence of ABER (Eisner, 1997) to recent scholarship (Eisner, 2008), has laid the groundwork for scholars who have developed ABER into various incarnations, including arts-informed research and a/r/tography. Arts-informed research is described as infusing “the processes and forms of the arts into scholarly work” (Cole, Neilsen, Knowles, & Luciani, 2004, p. 59), with the researcher-artist engaging in examination of the research question via art production alongside literature reviews and data collection such as interviews and observations. In a/r/tography (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2008), the researcher functions alongside participants as artist-researcher-teacher, working together by engaging in “living inquiry” in classroom

3. Descriptive narrative is rooted in the idea of writing as a method of inquiry, a “mode of telling about the social world” and a “way of knowing” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2007, p. 483).

settings wherein research projects focus on art production with a social justice agenda.<sup>4</sup> The synergy between individual and collective ways of knowing, understanding, and being are integral to ABER. Collecting, processing, and disseminating ideas are carried out through imaginative and creative expressions of new knowledge and understandings in interdisciplinary ways. Like all other forms of qualitative research, the goal of ABER, as Sullivan (2008) asserts, is to understand rather than to explain.

O'Donoghue (2013) cautions that art and research are not synonyms, asking whether we demand too much of art by expecting it to perform as research. I agree—art and research are discretely different. Typically, artists do not ask research questions, frame their art making in theoretical scholarly contexts and analyze visual “data” for interpretative presentations in order to understand phenomena. Yet the work of some contemporary artists reveals that intentions, characteristics and processes can be similar. Artist Sophie Calle does seek interpretation and understanding beyond art making (Calle, 2003). In *M'as-tu Vue*, Calle presents multiple research-creation projects in which she creates and simultaneously explores thinking about art and life through the lenses of numerous participants. For example, in the project *Psychological Assessment* (2003), Sophie asked artist and acquaintance Damien Hirst to send her a love letter. Receipt of the love letter was so powerful that Calle states she “forgot that the author was a virtual stranger” (p. 217).

The following year Damien asked me to interview him for the catalogue of his show at ICA. I wasn't free, but I replied that in his love letter he had managed to invent shared memories and tell me things I wanted to hear, so I was sure that he could also imagine the questions I would ask him. He played the game: The catalogue included a fictive interview. Twelve years later, it was my turn to ask Damien to interview me for the catalogue for my show at the Pompidou Center. In response he sent me three forms, T4-02, 02-4T and U4-M-E, which were to be filled in, respectively, by me, a friend, and someone from my family,

and returned. He would give them to psychiatrists so they could analyze my psychological profile. (p. 217)

Alfred Pacquement (2003) states in his preface to *M'as-tu Vue* that artists “have nonetheless capsized the rules, and by enlarging the scope of their praxis and activities, managed to turn initially quite distinct categories inside out” (p. 15). Calle, and other artists such as Judy Chicago and Fred Wilson, conduct research as part of the process for creating art. Within the broad context of purposes and processes, I view the words *create* and *research* as verbs that enact and perform the research question.

While this study is not a/r/tography (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2008) in that it is not cyclical community-based action-research or creative work in a classroom setting, it is a *living inquiry*. Cole and Knowles (2008) describe *living inquiry* as taking place when artists-researchers perform art making in and with intentional research motives for insights into something that is part of their way of being. Living inquiry provides rich, enhanced imaginative understandings of a topic of research in, through, and with artmaking. The purpose of the artworks produced is key—artworks cannot perform as illustrative musings in a/r/tography or ABER. The artwork must be exploratory and engage inquiry in order to provide deep understanding of the topic in sensory and embodied ways, processes that are not common in statistical or discourse analysis. The researcher-creator is the medium for expression of participants' lived experiences communicated through art forms and texts.

In composing this arts-based educational research essay, I present Gemma's words and visually document her lived experiences. My analysis is grounded in data that includes sketches, transcripts, photographs, field notes, and other primary sources. Through the creation of artworks, I am not just the living data collection instrument, I also participate with readers who engage with the art and prose presented here as interpretive co-creators.

