

Oberg, A. and Wilson, T. (December 2002). *Side by Side: Being in Research Autobiographically*. *Educational Insights*, 7(2). [Available: [http://www.csci.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v07n02/contextualexplorations/wilson\\_oberg/](http://www.csci.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v07n02/contextualexplorations/wilson_oberg/)]

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## **Side by Side: Being in Research Autobiographically**

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This writing comes after months of the two of us exchanging autobiographical and analytical writings and reflecting on our relationships to those writings as researchers. In the process, we came to see how very differently we each relate to writing, autobiography, and research, and we have honored those differences in this paper by setting our two texts side by side. To write the article as one voice, we decided, would compromise our own voices and the topic of our writing itself, *being* in research autobiographically.

Antoinette: In constructing this paper, Teresa wrote first and I initially used her text as a prompt for constructing my own text. (Her text appears on the left and mine on the right.) However, as my text evolved, it took its own shape, dictated by the very process I was writing about: autobiographical research writing as a way of proceeding. Writing this paper I have been researching autobiographically.

Teresa: When I speak of being in research autobiographically, I am speaking primarily of writing, of the texture of my writing having undeniably autobiographical threads, and of my relation to writing as being central to the theorizing I do within an academic setting. By autobiographical, I mean my own lived experience, through writing, of those events, concepts, understandings, and questions that I keep returning to, even if I try to move away from them. My writing always brings me back to the same ground.

In spite of each of our texts having evolved its own integrity, we find their juxtaposition produces a myriad of possible connections on every page. We offer these texts as an occasion for a lively engagement by readers with issues of writing, research, and autobiography.

*Ethics of Writing: Writing To Tell*

Cixous (1991) talks about “coming to writing” as a coming through death, a tearing of the veil from her throat (p. 36). The ground of my own academic and autobiographical writing rests on a narrative, similar to Cixous’s, of writing as disclosure. Another ground of my writing I identify as intertextuality, the fact that the texture of my voice is woven out of others’ words using juxtaposition. This intertextual technique reminds me of interlacing in medieval manuscripts, in which intertwining threads form a design integral to the eye, yet the lines on the surface remain distinct. I am also reminded of the interlacing narratives in medieval romance, the topic of an earlier unfinished master’s thesis. I find it fascinating that, fifteen years later, these same themes and images are surfacing in my writing.



Detail from 11th Century Manuscript

The ethics of writing autobiographically as research emerges from the tension between these

*Autobiographical Research Writing As a Way of Proceeding*

“The only aim of writing is life” (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 6). Something resonates deep within me, and I seek to articulate my response. I notice that Deleuze did not say, “The only aim of writing is *understanding* life.” Instead, Deleuze adumbrates the connection between writing and life; understanding does not stand between the two. There is writing *before* understanding arrives and separates subject from object. Before separation of knower and known there are acts of knowing. Before definitions and categories take hold, there is writing and knowing. Before concepts and theory become dominant, modes of knowing other than the rational-cognitive have free play, and it is possible to proceed purposefully and productively without conventional notions of method.



Antoinette Alexander

My writing in this paper articulates a process of researching in this place where there is no conceptual map and no method that guarantee results. I rely on my own resources, proceeding autobiographically. Proceeding autobiographically in research means simply that my life is the site of articulation of an enduring

two observations about my writing: that the coming to writing is as a tearing of a veil from my throat, in other words, a liberation, and also that the writing is intertextual and, in autobiography, intersubjective, explicitly implicating other selves in its composition. The intersection of these two elements creates ethical dilemmas peculiar to using autobiographical narrative as or in research. By research, I mean the public realm of the spoken and written communication of ideas.

*I have described as “furtive” my own coming to the writing of autobiographical narrative (Email to A. Oberg, October 17, 2001). I define autobiographical narrative as a story composed out of the memory of my real life experiences, but done so from the viewpoint of a writer aware of writing as a craft. Both elements (personal writing and writing as a craft) give rise to furtiveness. I feel furtive as I engage in the writing of autobiographical narratives, when I ought to be (as I tell myself) doing more serious work. Awareness of boundaries separating personal from serious writing harkens back to my writing of English essays with a cloistered view for clarity of thought. Excised were purple prose, metaphor or personal allusions. The argument held dominion. The pleasure that I take in composing the texture of the writing likewise feels illicit. Inhabiting this world feels like an unwarranted escape from the world of academe, for the only explanation that I as writer provide for why the story is written this way rather than*

