UNESCO Observatory
Multi-Disciplinary
Journal in the Arts

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SPECIAL ISSUE

A/r/tography
and the
Visual Arts

Guest Editors	*Rita L. Irwin*	Editor	*Lindy Joubert*
	Anita Sinner	Associate Editor	*Naomi Berman*
		Designer	*Rosie Ren*

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ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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Special Issue:
A/r/tography and the Arts

Guest Editors

Rita L. Irwin | Anita Sinner

THEME

To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through an ongoing process of art making in any art form and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create relational and/or enhanced meanings. A/r/tographical work are often rendered through the methodological concepts of contiguity, living inquiry, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations and excess, which are enacted and presented/performed when a relational aesthetic inquiry condition is envisioned as embodied understandings and exchanges between art and text, and between and among the broadly conceived identities of artist/researcher/teacher. A/r/tography is inherently about self as artist/researcher/teacher yet it is also social when groups or communities of a/r/tographers come together to engage in shared inquiries, act as critical friends, articulate an evolution of research questions, and present their collective evocative/provocative works to others (see http://m1.cust.educ.ubc.ca/Artography/).

This special issue of Multi-Disciplinary Research in the Arts invites original creative and scholarly inquiry that engages in critical debates and issues regarding a/r/tographical methodologies; are exemplars of critical approaches to a/r/tographical research; and/or extend the boundaries of inquiry-based research. Contributions are welcome from disciplines across the arts, humanities and social sciences and in a wide range of formats including articles, essays, and artistic interludes, which explore diverse forms of the arts from drama, dance, poetry, narrative, music, visual arts, digital media and more.

Seeing Learning Disability through Re/claiming a Book:
An A/r/tographic Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This article overviews an on-going project using an altered book to study experiences of learning disabled individuals, a group systematically and culturally marginalized within our society. Altering books is a form of mixed media artwork that changes a book from its original state into something different. This a/r/tography practice links art with written inquiry and free-form expression with rigors of qualitative research principles to juxtapose old knowledges with fresh perceptions, thus physically and meta¬phorically constructing new re/presentations of a hidden disability. The process of inquiry is briefly summarized and sample images are presented.

This article overviews an inquiry using the creative process of altering a book to study experiences of learning disabled individuals, a group systematically and culturally marginalized within our society. Altering books is a form of mixed media artwork that changes a book from its original state into something different. In this project, a 1961 textbook is altered as an invitation to look at learning disability (LD) beyond commonly-held negative stereotypes, traditional victory narratives, and inveterate medical model binary of able vs. disabled bodies, thus troubling these deeply held notions and opening space for multiple realities of what it means to be and live with learning disability. Active journaling, stripping, and painting pages of a 1960s learning disorders textbook counter passive receptive notions of scholarship. Instead knowledge acquisition is an active, performative process. During interview interactions LD individuals and those living around LD (caregivers, siblings, teachers, etc.) are given agency to play, react and develop issues meaningful to that individual; they choose the manner in which they would like to use the book. For example, as a direct artifact, they chose to react to images, create new images, modify existing pictures, or reject the book outright. As a relational artifact, participants select and react to issues that resonate with them, thus images from the book sparked topics of communication. The resulting input creates space and builds nontraditional metaphors of LD, as well as, encouraging active identification with the resulting text. The book itself becomes a visual, records the evolution of this research process while simultaneously opening space for non-traditional forms of communication and expression. This a/r/tography practice links art with written inquiry and free-form expression with rigors of qualitative research principles to juxtapose old knowledges with fresh perceptions, thus physically and metaphorically constructing new re/presentations of a hidden disability.