Creation-performance and research direct the researcher-creator to focus on theorizing and art making by synthesizing method in praxis, as connected activities. In the research-creation inquiry process the researcher-creator is open to emergent and divergent possibilities. Validity is enhanced by the presence of the researcher-creator in relationship

4. In qualitative research a social justice agenda is implicit, because we examine, broadly, the nature of lived experience: The personal always is political (Nochlin, 1988), which is also a feminist perspective.

with and to the participant/s, framed and performed by and through these specific roles.

I began this study by identifying a central phenomenologically oriented question to guide and synthesize the scope and purpose of this study. I asked: *What is your lived experience of becoming a young adult through your changing body and clothing?* In the conversation with Gemma, the overarching research question was buttressed by supporting interview questions:

1. How do you dress to show what you value and believe?
2. How does age play a part in how you dress?
3. How do you reveal or conceal your cultures in the way you dress?
4. How does your hairstyle show others who you are, what you value, and how you see yourself?
5. How are clothes used to hide or reveal your body?
6. How is clothing used to manipulate others?
7. How is the body used to manipulate others?
8. How do accessories (jewelry, shoes, purses, sunglasses, hats and so on) play a role in creating your personal, social and visual identities?
9. How do people dress within specific (youth) subcultures?

My conversation with Gemma lasted for one and half hours. I read and re-read the transcript to allow ideas to emerge. During this process, I identified four elements: events, feelings, usage of specific words, and evocative imagery that Gemma's responses evoked in my mind. I circled phrases and words that were repeated or that seemed to be significant to the participant. In analyzing the transcript, I eliminated from the conversations words and phrases that I decided were irrelevant. Working from the skeletal frame of words and phrases remaining, I focused on creating a coherent, chronological poetic narrative in prose form. My aim was to arrive at my own sense of Gemma's way of being in the world. My goal in the poetical renderings was to sensate in readers an empathetic understanding of why Gemma changed her way of dressing, and how her clothes express her current ideology and position in the world. In

doing this work, I go beyond the territory of discourse about Gemma's visual identity into the arena of her lived experience as a human being, expressed through her accessorized clothed body. Like Prendergast and Leggo (2007), I am experimenting with prose, describing Gemma's lived experience, contextualized by a strong narrative element in which "practice situations are fluid," and we (a global we) are engaged constantly in situated reactions (Polkinghorne, 2010, p. 394).

I use italics in the prose when the participant is speaking—her text is taken directly from the transcripts. Instead of presenting the prose in disjointed bits and then analyzing and theorizing about discrete aspects of it, I present it as a whole, using footnotes to theorize, to connect creation-research-theory-context. As Polkinghorne (2010) states, "Narrative thinking is more closely attuned to expressing human experience than paradigmatic thinking" (p. 395). My approach to ABER is nested in narrative thinking.

I took photographs of the participant and manipulated them to create artworks. I enjoy working in a representative figurative way, so I avoided simply drawing from the photographs, which would violate Gemma's anonymity. I created collages, altering Gemma's features, but still maintaining her ethnicity and colouring, by selecting and re-assembling facial features that resembled Gemma's—for example, wide beautiful brown eyes, taken from images in magazines such as *National Geographic*. I created artworks using oils, watercolour pencil crayons, oil pastels, conté crayons, and mixed media. The artworks show a face that is "like" Gemma's, but the woman represented does not look like Gemma. There is a syrupy prettiness in the first drawing--Gemma is very pretty. The shape of the face and features presented here are entirely different; the clothes and accessories are the same. It was my intention that the feeling and way of being expressed by the real Gemma be captured here. As Cahnmann-Taylor (2008) states:

arts-based researchers do more than help us see an external reality that heretofore has gone unnoticed by *reading* images. They actively form a new visual reality by creating images. The visual is not just a tool for recording, analyzing or interpreting data; it has become a tool for creating data. The visual has

reached a new dimension. It has become *generative*. (p. 99)

I see artwork as a form of narrative: art tells stories. Unlike data from the world, visual art offers a way of understanding and experiencing the world. Both data and artworks are interpreted by engaging with the material. Looking involves deciphering, decoding, analyzing, understanding and making meaning framed by one's personal aesthetic sensibilities, rooted in habitus.

While I was creating the artworks for this study, and because Gemma has embraced Islam, I looked at Islamic art, focusing on the work of Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi.<sup>5</sup> His paintings feature flat shapes, strong patterning and linearity, which are typical characteristics of much Islamic art. I then decided to experiment with my artmaking by re-working the images deliberately using abstract shape, pattern, and line.