interest, the site where, through writing, my research topic takes shape. My life is not the eventual topic, nor is the eventual topic *in* my life in the usual sense of “contained” within it. However, the fact that the site is *my* life makes a difference. My life is not a neutral site; not just any topic configures in that site. Nor is my writing a neutral process that describes a topic that is already there. Rather the topic configures as it does through my writing. However, although the topic constellates from my life and through my writing, the topic is not particular only to my life. Paradoxically, the process of autobiographical research writing I describe here produces topics of general interest within the larger social/political context of life in general.

#### *Writing autobiographically as research*

Writing with neither conceptual map nor conventional method in a process, or way of proceeding, claimed to be research requires releasing oneself from the norms of standard research discourses that both presume and demand a separation between researcher and topic and a clear statement of topic before research can begin. One releases oneself into the flux of the hermeneutic circle (Caputo, 1987) where, by circling attentively around and around that which is closest and most familiar, it is possible to spin out into awareness of something more general. Heidegger called this paradoxical relationship between the particular and the general the paradox of proximity where that which is closest is a source of insight into a generality (Steiner, 1978, p. 27). The circularity of the movement is reminiscent of Kierkegaardian cycles of repetition that move forward by looking backwards at what has already happened (Caputo, 1987, p. 11). Hindsight revises the past and thereby produces a forward movement of new understanding, from which position hindsight revises the revised past in an unending series of re-visions that continuously move forward by looking backward. The distancing that affords a new perspective is

*any other way is contained in more words or different words, but not words about what I am narrating. Instead, I am remembering, and in allowing myself to write remembrance, I am permitting a learned facility with words to flow through skin and sense and not constraining the movement of words to what the “I” (as controlling author) wants to say. While in this place, I am writing to tell, not to know.*

At the same time as I am engaged in this furtive activity, I am aware that I am likely producing autobiographical narratives that will later be submitted to my detached scrutiny. That scrutiny does not feel furtive at all, but is saturated with purpose. It is in the interstices, the cracks, between my academic and autobiographical writings that, to borrow Grumet’s (1981) phrase, the light shines through. Remembrance cannot help but begin with an attachment to particular stories and a belief in the curative properties of not only “telling tales” (Grumet, 1988) but of telling *these* particular tales of family and formation, tales that often trespass on prohibitive topics like flesh and intimacy. *I am trying to pull on some pants, some stretchy pants, and they’re not budging, they’re refusing to climb over the hills and valleys and troughs of my skin, which buckles and folds, as first I attempt the improbable and then cold hands intervene, painfully wrenching, tugging, bloodless tears falling on unrepentant flesh. Flesh touching flesh. Fleshes flinching. I am being corseted and my prospects for marriage are becoming slimmer the more difficult it is to*

temporal distance rather than the illusion of separability of researcher and topic.

In this cyclical process of moving forward through revising and expanding understanding, the direction of movement is not dictated by fulfilling a goal. In research terms, it is important to note that the momentum that keeps the circle in motion does not come from a desire to produce a research topic, although a topic is eventually produced. Rather, the goal of the process is to keep the re-searching process going. In this process, the goal of writing is a living engagement, a statement which harks back to Deleuze’s (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 6) statement that the aim of writing is life.

I take up this process of a living engagement through writing by directing attention to a deep-seated, enduring interest. In its strong sense, *interest* means “that which we are in the middle of” from the Latin *inter esse*, “to be in the midst of.” Interest is the site in the flux of my life where my attention is riveted and I am passionately curious, where the flow of my life burbles over large or small obstructions, and, as in the physics of flow dynamics, spirals form, repeating the circular movement of the hermeneutic circle. The places where these spirals form are sites where, articulating my interest through writing, I carry understanding forward in cycles of repetition/revision. Staying in the place of perturbation and writing and rewriting intensifies the spiraling. Suddenly the spiral spins out into a larger orbit and a research topic of general interest takes shape.

