IN SEARCH OF AN INTERSUBJECTIVE STORYTELLING VOICE:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE ACROSS TWO CONTINENTS

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a phenomenological study, grounded in my own British, Jamaican and Canadian tri-cultural location, and follows the path of a cross-cultural journey from classrooms and communities in Canada to Jamaica and back, in which I come to explore an inter-subjective storytelling voice able to support literacy and relationship both, and bring forth the complex literacies that thrive beneath the surface in all our culturally diverse classrooms.

My purpose in this thesis is to present a weave of theory and transparent, evocative phenomenological narrative experience for teachers wishing to integrate relational, culturally sensitive storytelling into their literacy praxis.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define literacies as the multiple ways in which knowledge is intelligently and creatively conveyed and interpreted through reading, writing, mark making, voice and body language, thus literacy is realized through the connection between the mother’s breath, voice, cadence, words and a child’s meaningful comprehension.
Reader’s Summary

Story is like a beautifully crafted boat that carries me, threads me across and over the wide river of my experience. My hand on the rudder shifts slightly, and the world responds in kaleidoscopic change, my view made new again. With story, I can impart whole worlds of experience, without imposing dogmas, or routes to understanding, instead I can let my stories find their own pathways into the worlds of those around me. This is the great power of storytelling, it changes the world by pulling us deeply into relationship, at times repelling us, compelling us, joining us, or making our differences known. Knowing each other’s stories is at the heart of why literacy matters to me.

A serious consideration of the key elements that contribute to context responsive storytelling and its relationship to respectful, cross-cultural and meaningful literacy praxis is underserved in the current literature. This narrative weave of story and theory follows the rough path of my own journey into the issues surrounding literacy acquisition across two continents, and how I came to perceive context responsive storytelling as a place from which to enter the very heart of language and literacy use.
While storytelling in the classroom is an ancient and universal practice, much used in many contemporary classrooms, it is still considered an addendum to other teaching methods. It is my intention in this thesis to provide support to teachers who remain shy of using storytelling as a central place to, at once, linger in relationship and nurture the promising literacies inherent to their culturally diverse classrooms. Furthermore, I hope to encourage teachers to story tell from neither the side nor the front, but from the inter-subjective middle of the room, and offer ways to negotiate what may be unfamiliar, unsettling terrain.

Context responsive storytelling is framed within a pedagogy of care and safe classroom practices; it assumes positive literacy outcomes from the consistent privileging of stories and the listening, dialoguing, reading and writing rituals they engender. This thesis describes practices and exercises necessary to bring storytelling to life in the classroom.

It is through a series of stories that I describe and reflect on my journey from Canada to the heart of the confounding issues surrounding literacy and language teaching in Jamaica, and relate how I came to stumble on a particular way of storytelling that might be used to engage deep literacy comprehension, without diminishing culture, individual difference or voice in the Jamaican classroom. Lessons reaped from my Caribbean experience reflect and echo back through my
North American teaching experience in surprising and beneficial ways. This has been a difficult journey. In my journal I wrote, “Failure is the only cure for rigid belief systems”, and certainly I came face to face with my own limiting worldviews, my cultural blindnesses, and the dualities that exist between my words and behaviour, dualities inherent and acceptable to a degree in Canadian classrooms, but confounding and baffling for my Jamaican audience.

This journey has been as much about listening as teaching or storytelling. I have had to approach the classroom without assumptions, being prepared to interrupt and divert or drop entirely the direction of my story or lesson in mid stride. In Jamaica where, historically, colonial domination has diminished the power of any other voice but its own, teaching English language and literacy becomes a tender practice of balance. Centrally, it became for me a matter of teaching and learning both. Teaching has become listening and speaking, continually passing along an invisible talking stick.

In every successful class lesson, I am also a learner, a student to some cultural expertise presented to me by my children. This is not simplistic knowledge, and my learning occurs, as with any complex knowledge acquisition, over time in increments. Fortunately, not knowing the heritage language of my children can become a place from which to model learning language. By making my
stumbling journey transparent, I become less intimidating. I become a teachable teacher.

