

(Re)storying My Ideas of Home

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“Love words, agonize over sentences. And pay attention to the world (Sontag, 1933-2004).

Introduction

“Make your words short and sweet, one day you might have to eat them” my mom used to warn. She would also say, “the tongue is a double ed-ged sword”, creating a two-syllable word where there was none. And yes, my ‘teenage self’ mocked my mom’s mispronunciation, and anyway, to my way of thinking actions speak louder than words. *Show me*, I would also say to my sister –*words are too easy*.

“I love you”, she’d say to me for reasons her own.

“Show me”, I’d respond.

And so, I chose to write. I wrote to make meaning of the complexities and contradictions between words and actions. I wrote to figure out who I was, what I felt, and what I thought; and how I fit into the world. To say that I have always been interested in writing, playing and creating with words and ideas would be an understatement. I remember the first poem I wrote in grade 4. ‘*Missus Murray*’ –my grade four teacher. I can still see her in my mind’s eye and remember fondly, her smile and her voice. It was about an airplane darting and dashing through the clouds –*my poem*. I had carefully drawn an airplane, framed it with fluffy white clouds. The words I’d written, danced across the page between the clouds and the airplane. I had yet to fly or learn that cumulus is the name for fluffy white clouds. Words for me were a tool for expression, I used them to write poetry, short stories, letters to friends and my favourite aunt, and I journaled as a way to work out my troubles. Words were a world I understood, and I could get lost in them. I was yet to understand how holding words at a distance, making the familiar strange (by default or intention) can invite us into a serious reconsideration of what is known, implied or taken for

granted (Todd, 2001). I had yet to learn the ways words connect us to our worlds, to each other, and to place, space and time. I was yet to understand that words tell stories, and stories create worlds –and that I can use words to create more just and livable worlds (Blommaert, & Maly, 2016).

We are all Story Tellers

I am a collector of quotes. I carry them with me, to ruminate over and allow them to ferment. The quote by Thomas King (2003), is one such example wherein he says, “the truth about stories is, that’s all we are” (p.32). *Oh, how I have loved this idea* –that we are ‘stories’- stories, in this sense are nouns, an embodiment and a being. It’s funny to revisit this idea again now, considering how differently it landed years ago when I was first introduced to King’s wit and wisdom. I am generally attracted to the poetics of words and ideas. In particular, it is my visceral response to them that I remember, that lingers and stays with me. The way I tilt my head –always to the right, sighing a thoughtful *ahhhh...* but sometimes a questioning *hmmmm?* Gesturing, for me a not quite yet known or graspable idea. I like this; it is my way of metaphorically stopping to smell the proverbial roses.

I have this idea that I too am --or could be, *a story-teller*. Yes, I think I could be? But what stories could I tell? And why would it matter? What, I wonder would be the point of telling stories for me at this point in my journey? “*So what, and then what?*” These words still echo and haunt --and yet stay with me in a way that makes me determined to figure it out.

Circling back, King (2003) writes “[s]tories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous” (p. 9). Yes, words have the power to haunt and to heal –*a double edged sword* for certain. Peter Moss (2014) writes, “(l)anguage matters” and it most certainly does. What is more, Moss warns, “[w]e should pick our words carefully, being self-conscious about meaning” (p.

76). I could now deep dive into a metaphor about gardening, how I will condition the soil, plant carefully my words as seed, tend them daily to ensure they grow optimally and nourish all those who feed upon them. But I won't, as it would be to belabour the point, so I will leave that rabbit hole for another time.

The truth is, we all are story tellers. By 'we' I include all things, animate and inanimate. Gunther Kress (1997) argued, some 20 years ago that a *critical rethinking* of the theories of language and literacies is needed; positing that education can no longer follow along behind society, as society has lost its way. Kress is calling for new theories, new ways of understanding the purpose and function of language and literacy at all levels of society. Kress writes, that language as a meaning making tools must activate, "the possibility of productive, transformative action ... this is precisely what is needed. This new environment is one which will demand habits of innovation, as entirely usual, unremarkable, unexceptional. To produce those dispositions, we need a different theory of language, one which treats language as a phenomenon in continuous, dynamic change, due to the action of individuals—whether children or adults—in everyday life. *Such a theory will treat individual speakers or writers not as language users but as language makers*" (p. xiv). Or as storytellers! To engage in the on-going-ness of (re)storying our world(s).