In presenting Gemma's story, my aim is for the prose and artworks to evoke a different experience in the reader, one that allows for an arts-based understanding of the human condition nested in the particular situated ways in which Gemma experiences, knows, and understands her world.

### Gemma

Your make up is beautiful  
 perfect<sup>6</sup>  
 your skin is smooth, warm, nut brown  
 your arched, plucked, shaped, dark eyebrows frame wide simmering light  
 olive eyes  
 symmetrical  
 your alluring full lips are creamy with gloss  
 you are sensual  
 and covered in a jeweled black hijab

5. <http://dynamicafrica.tumblr.com/post/39664899109/works-by-sudanese-artist-ibrahim-el-salahi> (Retrieved April 16th 2013)

6. Gemma is a qualified aesthetician, having worked in a Spa setting for two years.

### You say:

*I am Trinidadian and Venezuelan  
 Two very "naked" countries in the Caribbean  
 Everybody's very revealing there  
 At 13, I got into modeling; they liked my almond-shaped face  
 At 15, I was sports modeling  
 But on the runway they didn't want a woman's body, like mine  
 On the runway, the girls were  
 tall  
 thin  
 lean  
 long  
 sticks*

*Photos of me were unrecognizable, airbrushed'  
 I said "wow that's a nice photo," the secretary said, "That's you"  
 I was sickened  
 That's when I started hating the media*

*At 18 I was at college, studying aesthetics  
 I got a job in a Spa  
 I came out of my shy bubble doing massage, facials, manicures, pedicures,  
 We did radical stuff; infra-red body shaping  
 Skin sucked into a cup, fat cells melted and broken, excreted through urine  
 Our clients wanted permanent easy change  
 I grew tired of hearing people saying, "Oh this takes too long,"  
 'Cause you've gotta give up cheeseburgers too*

7. The Dove Soap "real beauty" campaign: <http://www.dove.us/Social-Mission/campaign-for-real-beauty.aspx> (retrieved February 13th, 2012) embraces women of all shapes, sizes and ages as beautiful. International concern about airbrushing is addressed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation here: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2010/09/20/con-airbrush-models.html>. Both the British and French governments are considering health warnings and/or disclaimers that identify the manipulation of photographs.

*On the Tyra Banks show there was a black girl<sup>8</sup> bleaching her skin as well as her baby's*

*In some African countries, people inject themselves with bleach  
Some die from it*

*But if I lightened my skin I'd look stupid, because of my features*

*I blame the media*

*Later, I got married*

*He wanted me to wear a string bikini, part naked, even shorter skirts  
sexy*

*I took care of myself*

*Everybody was saying, "You're his arm candy"*

*Friends said, "how come you're wearing stuff like that?"*

*He didn't like my look when I was pregnant, he said I was disgusting*

*He cheated on me*

*I would usually call him if I changed my hours at the Spa*

*I'd say "Oh, did you want me to pick this up before I come home?"*

*For some reason, one day, I figured I'm just gonna go home, I don't feel  
like calling, I came home early, feeling sick*

*And there,*

*lo and behold,*

*I caught him*

*In the act*

*That broke me*

*When I went into labour,*

*He didn't even come to the hospital*

*After the baby, he moved his mother in*

*I felt he violated my space*

*It didn't work*

*Every day his mother said "You're fat"*

*Her daughters are bulimic because of her*

*He wasn't even drop dead gorgeous*

*The marriage broke up*

*I was lost*

*I was jumping from this to that and whatever 'cause you know,  
you're still finding yourself, and how you want to show yourself to the  
world*

*Then, I met my partner*

*He's Muslim*

*Slowly, throughout the next few years, I changed how I dressed  
my skirts and sleeves got longer; I slowly got myself into it*

*For five years I didn't wear the hijab*

*Then, I put the hijab on, a year ago: I became Muslim*

*And I found a peace that I haven't found anywhere else*

*A peace and a respect in Islam*

*I found it there because the value of a woman is so high*

*I feel more peaceful wearing the hijab*

*It's a recommended choice*

*for modesty*

*I would continue wearing it if my relationship ended*

*Because we're not objects*

*The woman is looked at as something precious; they don't want her to  
over reveal*

*I learnt how to value myself more*

*I like dressing this way because I don't like the negative energy*

*Men*

*They're animals*

*Whistling, howling, hooting*

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8. Tyra's skin was like mine, gorgeous deep chocolate.