My work is not to showcase Jamaican children, not to impose yet another layer of western knowing over existing Jamaican culture; not to once again know better; "which is exactly the dialectic of welfare work, where one is concerned to understand others better than they understand themselves" (Kennedy, 2006, p. 184), but to inquire, investigate the relationship possibilities between myself, my culture, and the cultures, skills, and desire of the Jamaican actors, storytellers, and youth with whom I interact. In other words, what is possible on the bridge between our worlds?
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my father and mother, Oswald Murray and Joan Murray, who kept great faith in me through all my adventures in education!
Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed invaluable advice, help, moral support and expertise to me in the time during which I wrote this thesis. I especially wish to acknowledge the skillful, exacting and generous support of my supervisor, Dr. Carolyn Mamchur, who had the faith and wisdom enough to let me explore my ideas freely while also keeping my feet firmly planted on academic ground!

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I will always remember one child (I will call him Jerome) in particular. He was one of the boys that was often absent from school. When in class he would easily drift away from his desk with the ever present need for a pencil sharpener, fresh paper, eraser, or some other social matter that took him across the room. He was well ‘behind’ in reading and writing by at least two grades. I had by then invited two immensely accomplished Canadian storytellers, a retired elementary school teacher, Linda Stender and a woman from several generations of practicing storytellers, Allice Bernards, to spend two weeks with me in the Jamaican classroom as guest storytellers. We had worked together for a week when one afternoon in March, Linda told an African folktale called The King of Togo Togo. We had reached a point in the term where snacks were successfully distributed and eaten quietly while one of the storytellers would tell a tale. This was an accomplishment! To have the children be still without the threat of physical discipline, to engender dialogue but not chaos, this was the beginning of a new classroom culture. Linda had the children from the beginning.

The tale is full of repetitions, both in movement and in language, and deals with the most compelling of subjects: the telling of secrets. The huntress in the story,
assigned the job of cutting the king’s hair, discovers that the king has two horns. The king warns the huntress never to reveal his secret, that she will face dishonour if she does. There follows of course several comical near-tellings: in social situations the secret is so compelling and shocking it hovers on the edge of her tongue. Inevitably, she devises a plan to free her tongue of its burden in a way, she’s convinced, will surely be safe. She crosses a river, wades a swamp, climbs a mountain, and on the very top, she parts the yellow grass she finds there, digs a fine hole, and in cathartic bliss, whispers the king’s secret into the ground. Hugely relieved to have spoken it out loud, she begins her decent and returns to the village. Imagine her shock and surprise when the king comes to her, and angry, tells her she has brought dishonour on herself by telling his secret. “How,” she asks, “did you know?” The king explains that the yellow grass, blade to blade, had whispered the secret across the river, over the swamp, along pathways, until it returned, a near roar, back to the village.

Linda layers gestures into the telling, she speaks loudly, then whispers, wades through the swamp, climbs the hill, looks to see nobody watches or follows. Just as she takes great stealthy strides through the long grass, her step exaggerated, one hand, palm flat to shield an imaginary sun across her eyebrows as she ‘searches’ the landscape for possible spies, Jerome gets up from his seat, and to everyone’s delight, begins to mimic Linda’s mime. He follows the thread of the
story and begins to lead the movement, interpreting the words in action. In a sense, he 'had' the floor. His audience mesmerized, no other child attempted to join him. To our great joy and apparently his, he had found a way 'in' to the tale told in English. He was engaged, articulate and on time or slightly before time in his mime.