Walking and Talking

Where shall I begin? Or rather begin again as I am also reminded that we are always with/in a process of beginnings, picking up in the midst of other things (Said, 1985, Ingold & Vergunst, 2007). So, let's go for a walk, shall we? As we walk, we can talk and work out the parameters of how we might begin in a good way. For me, this means figuring out how to be, responsive, respectful, reverent, and reciprocal with and in all my processes of (re)storying, so as

to align my pedagogical commitments of decolonizing the words, histories and knowledges that are privileged and packed with power with/in the multiple spaces I reside.

Home, for me is understood as a geographic location with a complex ecology (as in the study of relationships), layered with multiple histories, cultures, knowledges, paths, and stories. Taking the long view according to Tuck & Yang (2019) is *the way* to engage with decolonization as a process, an on-going-ness, and every-day-ness that is *now*. Attending –as the commitment to ‘stay with’ disrupts dominant western educational theories and practices that rely on certainty, quick fixes and finished lines. Life after all is a process, it is never certain, assured or fixed and so learning to move with, roll with, and stay in communication with, is part of the new language that Kress (1997) and others promote (Springgay & Truman, 2018; Styres, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2019; Vergunst & Ingold, 2016).

I am reminded of how place names, or names of places gesture towards an origin story, survival story, and/or story of identity, relations and belongings (Anar, 2017; Kimmerer, 2017; King, 2003; Meunier, 2022; Parker, 2006). Pick a word, any word and you’ll find that “each word is hitched to all words and to the entire web of being” (Muir, 1883-1914, quoted in Popova, 2019) leading to some pretty fantastic rabbit holes. Robin Kimmerer (2017), Indigenous scholar and biologist writes of the revitalization of her Peoples first language, “every time a word is spoken” we are “breathing life into the language, even if we only speak a single word” (p. 129) and Leah Meunier, during a class presentation shared how words are keys that unlock hidden and/or lost meanings—words can embody stories of place, knowledge, and cultures (2022, May 31, UBC Campus). It is from this experience/place of wondering that I have begun to think differently about linguistic landscapes all around me. What stories are embedded in the places and names where I live, work, play? Do they gesture towards ideas of wellbeing, belonging, identity and survival?

(Re)Figuring (out) Presence

My on-going-ness --*as a being* in question –a person who is always trying to figure out, *who am I?* And more importantly, *who I am able to be?* This brain teaser might best be served by grounding myself in an introduction, allowing me to revisit my origin story. My parent's named me Veronica Lynn Maclean. I grew up on the north shore of Kootenay Lake (referred to as the 'west arm') on a small rural acreage, fifteen minutes outside of my hometown, Nelson. Also referred to as the 'Queen City' of the Kootenays for political, economic, and architectural reasons beyond this particular story. My road is named Gilroy Road, after the settler colonizer family who had allegedly established the first 'homestead' and orchard on this surprising level bench at 5-mile, overlooking Willow Point on Kootenay Lake. Within the visual linguistic landscape of this place, there was little evidence of anyone but us 'white folks' (Blommaert, & Maly, 2016). My elementary school was called, A.I. Collinson which was situated between Highway 3A and Lower 6-mile Road and flanked by Duhamel creek (which has a propensity to flood in the spring). Yes, 5-mile, 6-mile, North Shore, and West Arm communicate particularities of geographical locations that are in relation to somewhere else, presumably Nelson? The names, Nelson, Gilroy, A.I. Collinson, Duhamel, are of course, named after white settler colonizers whose political, economic or historical contribution were/are privilege. Willow Point indicates a promise of Willow Trees, on a geographic point within the contours of a map that belies a body of water. However, I cannot recall seeing Willow Trees. Perhaps because the existence or not, of willow trees did not change my path and was of little interest to me at that time. Kootenay lake of course, was named for the Kootenai Indians, but we didn't really think beyond this knowledge, as we grew up believing in a mythical presence of a bygone people, who never really 'lived here' –only passed through on their way 'to someplace else' (King, 2013).

My first name, *Veronica* was of no particular significance other than it was not ‘common’. I’d later learn it means, *true image* according to a biblical reference my mom shared with me after she became a ‘born again Christian’. I have always identified more with my nickname, Roni—I am not sure why? Maclean though –spelled, M-A-C-*little* l-E-A-N. The *little l*, according to my grandmother was changed by my great grandfather. Again, I don’t know why? **I think all this ‘not knowing’ matters.** I think it speaks to the colonial task of separating people from their lands; uprooting, disorientating and detaching people from their ancestral homes and indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing in their worlds (Somerville et al., 2019).