SEEING THE HIDDEN

Why is a project like this necessary? Learning disability is commonly dubbed the *hidden* disability for multiple reasons: First, LD is elusive; it can be difficult to diagnose since it manifests itself uniquely for each individual. LD does not necessarily have explicit physical markers. Second, historically it is stereotyped negatively with lack of intellect, mental illness, madness, and deviance. The resulting social stigma has marginalized LD from mainstream and excluded it from history. 'We can learn a huge amount by revealing their hidden history,' Rolfe notes, 'especially one as brutal and exclusive and isolating and hidden as the history of people with learning difficulties' (The hidden history of learning disabilities 2009). Third, marginalization continues today; few references exist in popular media or culture exists to bring it into the forefront of everyday consciousness. Likewise, experiences of LD have been largely absent from academic studies, even within Disability Studies (Atkinson 2005; Chappell 1998; Klotz 2004; Roets & Goedgeluck 2007; Smith 1999).

'[T]he experiences of people with learning disabilities are generally omitted from much of the disability literature even, when those experiences are central to arguments presented by the author. It appears the best that people with learning difficulties can expect is an implicit inclusion in any writing about disability...They are currently located in the backwaters of disability studies' (Chappell 1998: 213-14). Yet, learning disability is a global issue affecting individuals of all races, genders, nationalities, and economic levels. To me it is also personal: as the parent of such a child, a former speech language pathologist, and being learning disabled myself, I realize how complex, emotional, and isolating these experience can be. Altering a textbook created a grounding to reauthor experiences that '...have historically been excluded in the master texts and to rearticulate fresh and flexible diasporic modes of subjectivity' (Roets & Goedgeluck 2007: 86). Seeing what traditionally remains hidden opens space for dialogue trouble and how people think and understand learning differences, including my own perceptions. The spaces within this book are dedicated to exploration, a 'performative site of reflection' (Springgay et al. 2005: 902) using writing entwined with visual imagery in search of what Cixous calls 'that mysterious but vital force, the "leaven" that has the capacity to take the writer further than she would otherwise be able to go.' (Cixous & Sellers 2006: viii). Essentially, engaging a/r/tography practices to alter a book became my effort to know *more, better,* and *differently* than I was able to find in through more traditional research methods.

RE/CLAIMING A BOOK

So, how does one undertake marking, cutting, ripping, gluing—altering—a book and call it research? To begin, I selected a Sir Russell Brain's 1961 textbook, *Speech Disorders*, as the physical ground on which to work. In addition to having a particularly apt name, Lord Brain was a preeminent neurologist of his time, prolific author and journal editor, and seminal in the development of modern mental health policies. Brain's book as an artifact is imbued with traditions of scholarship, social respectability, and represents how these values were customarily transferred via print media. I started reading *Speech Disorders* while interactively writing notes and reactions atop of its pages of text and illustrations. Simultaneously I continued my field interviews and read contemporary research literature, incorporating my reactions in the Brain textbook. These included highlights, disagreement, questions, rants, stream of consciousness, as well as traditional research notes. Form and content are not important; instead my intent is as van Manen describes, 'It is in the act of reading and writing that insights emerge. The writing of work involves textual material that possesses hermeneutic and interpretive significance. It is precisely in the process of writing that the data of the research are gained as well as interpreted and that the fundamental nature of the research question is perceived' (2008: 715).

So the process of writing, travelling with my thoughts in a linear fashion to put words to paper, is my intention; product is irrelevant. As Leavy notes, what is most important at this stage is that 'meanings are not closed off, but rather open, multiple, suggested, and implied' (2009: 226).

Overwriting is done on top of the printed text in the book. The resulting script is difficult to read and, by being virtually anonymous, allows me a freedom in writing without need for a finished, coherent product. Figures 1 and 2 show how overwriting becomes both part of the fore and back/ground: Overwriting intermeshes thoughts, emotions, and insights alongside the original text and the result creates a new meta/physical space on which to build new meanings.