I am reminded of an anecdote from Lisa Delpit’s *The Skin that We Speak* (2002). Delpit finds herself thrown into deeply conflicted feelings when she discovers her pre teen daughter, having been deliberately moved from one predominantly white private school to another predominantly African American start up charter school, has absorbed and fluently vocalizes the vernacular language of her African American cohort. In her own words, she has learnt to ‘code-switch’ (Delpit, p. 39). Delpit, a middle class African American mother who speaks American Standard English, both rejoices in her child’s rediscovered pride of race and positive self worth, but also fears the judgement of a larger hegemony that privileges Standard English even in the social aspects of its educational institutions and professional workplaces (ibid, p. 57). However, watching her daughter, Delpit becomes intrigued by an incongruence: If her daughter could absorb, understand and speak so fluently a dialect, in many ways utterly new, in the space of a few short months, why was it children could spend several years ‘learning’ a foreign language in school, with often only partial success? Here is
Delpit’s insight; that the great and overwhelming social benefit and reward of learning the vernacular language insured her daughter’s delighted, emotional, socially charged language acquisition (ibid, p. 39). This anecdote reminds me that language is a social construct, compelled by social need. My mind turns to my Jamaican context, where the failure rate in English language in non-traditional schools (as mentioned elsewhere) is between eighty and ninety per cent at high school ‘graduation’ (Thompson, 2007, see also Robotham, 2007). I wonder have we chased the social value, on the children’s terms, right out of the classroom in Jamaica? Do we make classrooms unsafe places, where the benefit of learning English is simply not compelling enough?

This goes beyond the wisdom of making language learning culturally relevant or making it conversational, it goes to deep identity issues, to belonging, to being valued by classmates inside and outside the classroom. Herbert Kohl writes of this dilemma that it is “not a question of being wrong but never being sure in the presence of a teacher and classmates how you will look and whether you will be humiliated” (Kohl, 2002, p.148). I start to wonder if speaking up in the classroom is fraught with dangerous socially excluding landmines. Jerome demonstrated a real feel for understanding and interacting with Standard English, he nuanced the story with his mimed actions, and he showed off, he knew that his expression made a strong positive impression on his classmates. At most other times, he
would be the one least likely to raise his hand, try his luck with an idea, or attempt to write a sentence.
Use of Terms

Context Responsive Storytelling

In Context Responsive Storytelling, the story is no longer an isolated “performance” but a teller’s unravelling, unfurling, context responsive, informing of a story. It is not a linear telling, but a relived out loud remembering. This kind of telling requires change as it goes, it is “laying down a path in walking” (Antonio Machado as cited in Varela, 1988, p.63). This means that past participates with present as it glimpses the future through telling. Rather than the teller being diminished or bound by the story she tells, she mines new veins of gold from the same story plot and nourishes and grows herself and those around her as she goes. She renders her literacies transparent. Her evocation becomes a language “lesson” informed by the necessities of her own important story. This live story provokes participation, it is a whole body performance, it involves risk taking in the space in-between, it confronts, it values chaos, disruption and listening as sites of learning, it entertains while it mediates the in-between. It is instructive, vulnerable, unpredictable and entertaining.
Jamaican Creole, Patois, Patwa, and Nation Language:

All these names are used in reference to Jamaica’s home language. In this thesis, I most often refer to it as Patois, and occasionally Jamaican Creole. It is a hybrid language rooted in both ‘Standard’ English, including various British dialects and archaic English usages and also several predominantly Ivory Coast African languages such as Twi. The structural linguistic history of Jamaican Creole is complex, its description most fully realized in linguist Frederic Cassidy’s classic work, *Jamaica Talk* (1961). As with all languages, it was of course not formally constructed, but developed over time. Historically, enslaved speakers of a single African language were strategically separated and English was not formally taught. Jamaican Creole, if studied therefore, offers an extraordinary insight into Jamaica’s history as well as a fascinating journey into the grammatical, syntactical construction of a language.

The Tainos, the indigenous people originally in Jamaica, did not survive the Spanish occupation. Unenslavable, they succumbed through forced labour to sickness, and were prone to suicide. Their language survives in only a handful of words.
Deep literacy

Refers to the original language through which a child articulates relationship, in which a child learns to think, communicate, skill build, and problem solve, an understanding usually impressed by the mother. In the context of this thesis, it refers to the language linked to the earliest journeys into wonder, inspiration, visualization, storytelling and the connection between the mother’s breath, voice, cadence, words and a child’s meaningful comprehension.