*My clothes cover  
I have no more harassment  
I am pretty, not sexy*

*Right now I am wearing a long skirt  
Boots  
A sweatshirt  
And the hijab  
It's tied down with jewels  
And long dangly earrings*

*The hijab gives away my identity  
As Muslim*

*I don't go outside without the hijab  
It's like putting my pants on*

*The hijab has a huge impact on how society accepts me  
I find negativity  
People at school ask me about my freedom  
Do I feel oppressed?*

*The first time I went to the Mall, it was very hard  
Big cities in Canada are fine  
In smaller cities, people are scared  
They shy away*

*They stare at me  
Like I don't have a soul*

*They say things out loud and amongst themselves  
I've heard "terrorist" and "oppression"<sup>9</sup>*

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9. Milani (2010), citing artist Hans Silvester writes: "An image of oneself can only be constructed through the eyes of others" (p. 1).

*Last Christmas break I had a mental breakdown and started crying  
I came from the store and balled  
I get this huge sense of rejection—dirty looks  
People move away from me  
So I feel like I committed social suicide by putting this hijab on*

*And I used to style my hair; do all kinds of stuff  
You get your hair really nice, and the hijab ruins it  
Covering the hair changes your appearance dramatically*

*But this is something I do for myself, I'm changing for me, this is right  
for me*

*At university I don't go to the Muslim Students Association; it's full of  
Africans  
And African students that wear the hijab don't like me at all  
'Cause my guy is African—he's Sudanese, and they're making up stories*

*Ruining my reputation*

*I see negativity coming from girls wearing the hijab; if you step back and  
watch, it's a war  
The girls in hijab show anger  
Just because we wear the hijab, doesn't mean we all like each other, you  
know?<sup>10</sup>  
There are culture wars; they only like people from their own country  
Arabs stick with the Arabs, Sudanese with Sudanese  
They're cliquey  
The Sudanese hate me  
So I don't go to mosque any more  
The women make it uncomfortable for me  
They make me the enemy*

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10. In photographing the nomadic people of Ethiopia, the Surma and Mursi, Milani (2010) writes that without mirrors, these people rely on the gaze, the social and visual responses of others to shape a sense of self, personal and social-political presence and identity with the group. The enacted gaze confirms acceptance or not.

*I am in love with the religion itself, but not the women*

*My family response is mixed*

*Mum accepts; dad is getting there*

*I miss the Christian faith tradition<sup>11</sup>*

*And my son in grade 2 is having trouble at school; They're*

*Bullying*

*Pushing*

*Hitting*

*He came home with bruises*

*It's because they see me...*

*I've changed his schools three times now*

*Islamic, Sudanese, and now he's at a public school, suffering*

*I was tempted to take off the hijab*

*for him*

*He's so docile, sweet*

*And me—I've abandoned my Caribbean identity*

*I have this new one: Muslim*

*And we're not supposed to be dancing, listening to music, they say it's*

*evil*

*But I still do it*

*It keeps me in touch with my personal culture<sup>12</sup>*

*With me*

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11. As stated earlier, although Wacquant (2013) claims that habitus is malleable, I believe we are loyal to our roots in deeply emotional ways.

12. Identity is a socially constructed phenomenon (Jackson, 2010, p. xxv). Like Bourdieu, Jackson contends that identities are rooted in the habitus of family life where they are co-created through ongoing shifting interactions. Jackson holds that everyone has "several social identities" (p. xxvii). Gemma's identity has shifted as a daughter, model, mother, trophy wife, divorcee, spouse, student, Canadian citizen of Trinidadian-Venezuelan ethnicity and Roman Catholic – Muslim.



Gemma 1. June 2013, oil pastel on oil paper.





Gemma 2. detail Watercolour and watercolour pencil on watercolour paper, July 2012



Gemma 2: detail Watercolour and watercolour pencil on watercolour paper, July 2012



Gemma 2. Watercolour and watercolour pencil on watercolour paper, July 2012



Gemma 3. Watercolour and watercolour pencils on watercolour paper, July 2012

### Reflection

The aim of working with and through prose and artworks in this study is to explore and provide understandings of the topic as arts-based educational research. I explore the broad theme of clothing as a mechanism (or not) for performing in various settings wherein one navigates identity and acceptance (Butler, 1993, 1999; Braziel & LeBesco, 2001; Lurie, 1981).