Figure 1
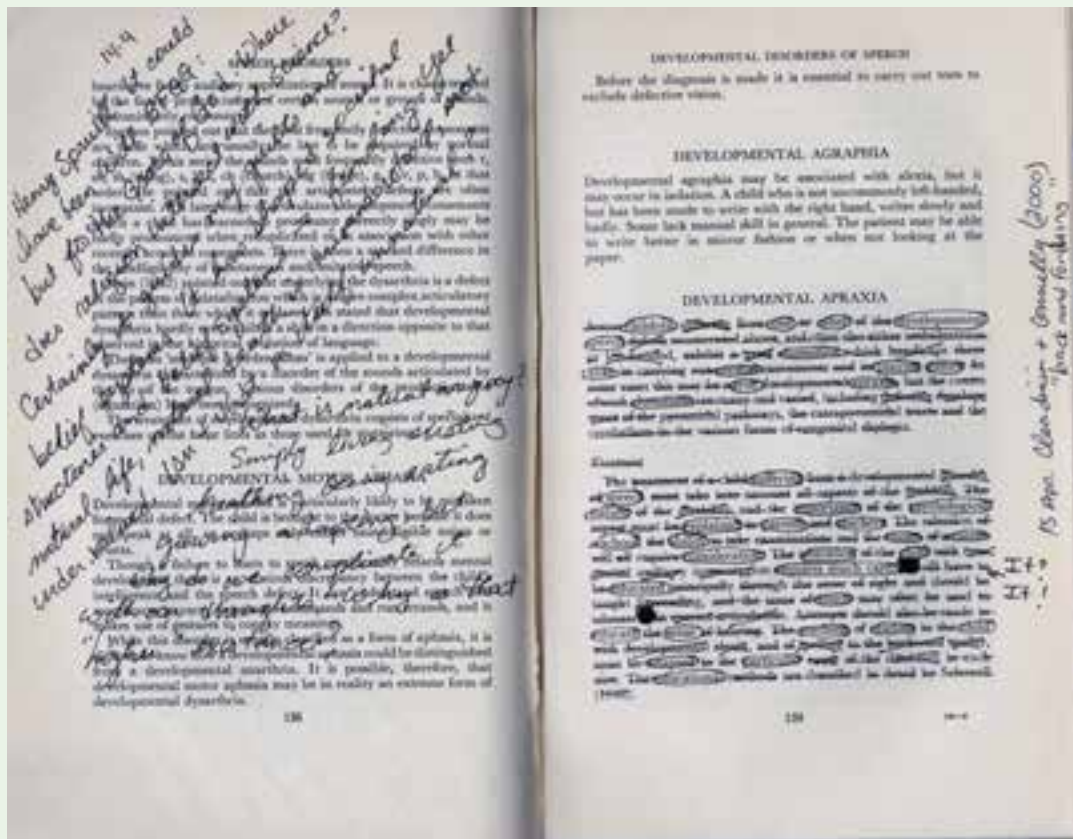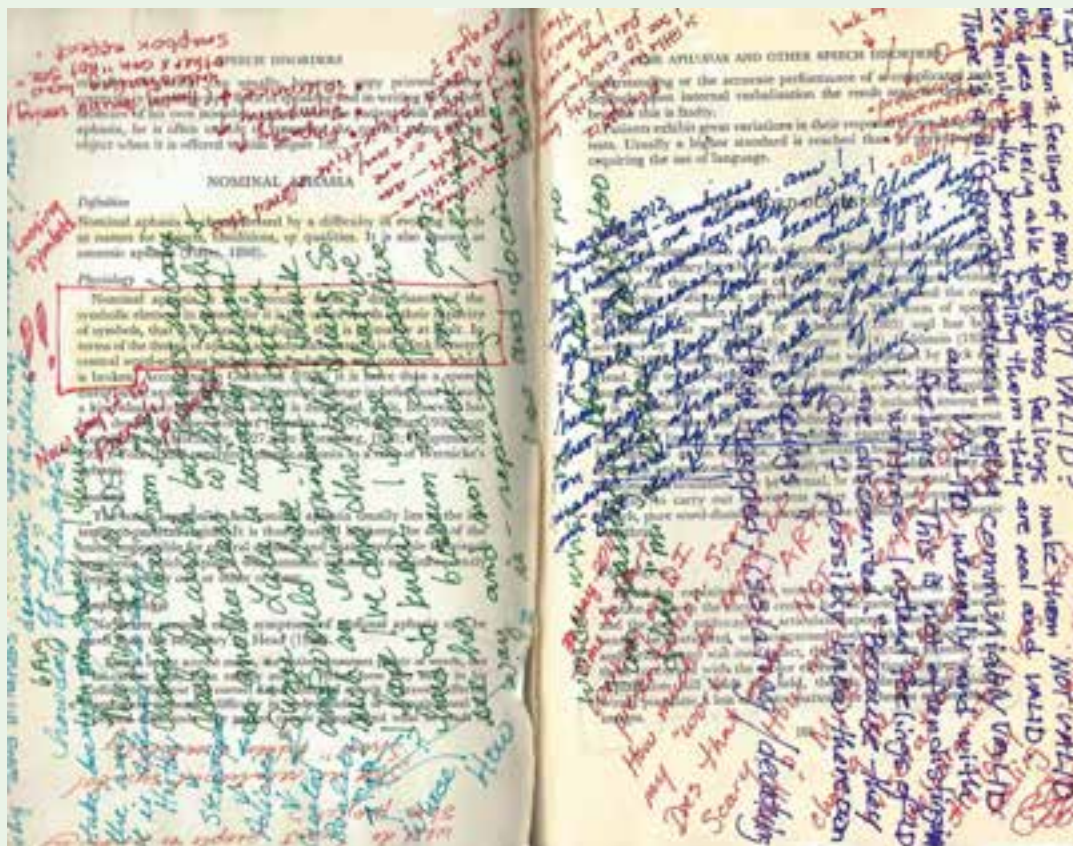*Example of overwriting as part of re/claiming book*