Inter-subjective

I use ‘inter-subjective’ here in the post-modern sense, not a merging of identities but an acknowledgement of the divided subjective self as it interacts in dialogue with others who are also ‘divided subjects’. This term is borrowed from psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva who perceives the ‘individual’, not as an undivided entity, but made up of both self and other. In other words we are never entirely just ‘ourselves’ but always also ‘other’ (Kristeva, 1991). In the Jungian sense, we are host to various ‘selves’; not only mother, daughter, wife, but also child, orphan, tyrant etc. The inter-subjective is therefore an alive, unpredictable, creative, vital and playful space of discovery.
Literacies

For the purposes of this thesis, I define “literacies” as the multiple ways in which knowledge is intelligently and creatively conveyed and interpreted through not only reading, writing and mark making, but also through voice and body language [sound and movement].

Mythical Source of Meaning

A term beautifully coined by Kalpana Das, the mythical source of meaning is the underlying worldview of a culture including its relationship to the rest of the universe expressed in its beliefs, creation stories, and the beliefs and values underlying its social codes and norms (as cited in Sutherland, 1995).

Phenomenology

My definition of phenomenology is directly related to the narrative nature of this thesis. It is the description of the intentional and direct experience of phenomena; this is a narrative reflection of everything from having dinner with a lover during a storm over the north coast of Jamaica, to the perception of a classroom of children from the perspective of storyteller, to an interior emotional experience of assault. Experience is set on the pyre of phenomenological reflection.
A Phenomenological Approach:  
Narrative text and the Living Voice

It is with the utmost care that I approach this portal-like entrance into a phenomenological methodology for my thesis. As wise educators we teach through being; we demonstrate the application of our knowledge and live our complex literacies out loud through relationship in the context of our classroom and community lives. To teach relationally we become present with ourselves and allow our particular historic experience interior room and air so that we are at once aware of ourselves while also being sensitive to others and the context and content of our teaching. To dwell in possibility and be responsive in our teaching is to bead moments of presence together, to immerse ourselves in a tapestry of teachable moments. This very moment that I write is significant to my description of storytelling, the text itself becomes my evidence and my writing takes the stand. It is my proof. It deals with the inter-subjective present while it looks with care to the past. This writing is the research; my thesis, a long moment of dialogue, or a monologue that strives to invite, entice, provoke the complicating silent witness of my audience.
This phenomenological enactment attempts a narrative enquiry into the fresh uncluttered revelation of those themes that relate to my storytelling experience. Such a journey by its very nature draws fuel and clarity from a sustained attitude of lingering in uncertainty, my knowledge and education becoming contributive not directive or determinist to my experience. It is my intention that the experience and skill of the mature student be in harmony with the grown up wonder of the child that once was, and in Jungian terms, still exists within the adult. The scientific method in its preoccupation with certainty cannot provide a container for this living enquiry, nor does it publicly ascribe value to uncertainty, despite its core wisdom that our world at its essence can only be measured in probabilities.

As I write this, it is early evening on Bowen Island, before me through the window a vast seascape softly heaves, its waters a grey silver, the sky combed with a steel gray mist of rain, the sound of it a light syncopated tap on the roof above my head. My landscape, this kitchen seat above the sigh of waves on the beach below is a good place to be. It is a good place to be. As the light fails outside, I light the house and tend to this flow of words to rend a reflexive unbound method into a long moment of pause. A phenomenological study requires a present context as well as past experience; a present lived experience as well as a past historic moment. It requires awareness of audience and of the
self or selves that would speak, narrate, commit themselves to paper for that audience. It requires breathing. It necessitates walks, common interactions, the record of small decisions, attention to interior and exterior sounds, changes in the weather, mood changes. It demands a re-entry into the very phenomena under discussion, a willingness to endure or revel in the difficult passage through unlit territory, and to do so from here, without leaving my experience of sitting at this kitchen table or where ever it is that I am. To write about what I believe happened in Jamaica, to reconstruct my experience from my notes, and allow, render transparent what is occurring in me in relation to that "happening" is promising and honest, and may with its life, touch and ignite a useful conversation into the nature of storytelling in the classroom, into the lives of others.