Gemma is not at ease. She has moved from pleasing her first husband (but not herself) by dressing as his *arm candy* to a faith conversion and significant identity shift as a result of her relationship with a new man. In navigating her conversion to Islam, clothing her body in formal female Muslim dress, Gemma creates a visual aesthetic and a particular socio-cultural-political relationship to and with the world and with other human beings that has not afforded her acceptance within former or new communities. Gemma is an outsider. She is “other” and “othered.” Yet, she is not a passive agent. Gemma enacts agency in how she relates to and with others based morally, as she puts it, in trying to be “a good person.”

Sleasman (2010) (based on the foundational work of Habermas) outlines three phases that characterize group acceptance. In Phase 1, individuality is eclipsed by the group; in Phase 2, the individual learns to play by the rules: Gemma enacts “implicit or explicit expectations and converts them to appropriate habits and actions” (p. 395). In Phase 3, the individual begins to feel accepted “by actively contributing to the common purpose of the group” (p. 395). Clearly not yet in Phase 3, and in spite of playing by the rules, Gemma is rejected by strangers who express hostility in public spaces, by women (only women) at mosque, and her son is tormented at school. In a sense, in the particular context within which she lives, she is marked by the hijab: Defined, placed, *boundaried*, and isolated. Her family has struggled with her conversion and it would seem that she does too, wondering about removing the hijab to unmark her son.

Eisner (2008) charges that case studies must be impactful by connecting the particular with experiences shared by others. For feminists, this is seeing the personal as political. In drawing attention to Gemma, the social and moral purpose of this case study is to enhance understanding of the human condition “through alternative processes and representational forms of inquiry ... (by infusing) ... the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts with the expansive possibilities of scholarly inquiry for the purposes of advancing knowledge” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). In this study Gemma has voice. Through prose and artworks as interpretive analysis, I seek to evoke

the empathy that is at the root of all qualitative research, including ABER (Eisner, 2008). As Prendergast and Leggo (2007) note, citing a reviewer of their work, “My ears have been blunted by political-speak and techno-education, so I look to the poets to redirect the course” (p. 1474). The impact of this arts-based educational research paradigm of scholarship as enacting aesthetic creative interpretation necessarily will be judged by audiences within and beyond the academy, including scholars and artists, with regard to its validity, coherence, authenticity, and the strength of its artistry and scholarship as media for the expression of ideas that are connected, and that serve to enhance understanding in compatible, connected and discrete ways through research-creation.

In the review process I was asked what meaning I found in the process of engaging in narrative and art making, and what I learnt “narrating Gemma through these artworks” (Reviewer comment, May 2013). This is an essential question that must be asked of all arts-based research. I aim to express visually Gemma’s gentleness, beauty, and sense of isolation. I aim for the prose to express in her own evocative words what her experience has been as a young woman, wife, and mother, attempting to navigate her identity in and through the expectations and demands of others, her sense of self and her mothering of her son. Gemma is sweet: Like many women, she aims to please. This is her strength but it is also a weakness. It is something I recognize in myself. In this there is always a loss of self that must be re-negotiated and re-claimed, and a concomitant sense of isolated searching and yearning for truth and authenticity. Situated in my own lived experiences, the desire always to ameliorate made it that much easier for me to channel Gemma: To express through and with her lived experiences as a young woman who has chosen to navigate numerous conversions. In our scholarship, we don’t choose our topics and our participants-- they choose us. Together we co-create new knowledge and new understandings.

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Fiona Blaikie received a Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia in 1992. She served as Director of the Joint Ph.D. Program in Educational Studies from 2003 to 2005. Currently, she is Dean of the Faculty of Education at Brock University and is a scholar with more than 100 published works. Through arts based research, Blaikie examines the aesthetics of scholarship and youth culture. Blaikie has received numerous awards for her service to art education in Canada. She is Past President of the Canadian Society for Education through Art, and an elected World Councilor on the Executive Board of the International Society for Education through Art.

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