In practical terms, articulating an enduring interest is putting into words what captivates my attention in those places of disruption in the flow where spirals form. In theoretical terms, articulating is a process of carrying forward understanding through writing in cycles of repetition/revision. The writing is structured not by conventions of academic writing, but by the imperative to write where the burbles are in

*find an appropriate pair of stretchy pants to fit me.* The alternative is to collude in their suppression. The experience of “telling tales” is one of disclosure, an act that implies exposing that which would otherwise remain hidden, as well as invisible and taken for granted. This feeling of vulnerability has been, for me, characteristic of all my writing, even of my academic writing, which feels like an unwarranted intrusion even while it craves the light of day.

I deliberately chose the word *tale* because, while on the one hand synonymous with *story*, it connotes a lie, something made up (Frye, 1976; Grumet, 1988). The particular connection of “telling tales” to writing research autobiographically is of challenging and transgressing prohibitions against, or at least deep reservations about, representation. It is not even only the disclosure of particular others that is at stake but the very act of disclosure itself, of excess, of traditionally invisible groups like women “being too much” (Munro, 1971) or “having already said too much” (A. Oberg, Email communication, December 1, 2001), that constitutes a potential act of betrayal against readers’ sensibilities and societies’ expectations of the proper subject matter of educational research.

The ethics of representation cuts across the life-affirming impulse to tear the veil from one’s throat and let words spill out untrammelled. After all, representation is about how persuasively

whatever form is least restrictive, which often turns out to be free writing. The primary requirements are the courage to go where the burbles are most persistent or rambunctious and to stay there with full attention. The temptation in a research process is to stop too soon and to impose the form of an impersonal research topic before the writing has built up enough momentum to make the leap of its own accord from the purely personal to the social/political. Paradoxically, the more deeply inward into my interest I follow the spiraling, the more forcefully it moves outward when the time comes.

Spiraling inward through an opening in the surface of the flow of life is hard work and the challenges are numerous. A brief listing includes maintaining the integrity of the spiraling process in the face of the time pressures that always accompany research projects; letting go of the frustration that arises when I think I’ve come far enough and then realize I haven’t; reopening the blockage that occurs when I allow my cognitive controller to have the upper hand; resisting the temptation to legitimize by injecting foreign material into the process, forgetting the lessons already learned about how imported concepts can lure my attention away from the spiral; checking my tendency to presume too much and thus say too little; and resisting my hesitation to reveal publicly a research process that occurs largely in the domain of the personal and is therefore occluded and dismissed in the dominant discourses of research methods. The resources for meeting these challenges lie within me and not in any methodological precepts.

Writing in the site of my own life is a research process without a conventional research method. The research writing I describe here depends instead on particular practices of engagement with an enduring interest. Practices develop over time (through practice) without expectation of perfection. One never culminates a practice; one only practices. One must accept the incremental, fragmented, unpredictable,

writers write, or so Geertz (1988) would claim. However, writing as responsible only to itself (to its own impulses and longing for integral design) is insufficient for writing as research, as a being in the world. “Bad writing,” says Maracle (1992), reproduces stereotypes, or perpetuates the lie that it is all right to take another’s words and put them for one’s own (p. 15). Writing autobiographical narratives as research also implies accepting responsibility for the fictions that I, as a writer, create through my thickets of words. This acknowledgment can exist within the curative properties of storytelling, by reconceiving the formerly autonomous “I.”

### *Intertextuality*

If what makes writing unimaginable is disclosure (Cixous, 1991), what makes writing imaginable is also disclosure. Within my writing, this act of appearance is based on an act of disappearance: *In writing I disappear so that I can appear differently and more . . . In writing I can move, I can fly, I can dance, I can play.* In disappearing into the writing, the “I” becomes identified with writing. If writing is thought of as the product of an author (Foucault, 1977), then the “I” is projected as remaining in control of the writing process. On the other hand, if the “I” rests on a fiction, then it is the texture of the writing, with all of its intertextual threads, that disperses the “I” into multiple selves, directions, and possibilities, as in Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of heteroglossia. The “I” becomes intersubjective. The “I” can finally move because it is not

unordered form associated with practicing this writing.

The particular practices of engagement that compose the process of research writing I am describing are opening to the unexpected, holding the intention to articulate an enduring interest, and paying attention. Opening refers to opening to the unexpected with more than the conscious rational mind. The mind’s desire for predictability and closure must be suspended, as must tendencies to judge what is happening in terms of criteria made available by conventional discourses of research methods. Holding refers to holding the intention to articulate an enduring interest even when the going gets rough, when the way becomes blocked, when the path gets slippery, when what seemed like a place of arrival turns out to be a cul-de-sac. Paying attention refers to paying attention to everything that happens as if it were related to my enduring interest. For example, overheard comments, books on seemingly unrelated topics, dreams, radio commentaries, casual conversations, among myriad other things, can reveal rich insights into the nature of a topic-becoming.