There is an enquiry that can happen through the very language I use to describe my experience, so that the writing becomes another juncture of this experience, illuminated by this body, this breath, this moment. The body knows, it asks me to listen with the resources inside and on the surface of my own skin, my intelligence, sensuality and a responsive aesthetic ordering of words in a cursive flow from the well of my own understanding, through my own specific literacies historically bestowed on me through the luminous source of my parents.
A Note on Methodology

This work is arranged under three titles that cycle several times throughout the thesis:

1] Theory and Explanation, a discussion which includes my epistemology and literature review; 2] Classroom and Community Observation and Anecdote; this weaves my Canadian and Jamaican observations along with some personal reflections that locate me within the events I describe and 3] Personal Biography: Wherein I strive to be at once metaphoric and reflective and step entirely into the narrative stream of my personal experience. Through this matrix, I hope to demonstrate in written narrative form, some of the key components of what I coin context responsive storytelling. Through this thesis I am also presented with a paradox: That which I wish to demonstrate, an approach to oral storytelling, relies on a live, real time context of relationship in order to be truly represented. Some components are impossible to replicate, for instance, the sound and music of the voice, physical gesture, and the contextual response, the live exchange, the inter-subjective experience between audience and teller.

Story is represented here in a variety of ways. While classroom and community anecdote are to be expected in a qualitative study of this nature, personal biography is less likely, and needs further explanation. I include such writing here to demonstrate three purposes. From a traditional perspective, a storyteller’s
biography is very familiar within the communities she performs, and she is identified with particular well known traditional stories, and her personal history informs her stories with a unique texture; when oral tales become print we lose this profoundly rich and personal textural canvass (Abrahams, 1983, Scheub, 1998).

In addition to this, through personal biography I explore the ground I stand upon; the stories I live inside. To know where we stand in our own story brings resonance and weight to our storytelling voice, texture to our anecdotes, and poignancy, relevance and depth to our folktales, myths and creation stories. If we do not know where we stand within our own lived story, I would argue that all our storytelling—from small anecdote to epic—is prone to be weightless and ungrounded.

Lastly, because personal biography provokes and entices ownership of words, it is a profoundly affective way to nurture literacy (Rodgers, 2006, Stock, 1995). Thus I hope to demonstrate how personal biography demands that I reach and wrestle for the right words. So in this thesis, I hope to demonstrate several uses of personal biography; to enliven, and inform and become ‘known’ to you beyond and through the myths and tales I chose to tell, and to be transparent in how I
arrive at these stories. When we write from our lives the stakes become very high: we are directly implicated in what we write.

For clarities sake, I would ask my readers to consider this thesis as an overlay of three writing genres; expository, anecdotal narrative, and personal experience narrative. While each is grounded in a different context as stated above, and each is intended to perform a different task, they are meant to be read as a single weave, as contributing parts to a single story. It is my hope that, even with its limitations, as my audience progresses through this thesis they will have an experience of context responsive storytelling in a written narrative form.

Throughout this thesis, I have deliberately kept identities of schools, students, teachers and principals anonymous. All names are fictitious. Classroom observations and anecdotes are general and not specific to any one child or teacher unless specific permission has been granted.

**Theory and Explanation:**

**Centralizing Theme and the Mosaic of Experience**

Context Responsive Storytelling is a centralizing theme for this thesis. References to my journal are included according to their narrative relevance; in addition, some events are footnoted. It is my hope that I have organized stories in ways that highlight the metaphoric link between one experience and another. Just as in
conversation we move forward or backward in our chronologies, weaving in relevance through secondary tales, likewise in this thesis I strive to explore resonant frequencies between my memories, stories, and the stories of others. In *Story*, Harold Scheub (1998) writes of chronology and metaphor in oral storytelling practiced as part of a *palimpsest* of images: that is one image is suggested in the same place or moment as another; as in a San cave painting, or south African oral storytelling, gods, animals, humans, temporal and non temporal symbols share the very same space and their juxtaposition provide new ways to view each separate image. Meaningful narratives are layered narratives. What follows is an introduction to these layers.