Figure 2
Example of overwriting intermeshing with text to become fore/back/ground

Separately, in a research journal I record brief synopses of my overwriting sessions, jotting down main points, revelations, or ideas generated from my overwriting stints. Prosser & Loxley (2008) encourages visual researcher to record personal and procedural reflexivity in a field diary to enhance trustworthiness in data collection and creditable verification. Where the other steps are exploratory and free, this journal serves as a clear synopsis, a map of the enacted process, tracking the academic progression of research.

Numerous qualitative researchers recognize the corporeal act of writing as integral to knowing (see, for example, Cixous & Sellers 2004; Richardson & St. Pierre 2005; van Manen 2006). Indeed, the written word is the conventional, privileged vehicle of scholarship. However, language-based approaches may not necessarily be the primary mode of experiencing the world for LD individuals nor for communicating it. Each person's meaning-making is individual and falling outside the realm of 'normal,' does not undermine the significance of their experiences. For example, to me, writing is not the natural course of my thought-process. Instead, my visceral sense-making is visual; writing is the secondary output of logically arranging my thoughts. No matter how much I try to loosen up, writing always feels like a translation of pictures in my head versus *version originale*. This project combines multiple modalities of processing reading, writing, and imagery to access levels of thought below the synthesis that occurs when I write, allowing me a depth to examine and trouble my most basic assumptions and held knowledges.

Springgay, Irwin & Kind discuss similar inquiries process combining art and writing:

> *...we attend to the process of creativity and to the means through which one inquires into an educational phenomena through artistic and aesthetic means...This displacement from what does it look like, which emphasizes a product driven representation of research, to an active participation of doing and meaning making within research texts, is a rupture that opens up new ways of conceiving of research as enactive space of living inquiry...Through doubling, hegemonic categorizations of knowledge production are troubled, infusing both the art and the graphy with intention and attentiveness. This doubling is not a static rendering of two elements positioned as separate and distinct; but it is in the contiguous interaction and the movement between art and graphy that research becomes a lived endeavor (2005: 898-9, 900).*

A/r/tography links the knowing, doing, and making processes into a common goal of communicating data in ways to challenge stereotypes, build empathy, promote awareness, and open dialogue (Leavy 2009). Simultaneously it is creative and analytical, desirable and valid, and allows exploration into thorny issues like learning disabilities in all of their multiple complexities. 'Trying out evocative forms, we relate differently to our material; we know it differently. We find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences…we struggle to find a textual place of ourselves and our doubts and uncertainties' (Richardson 1994: 521). Additionally, visuality allows viewers to access information in a different manner, potentially incorporating diverse audiences and creating a space for populations underrepresented in academic research. 'Simply put visual methods can provide an alternative to the hegemony of a word-and-number based academy; slow down observation and encourage deeper and more effective reflection on all things visual and visualisable; and with it enhance our understanding of sensory embodiment and

communication, and hence reflect more fully the diversity of human experiences' (Prosser & Loxley 2008: 3).