These practices of opening to the unexpected, holding an intention, and paying attention must be released from the control of the rational mind. In place of rational control are strategies for cultivating the modes of engagement (practices) of opening to the unexpected, holding an intention to focus on an enduring interest, and paying attention. An effective strategy for cultivating these three modes of engagement is writing informally and repeatedly about an enduring interest. This writing is not a method that leads to engagement. Rather, the writing *is* an act of engaging. In the act of writing I come forward in a state of not knowing, released from the usual requirement to know before writing, and thereby open to the unexpected. Thus writing without prescribed structure and goal about something that interests me deeply is a way of cultivating the ongoing

confined within a modernist, colonial, or parochial framework, but dispersed through words into a space filled with multiple voices. This is Greene's (1995) vision of public spaces in education in which we imagine ourselves differently by being open to plurality, or multiple voices and perspectives. Within my own writing, this intersubjective space occurs in the interstices between memory work and excavation while the intertextual texture of my writing comes through remembrance of things that I have read, heard, seen, and thought on.

*Method of Living/Working Autobiographically:  
Memory Work and Excavation*

The ground of my autobiographical narratives, their method, is their claim to truthfulness. The truthfulness relates to a grounding equally in memory as in nonmemory. Powerful sensations can serve to activate memory, as in Virginia Woolf's (1978) reminiscence of lying half asleep, half awake in the nursery with the sounds of waves breaking beyond a yellow blind. If life is a bowl that one "fills and fills and fills," she says, then her life finds its "base" in this memory (p. 75). Morrison (1987) calls evoked things "rememory," which Edgerton (1996) interprets as meaning that "sense of having been struck by a glimmering of recollection, of something that has happened but has since been long lost to consciousness" (p. 141). Woolf talks about how strong emotions leave traces and even though the specific details of incidents may seem to vanish, impressions

practices of opening to the unexpected, holding an intention to focus on an enduring interest, and paying attention that move the hermeneutic circle.

The process of writing and rewriting in the site of my life about an enduring interest is not only self-directing; it also produces a research topic of general interest beyond the life in which it is articulated. This movement from the personal to the social happens of its own accord, oftentimes taking the researcher by surprise. As in hermeneutic circling, realization comes in retrospect: I am suddenly aware that a topic has been articulated that has social relevance.

Writing this paper, I am doing what I am writing about. I began writing about my interest in my own autobiographical writing and, through writing and rewriting, produced an articulation of an autobiographical research process that has currency beyond my own life. The process of spiraling in the places of perturbation is eclipsed in the writing presented here, which shows a topic already having taken shape. Below I share some writing that affords a glimpse of writing producing a research topic near the time of the leap from the personal to the more-than-personal. This writing was done by a graduate student researcher in the midst of an autobiographical research writing process and is shared with her permission. My interpretation, based on eight months of reading excerpts of her writing, is inserted into her text, which is italicized. I shall call the student researcher J.

The interest on which J initially focused her research writing was her own position as an advocate within her profession of a policy adopted but not implemented to supplement a traditional model of service delivery with a community-based one. She was frustrated at the obvious lack of interest among her colleagues in this model of service to which she herself was fervently committed. She wrote about her desire to overcome the resistance she perceived among

remain, reattaching us to memory (p. 78). Many of my autobiographical narratives begin with outer landscapes semiotically inscribed with a meaning of inward significance, one to be worked out through autobiographical narrative writing, as in the following instance: *A sudden gust of wind tears a piece of paper from its nesting place and deposits it in the middle of the hallway floor. This happens as I'm beginning to compose words in my head about that scratchy sound of the branches. I turn slowly to look at the paper on the floor, and wonder idly where these words are coming from except it's too late and I dash to the computer.* It is the inner landscape that the writing—and writer—is really attending to, as in the following beginning to a narrative piece: *The wind is pushing against the walls of the house; it pushes and pushes, winding itself up and colliding against any surface that stands in its way, whipping up the sources of its strength and smashing them, once, whoosh, twice, rush, three times, crash. The walls groaning.* The wind's howling reminds me of sensations constitutive of subjectivity. The wind becomes a force against which I must resist or risk becoming a vacant vessel through which external influences can freely pass. *There is only a certain amount of air within this tiny cubicle of the cabin of this small truck that is raging, snorting like a bull speeding down the highway as the driver's face contorts in rage and my breathing becomes shallow to conserve energy, to continue to live beyond this moment that stretches.*