**Personal Biography: An Introduction**

Coming to higher education relatively late in life in my mid forties, first completing an English major and then tackling graduate studies in education, I have found it crucial to seek out avenues of real life engagement at every turn. At times this has meant bringing distance education courses, and later, field studies to Jamaica; my father’s residence and my second home. It has also meant travel on university exchange for eight months to Boston, Massachusetts; my black grandfather’s residence for formative years of his education and profession, and my aunt’s home. While in Boston, I studied early slave narratives, multi-ethnic literature, creative writing, poetry, and painting. I lived in Dorchester.
Through these relocations, my academic agenda has been disrupted in utterly unexpected ways. I was initiated into the street culture of inner city Dorchester through an assault, I have found love, and I have nursed my mother and been with her as she died. All of these events have left inerasable traces on my personal biography, they have become, in crucial part, what I bring to the stories I tell in this thesis.

**Classroom and Community Observation and Anecdote: My Canadian and Jamaican experience**

In Jamaica, in 2004, I began a read aloud program for a kindergarten basic school in Jamaica. This led, in 2005 and 2007, to work in Jamaican primary school classrooms where I strove to integrate my own performative storytelling with the application of literacy methodologies such as reader's theatre, Brett Dillingham's *Performance Literacy* (2005), Barbara Mariconda's *Story Diamond* (1999), and Betty Rosen's use of oral storytelling to provoke and nurture imaginative language explorations and vocabulary expansion in the classroom (1988).

Also in the spring of 2007, amidst a search for a deeper understanding of the relationship between Jamaican youth and literacy engagement, I sought out innovative applications of theatre and poetry in Kingston, Jamaica. It is there that relationships between language ownership, literacy, and identity were illuminated. Included are my field trips to the inner city of Kingston and the
Ward Theatre with the Sistren Theatre Collective. This was originally a group of working class women who got together in 1977 to protest and raise consciousness about social conditions through theatre and dance, (Vassell, 2004, Manning, 2007). I also include here my participation as audience for Sajoya and Chandis' riveting dialogic *PumPum Poetry* performance in the small village where I taught in the spring of 2007.

In Canada, I intensified my exploration of oral storytelling further through the vocabulary of two graduate courses: I took Curriculum Embodiment with Dr. Celeste Snowbar at Simon Fraser University in the summer of 2006 and Performative Inquiry with Dr. Lynn Fels at the University of British Columbia in the summer of 2007. It is through this last course that I stumbled on the centralizing theme for this thesis, that of Context Responsive Storytelling.

Dr. Carolyn Mamchur, my supervisor and mentor throughout the development of this thesis, employed me as a narrative consultant and storyteller for the Foundations of Academic Literacy program at Simon Fraser University in 2006. Through this experience I wrote and told my own stories in plenary seminars. For those students who for cultural reasons or otherwise, were hesitant to tell their written stories before a large audience, having me speak and perform those stories instead seemed to be a meaningful, esteem building conduit to bridge and
nurture rich, reciprocated culturally articulated writing experiences between new writers.

**Personal Biography: An Introduction Continued**

The kinds of literacy I explore in this thesis are linked to a visceral connection with the body. One of my first loved literacies was dance; I have always loved to move expressively. I created dances and performed them on stage at the age of nine. At thirteen and into my twenties, I started to write and sing songs with piano and guitar. I led eclectic movement classes for several years in my 30s and 40s. I wove these passions into performance, where I played the djembe, danced and told stories through song, in the market place, at festivals, in churches, on stages. Performance, rhythm, song, movement and dramatic expression have long been passions of mine. As for writing, it has been part of my recreation for most of my life. In the last few years as a storyteller, I have performed in various schools in Jamaica, at Simon Fraser Storytelling Festival in Vancouver, Canada, and at the Lincoln Theatre in Mount Vernon, Washington State for the Skagit County Literacy Board’s stage performance, *Journeys into Language* directed and produced by Stella T. Ireland. I have been employed as a narrative consultant and storyteller for Simon Fraser University’s Foundations of Academic Literacy Program. Oral storytelling is a relatively recent passion, although I have long
been involved in all its separate elements: performance, voice, narrative, song, dance, rhythm, patterning, relationship, trope.
Theory and Explanation: An Introduction to Context Responsive Storytelling

A shared mythopoeia lies at the heart of context responsive storytelling. As in poetry or literature, layers of meaning are exchanged between teller and audience in image sequences; in order to create the images, “words [are] perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations”, the affect of which is to bring the heart into various places of crisis, tension, and release (Eliot, as cited in Webster’s, 1981, p. 1229). The symbolic capacity of single images, such as the cross or the medicine wheel (and all other temporal images such as the gun) to continuously magnetize stories and mythologies to them is remade by the audience in a visceral tropic re-invention. But each re-invention is fresh.