Like sediment settling, I encourage my thoughts to coalesce into a visual representation. '[T]he image is a construction which 'represents' an intersection between culture, personal biography, positionality, politics, aesthetics' (Prosser & Loxley 2008: 16) so the acts of selecting how to re/represent my thoughts become an integrative pivot point between what I've read, my reactions to it, and how I think/need/feel I should approach a topic. For example, the physicality of choosing orientation on a page, size and shapes of different elements in relation to each other, even the sensations of colors and textures are all conscious choices requiring me to examine how I assign value to particular elements of an issue. Images are built on top of text, notes, and overwriting. The inquiry process underneath is often visible, yet it is the synthesis of the thought process (the picture) that stands out.

Naturally, I speak to my own process of image creation, but this re/claimed book is co-created with other individuals also. The book and its images are central to on-going field interviews where participants are invited to react to, alter, or create their own images within these pages. As such, no image is ever finitely complete. van Manen states that qualitative 'method of inquiry constantly has to be invented anew and cannot be reduced to a general set of strategies or research techniques. Methodologically speaking, every notion has to be examined in terms of its assumptions, even the idea of method itself' (2008: 720). Returning to readings regenerates the process. Inevitably a new reading or someone's contribution sparks further strains of inquiry. By reflexively returning and renewing the topic, my relationship to the subject stays in flux, and I continuously re/examine existing findings from new perspectives.

For now I give you over to a few examples from the book itself:

Figure 3
Faulty wiring
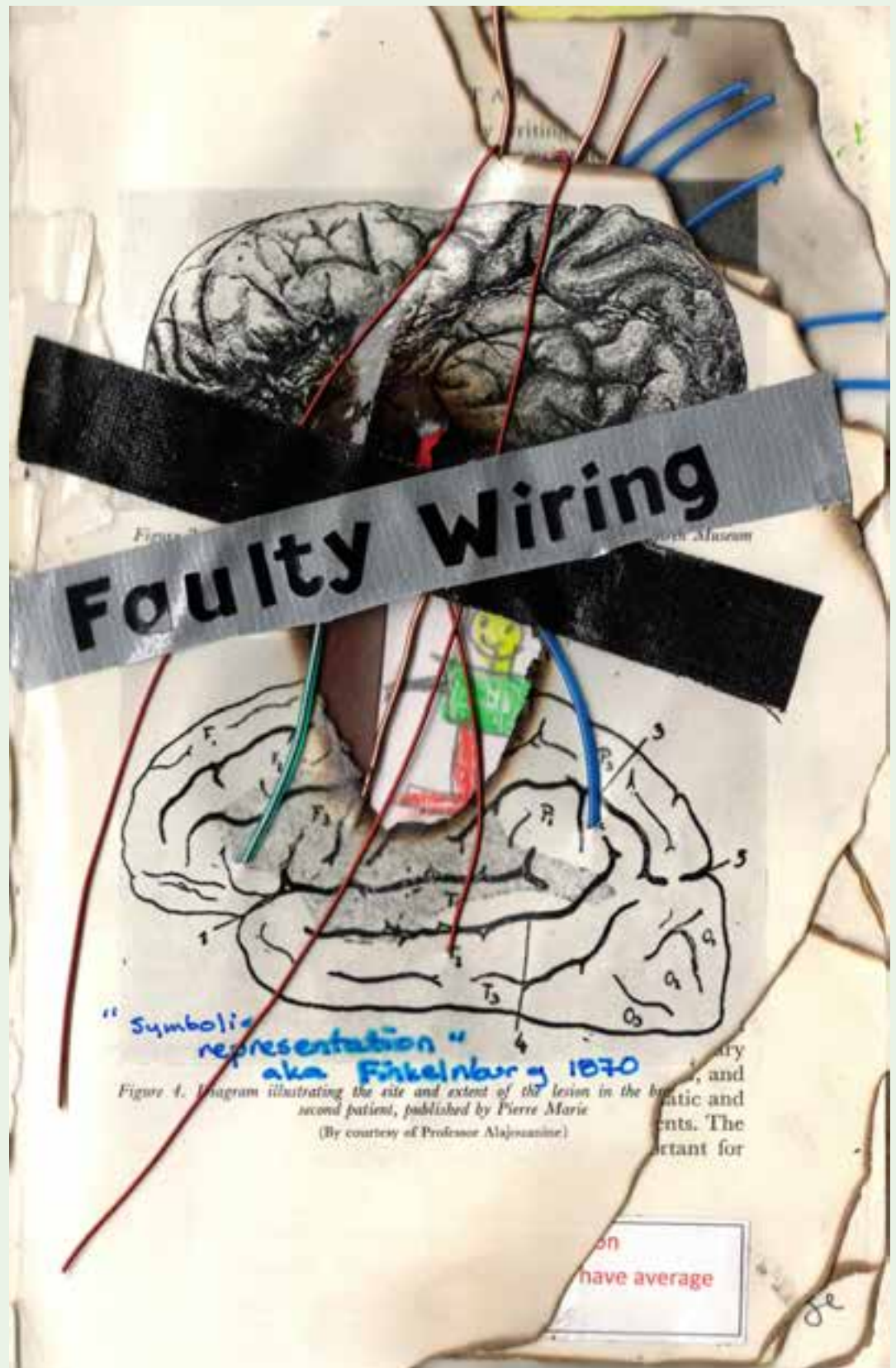
In Figure 3: Faulty wiring, I found it surprisingly difficult to overcome a lifetime taboo of physically 'damaging' a book and, instead, allow myself freedoms to construct and de(re)construct in conjunction with the original text. An excerpt from my journal during this time reveals the evolution the process: '…Overwriting was reaction, it allowed me a doing, active layer to the reading process. However, the physicality of intermingling my thoughts over and equal to the text feels slightly powerful, like I

control my response to the text instead of consuming it, being lead passively down a path. It's difference between watching an event unfold from the vantage point of a window or opening that window to get oneself involved in the event itself. Openly I can question, draw my own associations, accept or reject what is written. Altering the page acknowledges that my thoughts and feelings are important also, existing alongside the author's. Perhaps I'm not just altering this book, but re/claiming it for myself too.'

I remain fascinated by the creative and complex ways people think that emerged during interviews. Figure 4 results from a conversation with Jason, a sixteen-year old boy diagnosed with learning and reading difficulties. When asked to describe his thought process, he launched into a beautiful description of his 'brainwave kaleidoscope' of flowing, intermingled colors constantly in motion. He showed no interest in drawing himself, so I created this image based on his description using water-based media to replicate intermingling color. When asked for feedback during a subsequent interaction, he replied, 'Yeah, it's like that but 3-D movie version.'

Figure 4
Brainwave kaleidoscope

Robert is a thirteen-year old boy. He is highly intelligent, articulate and accomplished. He is also on the autistic spectrum and deals with attention difficulties. Robert described his thought process as 'Infinite interconnections. Each thought leads to another to another to another, never stopping. I see how everything fits together, even crazy mathematical stuff—you know, super scary smarts. But I can't ever stop, rest on one single thought. My mind just blitzes, jumping to all the ways one thing is related to something else." Robert punctuated his interview with pencil marks in the book. To create Figure 5 I added colored dots and traced his lines using permanent colored inks.