Things remembered are equally as

her colleagues through an education program. In the eighth month of her research writing, by way of assessing where her work to date had brought her, she wrote:

*I have noticed the tension and conflict that saturate my inquiry. It can be seen in the many layers of what I say and do and feel around my topic, and even how I choose to investigate it. I guess you could say the discourse of my inquiry is very much a discourse of conflict and contradiction.* The layers J refers to are the cycles of repetition through which she has carried forward her understanding of her interest. In an early cycle, she identified her own distress at the contradictions between policy and practice she perceived in her profession. Whereas she initially located the contradictions in the actions of her colleagues and interpreted her feeling of tension and conflict to be a response to these actions, later she realized contradictions also characterized her own feelings as a member of her profession. *I notice too that my profession is generally about conflict and that even my affiliation with that profession has taken on that adversarial and contradictory stance.* In the cycle of repetition to which she refers here, J realized that it was the very business of her profession to deal with conflict and that she herself had conflicted feelings about that focus. *Last semester I wrote about taking a leave from my job and the emotion that went with that. Even though I really wanted to pursue my education, had the financial opportunity to do it, and felt I needed to get away from the job for a while, I hesitated. In my writing I tried to express the conflict between the logical assumption and expectations that I would go back to active duty one day, and my inner voice saying I would never go back, the conflict between logically knowing that this was a minor thing and feeling somehow that it was a big thing. I still struggle with this question regularly and feel differently about it each day.* Here she begins to identify the conceptual structure of the conflict she experiences: logic and emotion are at odds with each other. With this insight, her interest

important as things not remembered, those sundry details that recede into everydayness. “A great part of every day is not lived consciously” but in the “cotton wool” of habit and routine, or “non-being,” says Woolf (1978, p. 81). To leave autobiographical narratives in a pristine state is to reify their familiar details (Grumet, 1981). Instead, we need to bother them, to cast doubt on their reassuring familiarity. An attitude of suspicion can dispel the myth that autobiographical writing can be only personal. Capable of being “excavated” from autobiographical narratives (Grumet, 1981) are the social minutiae of everyday living that obscure partial cultural perspectives, perspectives that are nevertheless felt, through memory, as whole formations. Also discernible are the larger myths that sustain society’s inertias, like the story of the autonomous self, the “leaving home” story (Taylor, 1989). As I write my autobiographical narratives, I self-consciously invoke my awareness of social myths, as when I identify the “journey” trope in my “contact” story (Wilson, 2000): *Accounts of teachers journeying to outlying communities follow certain conventions. They begin with a trip through difficult terrain, a laborious route that entails more time and energy than “civilized” people would tolerate.* But then, I nevertheless rely on the journey trope, because it is what allowed me to conceive of teaching in a First Nations community; without the existence of the implicit social mythology of a White teacher traveling to a rural First Nations community and participating in a transformative

begins to spin out beyond the personal. *Leaving active duty, even for a short while, is frowned upon. (This may be another expression of the isolationist aspect of the culture of my profession.) Before I left, I had several supervisors advise against taking educational leave, as it was bad timing and would ruin my chances of promotion. They said, “Why would you need another degree to do this job?” (This is perhaps an expression of what is valued in my profession.) Part of my conflict is that I understand that my decision to leave, compounded by my criticisms of the culture, could very realistically jeopardize chances of advancement for me in my department. My writing practice has allowed me to notice that even though I want to be beyond this, I am still very affected by the potential loss of favor my opinions could incur in the organization I have been successfully associated with. In recognizing the depth and breadth of my conflict I gain insight.* J has again carried forward her understanding of the nature of the conflict she experiences. Her emotions signal that what is at stake in her rational decision to take a leave from her profession is her ego identity as a successful and respected member of her profession. Here the leap from the personal to the more-than-personal is foreshadowed. What is at stake for J is also at stake for her colleagues, though the details of their situation within the profession is different. Whereas J’s ego identity is threatened by the prospect of leaving her profession, her colleagues’ ego identities are threatened by the prospect of the move from traditional to community service. The insight she refers to in her last sentence was made explicit in earlier writing in which she described the high social status associated with traditional roles in her profession contrasted with the low status associated with community-based service. As J has been interpellated into the dominant discourse of her profession, so have her colleagues. Her topic of resistance to community-based service is becoming not just a matter of new skills and information, but a matter of identity and status