Words describe symbols, symbols host revered stories, and the emotion generated by the artful juxtaposition of these symbols imbedded in images transforms an oral storytelling through trope to a mythopoetic event (Scheub 1998, Ireland 2006). This mythopoetic event, and not the linear narrative of the tale, is the heart beat of storytelling; it is an enactment that either fails or flies; breaths or lies dormant, that hits or misses its mark. Thus oral storytelling is like other art forms, it can be done badly or well and it does so according to what flows
between artist and observer, particularly the observer's response to what is seen, heard, provoked and evoked through and beyond surface presentations.

With this mythopoetic event as its central flame, oral storytelling engages several contrasting threads that resonate even as they contradict or oppose each other. For simplicity's sake these could be imagined as two related realities; One is the contextualizing *mythical source of meaning* a story imbibes: this term, beautifully coined by Kalpana Das, refers to the underlying worldview of a culture including its relationship to the rest of the universe expressed in its beliefs, creation stories, and the beliefs and values *underlying* its social codes and norms (as cited in Sutherland, 2006, p.36). The other reality is the *real, contemporary and temporal subject* the story examines or illuminates. Herein lie all human dilemmas, characterized by the full spectrum of physical, social and spiritual need. Herein are the binary tensions of lived life and fantasy, of personal biography and spiritual imperative, of private and public calling, of duty and authenticity. The zeitgeist tides between the temporal and the mythical source of meaning, breathing life and heartbeat into stories. Scheub (1998) writes about the layering of the temporal with the un-temporal as a palimpsest of images. It seems stories are never isolated phenomena but are always part of a greater matrix of stories where doppelganger motifs proliferate, one story continually calling awake another. The mythical source of meaning (as cited in Sutherland, 2005) includes
the creation stories, the folk myths, the religion, spirituality, the life beneath the traditional homilies of a people, and the symbolic universe which captures these myths in forms, be they mineral, elemental, supernatural, animal or human in character.

The real contemporary, temporal focus in stories includes the risky subjects, what Dr. Carolyn Mamchur refers to as high stakes subjects; the gritty, volatile subjects that transgress; those subjects that we fear, such as fear itself, as well as greed, envy, deceit, viciousness, cunning, covetousness and those subjects that stir our desires, our longing, for sex and belonging for instance, in all their real, temporal manifestations.

In oral storytelling, the sticky realm of real life is reorganized and made new through the use of fantasy (Scheub, 1998, p. 25). Through fantasy, traits and desires, relationships to divinity, to tradition, to a changing world, are liberated from their usual habitual description and position to become luminous sources of insight. Life is examined through the heartbeat of story, our very character, relationships and societal tensions are set in metaphoric animation through the characters and elements of story. In the sense that I mean here, fantasy is a poetic device that makes new understanding of life possible (ibid, p. 26). Within the matrix of a particular mythical source of meaning, risky subjects are illuminated
through this metaphoric device of fantasy. Our traits, dilemmas, and contradictions become holograms that we can view from many angles, even as they are acted out in fantastic or familiar ways in story.

From the central mythopoetic event of context responsive storytelling, contradiction and resonance spiral. Real gritty, risky subjects are tackled through the use of symbolic literacy, through the use of fantasy, within the matrix of a mythical source of meaning. The way in and the way out of storytelling is richly informed through the use of rhythm, pattern, song, gesture and the music of the voice itself. The context of oral storytelling is relationship with audience. Relationship marks the beginning of story and the beginning expression of literacy both.