Figure 5
Interconnections
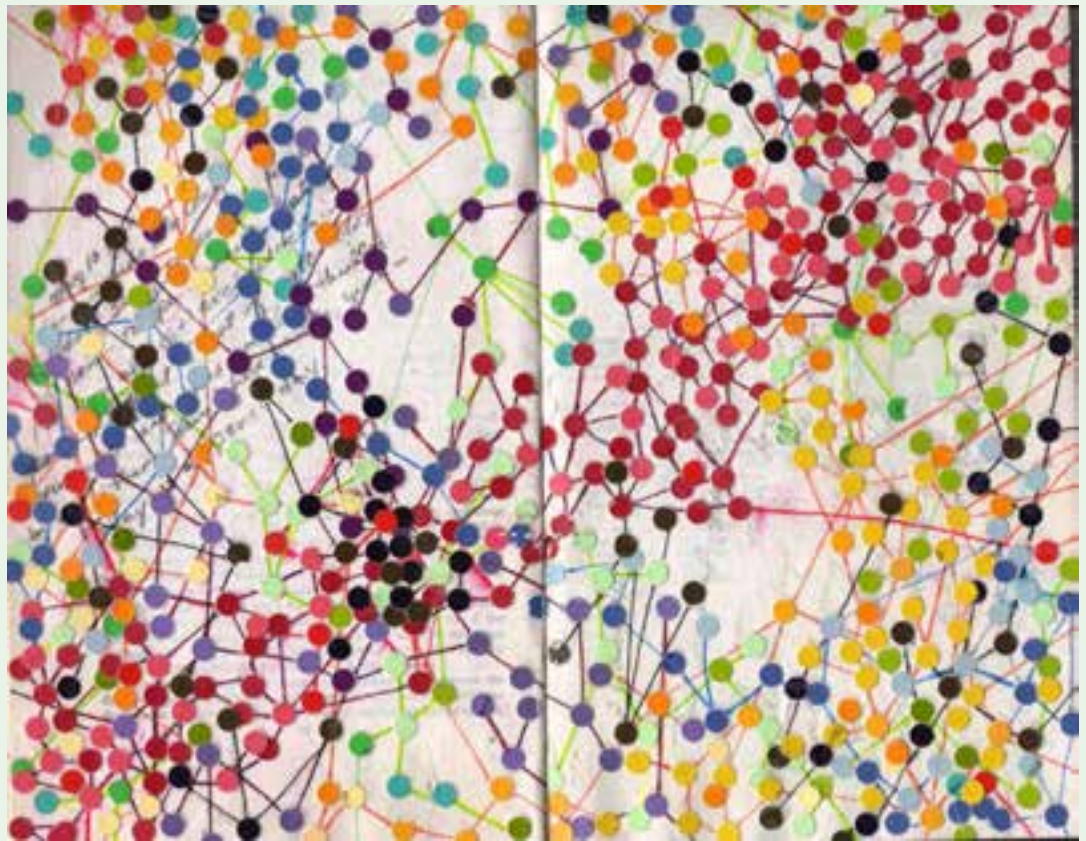
Learning disability does not affect just individuals, it also profoundly impacts those around PWLD (people with learning disabilities). Figure 5 alludes to complexity of family relationships. Five year-old Sarah accompanied her older brother to several interview sessions and insisted that 'it's only fair that I get to tell my side.' Her brother experiences anxiety and depression related to his learning and social difficulties, resulting in sometimes erratic or explosive behaviors. Sarah's picture hints at the complex spatial and social relationship within her family dynamics. On the left page she drew herself hiding in her closet behind a closed bedroom door. She is frowning. Her brother stands on the other side of the closed door with an angry expression on his face. She said, 'I don't like it because I have to have my door shut' because her brother 'screams, yells, gets mad for no reason' and acts scary when he 'hates on himself and hates on me too.' In contrast, on the opposite page Sarah drew an outdoor scene with two people on a swing set. Each holds an ice cream cone and one has a dialogue bubble containing cloud signs because 'they like to talk about what clouds look like.' Sarah explained that 'in the summertime my brother is my best friend.'
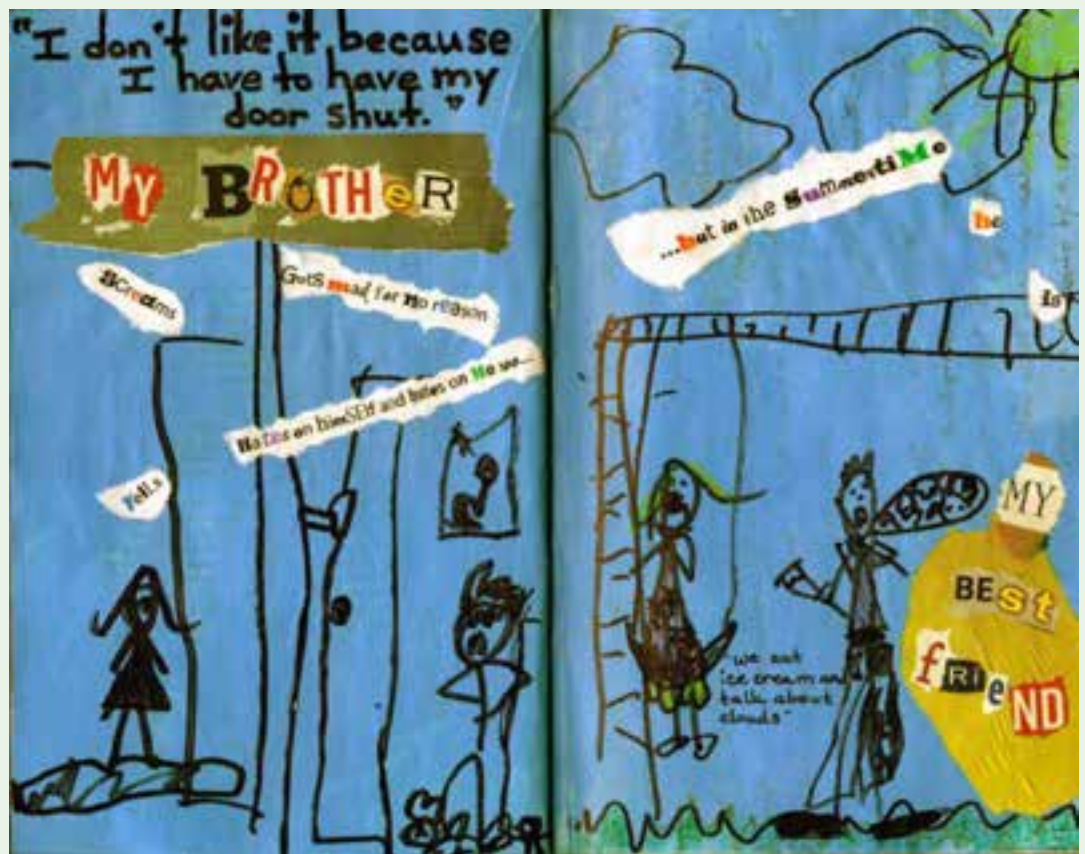
These images and comments are intended only to summarize the larger endeavour of re/claiming a book. My purpose here is to illustrate one possible implementation of creative a/r/tographic research in which '…art, both the process of creation and its outcomes, is marked by social engagements that break down distinctions between artist, artwork, and audience… that resides in the space of the in-between and in doing so defines community knowledge and research by unsettling perception… [it] interfaces the arts and scholarly writing through living inquiry' (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind 2008: 84). Re/claiming a textbook is my attempt to conduct person-centric research about learning disability, committed to authenticity and rich complexities that are myself, my son, and other PWLD. This arts-based format is used as a two-fold representational strategy: First, to see what usually remains hidden, the multiplitious experiences of learning disability that belay simple definition; and, secondly, as accessible scholarship with the potential to enervating dialog for both within an academic community and also for wider audience. As with all qualitative endeavors, I recognize results as partial and incomplete, providing only temporal snapshots into complicated issues. This project is but one coherency drawn from an endless array of potential others. Hopefully it might spark further conversations about LD and encourage others to find their own coherencies too.

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