experience, I would not have gone. A further excavation of the same piece disclosed a preoccupation with landscape and the embeddedness of the journey metaphor in my own landscapes of learning through my familiarity with Canadian curricula and literature (Wilson, in press).

### *Conclusion*

If writing is conceived of as disclosure, then its fitting method and mode of presentation consist in transgressing prohibitions on disclosure. Such writing demands to appear publicly in a space beyond the preserve of the writer's formation. That is part of the story. Grumet's (1981) method of "excavation," which is intended to not let lie unexamined narrative, but to awaken stories to their positioning within an already constructed public world, shows how autobiographical narrative orients itself, even propels itself, towards a public light of day, but so as to reconstitute public space differently. Writing, far from being private and like Vygotsky's (1962) notion of inner speech, is thought of as already always social.

It is through the cracks that lie between autobiographical narrative and the excavation of a critical discourse that glimmers come. The glimmers highlight the cracks. Both light and cracks remind me as writer and thinker of the insufficiency, taken alone, of either tale—narrative or academic. The tales themselves, however, comprise that ground to which I keep coming back.

within the culture of her profession. J's approach to further study of her topic changed accordingly. She abandoned her early ideas about developing and assessing educational programs, as if the issue were simply lack of understanding of community-based service, and decided instead to study the culture of her profession and how it valorized some roles over others.

### *Ground, intertextuality, disclosure*

The concepts that are central in Teresa's text on the relationship between autobiographical writing and research appear differently in the research process I have described. These concepts are ground, textuality, and disclosure.

In the autobiographical research writing process I have described, *ground* is a verb. Grounding one's interest is articulating the ways that interest is connected in one's life. J's writing grounds the sense of conflict in her own life in two places: in the tension generated by the lack of congruence between emotional investment and a rational decision to take educational leave and in her ambiguous feelings about her profession's preoccupation with conflict while she is committed to a nonconflictual community model of service. In J's writing, grounding her interest in her own life enabled her to articulate the conceptual structure of the contradictions she observed in her profession. She came to see that failure to implement a policy of community service was based in resistance to loss of status within the profession. Grounding her interest in her own life enabled J to speak authoritatively about her research topic, that is, from her own ground.

The concepts of textuality and intertextuality tempt me to forsake my own grounding in the autobiographical research process I have described here for the realm of conceptual abstraction. These terms prompt me to attend to a text not for what it does to/in/for life, but for how it is connected with other texts that

are not explicitly identified. Textuality and intertextuality are features of text that are produced by reading (Silverman, 1994, p. 85) in what I would call a *metareading*. In other words, instead of reading what a text says, a reader reads for *how* a text says what it says by looking to see how it incorporates other texts not explicitly identified. I call this *metareading* because it works at a theoretical level on the surface of the text rather than, as in the process I describe in this paper, carrying understanding forward while situated in engaging text writing and rewriting.

There is an implied connection between openness and disclosure in the autobiographical research writing process described earlier in this paper. Heidegger claimed that disclosure occurs in the place where man [*sic*] is, by which he meant where man is open and paying attention (Anderson, 1966, p. 32). As Heidegger believed, disclosure is not of something already there, but rather is produced by our openness and attentiveness (Steiner, 1978, p. 66). Both what discloses, and when, depends on the practices of opening to the unexpected, holding the intention to focus on an enduring interest, and paying attention.

#### *Acknowledgement*

The image above, one from a series called “Reflections,” captures on film the evolving and unpredictable interactions of reflective objects, color, and light. Although it employs the materials of everyday life, including ordinary camera equipment, the process by which this image was produced exceeds the bounds of conventional approaches to photography to the extent that the process, carefully guarded by the artist, remains a mystery to even the most expert observers. The artist is Antoinette Alexander, my mother. It is included here with her permission.

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