My family name originates from the Highlands of what is known to me as Scotland. The Maclean Clan –oh, yes! As the story goes, we were a clan to be reckoned with (according to the Campbells) and to this day the Duart Castle, the homelands of the Clan Maclean stand overlooking the channel between the Isle of Mull and the mainland. In 2019 I visited the Duart Castle and was invited to sign my name in the Maclean Clan registry, as is anyone who shares this name or any variation thereof. I identify strongly with the name Maclean, it conjures for me, feelings of pride, honour and virtue. It is a name that is rooted, in place. It has a rich, vibrant history of a people, and a homeland within a complex assemblage of inter- and intra-relationships, of matter, material, culture, myths, ecology and survival (Somerville et al., 2019). My visit to Scotland also illuminated some of the less favourable stories associated with Clan Maclean (and others), but these still feel like my stories—stories I can tell. And yet, Scotland is not my home. My home is Nelson and always will be. There is this feeling I get when I drive into town –it has something to do with the way the valleys merge and the river widens becoming the lake. The lake I learned to swim in, water ski in, and fish in. It is also the lake we’d ride our ponies into, for the sheer thrill of experiencing ‘horsepower’ and the refreshing feeling of glacier

fed water. It's beach, however, became a contested space each summer, as adjacent homeowners, claiming sovereign rights to this space, would set up sprinklers to deter the sunbathers and pony riders alike.

This is a storied place for me, and an important space of remembrance and lived experiences that have shaped who I am, all that I value and hold dear. But I am an uninvited guest here. My 'people' arrived at different times, by different means and for different purposes—but arrive they did, and settle they did—and occupy the land like nobodies' business. Therein belies the tension I am working to reconcile. To make peace with my experiences/feelings/beliefs of home, and of my inhabitants on this land and of my ongoing responsibility to my settler-colonial inheritance and the multiple others who are left out of my stories. For me to make peace with myself, to nurture a sense of belonging with/in these places, and to (re)story my narratives begins with acknowledging that whether I was aware or not, my stories have always been entangled with the narratives of others. I am thinking here of Sandra Styres (2019) and her description of journeying “as a process of coming to know...learning through the chaos of moving from the familiar through to the unfamiliar while maintaining and observing a reflective frame of mind” (p. 29). Styres' interpretation of process here, offers me hope. Hope that begins with a *willingness* to confront my fears, and anxieties; and a settling into the unknown, and the unfamiliar of what a shared space might look like, “where our stories intersect and become interconnected with other stories—layers upon layers” (p. 29). And to write decolonizing methodologies into my storying processes.

It is this idea I want to linger with, that our “current context of colonialism [is] that the histories and contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples and colonial settlers within Canada, and indeed across Turtle Island, are now inextricably connected” (p.30). Denial, shame, guilt,

apologies and making myself and my stories small will not change or transform any of this. I have two choices; there is no middle ground for me here. I can continue to get lost in it, and stagger, stumble and fumble around and remain confounded by the ‘*so what*’ or I can start walking and get on with the ‘*and then what*’ part of the equation. To answer the call, “*what is it [I] plan to do, with [my] one wild and precious life?*” (Mary Oliver, 1990).

Intermission

Robert Frost (1874-1963) wrote.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

Oh, I cannot tell you of the love affair I have had with this stanza. I swoon even now to think of it, how I have coveted this idea and applauded myself time and again for taking the road less travelled. And this is the place, where I would want to tell you the story of my 37-year-old self, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, I entered my ‘fuck you’ years. Harsh, yes. But it was what was needed at this time, and it was what led me back to school. To Selkirk college, and to Canadian, BC and West Kootenay History. It led me to Duff Sutherland’s classroom wherein his knowledge sharing, systematically dismantled everything I believed to be true about my home and my position in it. His words, ‘history is always told from the perspective of the conquerors and/or victors (colonizers)’ still haunts. And what is more, there are more than two roads. There are multitudes and they have all been travelled and traversed long before me and my people. Two road, two possibilities, either you go this way, or you go that way. Yes, this is what the great European thinkers, tinkers, tailors and sailors would have us think. Well anyways,

I jiggled when I could have jagged and it has made ‘a’ difference, but it’s a long winding road and I must now circle back. And this is where I leave you, Robert Frost.

Circling Back

A critical rethinking of the word *processes* for me, is also an invitation to slow down, to notice and to attend. I am thinking here about the Old Man Coyote story shared by Archibald and Parent (2019), and how I too often, find myself going in circles around a metaphorical fire looking for my ‘bone needle’ (assuming I know what my bone needle is, and what is needed for the job at hand). As a metaphor, this story comes alive in different ways, at different times –this is the beauty of (re). In this case, I am interpreting it as a way of (re)turning to something familiar, coming back to (re)visit and linger awhile. In this way the (re)petitive practice of walking in place (or crawling for Coyote) can be seen as (re)productive, a way of (re)creating momentum and building the confidence needed to venture into lesser-known territory. In this case, it has afforded me the opportunity to notice what I had previously neglected, to extend beyond myself, and to attune to what is not readily (or easily) visible or within my scope, but none-the-less very much in existence beneath my feet, deeply and irrevocably embedded within the storied landscapes I share with the Indigenous People who have called our shared space, their homeland since time immemorable –inclusive of other beings, inanimate and animate (Ingold & Vergunst, 2007; Kress, 1997; Styes, 2019; Wall Kimmerer, 2016). This Land calls her people, the Sinixt (James, 2022).

Archibald and Parent (2019) have offered us a ‘bone needle’ a tool/framework/methodology to think with as we navigate a new way of walking and living in

relationship; with a deep embodied respect, reverence for all bodies, entities, lands (and water) within the on-going-ness of the practice of reciprocity (such as storytelling). Easy peasey lemon squeezey, right! Wrong. This work requires a steadfast commitment to staying with, attending and paying attention. The illusion of choice --of having a choice is but a reflection and exemplar of my settler-colonial privilege, and it is a position that continues to grow uncomfortable for me.

(Re)storying Land Relations with Kin

I am thinking about a conversation I had recently with my daughter about plants. We were walking together and talking together and very soon we began noticing the vibrancy and abundance of flora all around us. This is my home, and these plants are familiar to me- I simply take them for granted and stop noticing. Being in place this particular day, invoked something new, most probably the company of my daughter invited me to look again, making what was familiar, strange. With new eyes, and new ears and new thinking, my daughter's presence brought into questions the words we use to describe and thus position plants as either native, introduced or invasive. And of the ethics implicated in only growing plants that are indigenous to this land --for example, if we are to board this train would we have to eliminate lettuces, carrots, and cucumber from our gardens? It made us wonder how long it takes for a plant or animal species to become indigenous to place? Does it matter how plant species get introduced? Whether intentionally carried in by luggage or unintentionally by birds, ungulates, and even upon the wind. When does an introduced species become a pest, or is declared invasive? *Who gets to decide?* I have to admit feeling perplexed by the irony of human beings designating spaces as preserved and/or protected landscapes in a counter effort to revitalize the growth of 'native' species, including plants, animals and bugs. A practice commonly referred to as 'rewilding' or 'ungardening' and it is a fast-growing movement meant to raise our collective

conscienceness, and for many a privileged city folks to “reclaim [their] yards for nature” (Ahmed & Navarro, 2019).

The On-going-ness of Processes

Styres (2019) writes “that we cannot allow the ideologies of colonialism to become the story of our existence—as it is a discourse that continues to center colonial relations of power and privilege that hinders our ability to move forward by continuously reinforcing victimizing constructs of reality” (p. 31). Although Styre’s is referencing Indigenous Peoples; it applies to all of us who are now sharing space, lands, words, stories, languages, and survival. Colonialism as system and structure stands in the way of creativity, and innovation, it prevents a reconceptualization of a shared space, of reimagining other possible futures, other possible worlds and other possible narratives. As long as I see myself within this system and as also centred within colonial relations of power and privilege, I will not be able to move away from it. It is only through the processes of ‘good walks and good talks’ alongside difference, unfamiliarity, strangeness, and queerness –inclusive of the multiple ‘others’ that ‘we’ can create the conditions for a convergence, a contamination and a transformation upon the Land that might make our survival possible (Tsing, 2015).

Concluding Thoughts

Thinking again about *so what?*

“So, what! You think you can tell stories? And that your stories might matter? Ha!”

Yes, I think I can. Indigenous wisdom has shown me that the story teller's gift of storytelling is to be shared, as it affords the possibility of a different path, and a way of rewriting the world towards more equitable and just societies. I can’t think of a greater gift of reciprocity than this.

“Okay, so your storytelling is couched in the practice of storying to reimagine and rewrite the world, expanding our conceptions of what counts as languages, literacies and learning within early childhood education. *So, now what?* What will you do?”

I will respond. As an educator, becoming academic/scholar and human being. To the on-going-ness within the processes, of digging deeper into the fabric of our worlds, to parse out the stories embedded at all levels of our existence/presence and 'occupations'. I will continue to think about respect as a verb (Kimmerer, 2017) in ways that invite an aliveness, an embodiment, and an aboutness --“bringing [and becoming] more than I contain” (Todd, 2001). And I will continue to write, narrate, reimagine, tell, voice and share my stories.

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