Literacy engagement depends on engaging the internal imaginative world as it lives in core images, symbols, and words that reflect real life experience. Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) writes of these words as the key vocabulary; power saturated words that once free work to unlock spoken and written expression (p. 36). These core words, symbols and images exist on or beyond the borders of socially inscribed norms, and therefore are sometimes deeply discomforting for educators to engage in the classroom.
In her infant classroom, Ashton-Warner describes these words as centered around "the two main instincts, fear and sex" (ibid, p. 36); in my Jamaican experience, the fear words relate to such topics as ghosts or duppies, gun men, machetes, lizards, snakes, and the strap; the sex words, kiss and touch are there, as well as other images such as crudely crayoned phallic dispatched in passionate strokes into the margins of stories, these last often becoming guns or knives. The physical, visceral nature of life experience and the emotional ordering of this experience into meaningful images is a constant creative process beneath the surface life in the classroom.

Reaching these images and rendering them in words can act, as Ashton-Warner describes, to release a creative vent. From one word pours others. Their own words then in hand, students become word conscious, word hungry, engaged students of writing; they become passionate readers, and sharers of written language. Yet without a visceral, satisfying connection to words, language students cannot find pleasure in learning to write and read. In such instances, written words can be a dull, even crushing, useless social currency, by extension, they can also become a confounding, dreaded barrier to a decent, safe and sustainable future.
We tend to teach language within heavily bound terms to students whose lives are lived out beyond or beneath our comfort zone, and yet our teaching must carry some element of faith in our students' capacity to order their symbolic worlds in artful expression, and such art cannot be managed, dictated or controlled. However, through various means it can be met.

Disturbing imagery can be held within the vast mythopoetic boundaries of storytelling, and it often is. The sensual nature of language can ride between fear and pleasure, vivid terror and joy. There is room in storytelling for the fantastic, the terrifying, for the dark. The fantastic can symbolically echo real life grit, fear, beauty, hope and fulfilment. It can also carry storylines out of current biographies. How electrifying it is to hear our own story told, disguised with different names, other times, apparently different circumstances. Any topic can be managed given appropriate context.

Finding a way in to each student's stickiness of real life imagery is not a didactic process, it comes of conversation, of leading by example. In some family literacy programs, teachers will bring the detritus, scraps, bills, memos, notes, grocery lists from their own homes, their own kitchen tables, to begin a process of bringing stories from home into the classroom (Nuckolls, 1997). Maryann Nuckolls writes "you have to be willing to risk exposing your own literacies to
children in order to encourage them to explore the literacies of their own family and community” (ibid., p. 182). Nuckolls encourages an embrace of various family cultures, of local family literacy, symbol and oral language, and essential to all this, the confidence to show our own literacies, the stories that tag along with our grocery lists and reminder notes. The constant through this risk taking is the awareness of our own boundaries; which stories, what topics are safe to air, which are not safe, not appropriate? The answer to such questions will change with our audience and it is up to us to know what our limits are.

There is a distinction between destructive language and the uncovering of frightening words that carry powerful currency, the distinction between dark words lodged like corks in the creative vent and language used to shock, to mask and deflect engagement. The difference is a matter of creative potential and imaginative application, the words themselves cannot be judged. Ashton-Warner writes:

You’ve got no right at all to criticise the content of another’s mind. A child doesn’t make his own mind. It’s just there. Your job is to see what’s in it. Your only allowable comment is one of natural interest in what he is writing. As in conversation. (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 53)
The challenge is to allow the vent of organic, risky material in a wider political and academic atmosphere of test pressures, subject constraint, and discouraged or forbidden words or topics.

In reference to risky subjects and power drenched words I wish to emphasize that risk is never the context. The context must be safety that is firmly, quietly and fiercely upheld. There is no need and no benefit from pressure to risk; instead the emphasis is on meaning and significance. We all have current subjects which hum inside us; in a safe atmosphere, following the example of others, they simply begin to tip out. Providing such a context presumes that the content is already there, only awaiting invitation.

The content is already there. The bridge to expression is there or not on a vast continuum of language skill. This assumption of content means the educator’s emphasis is on using accessible language, welcoming a child’s home dialect, her mother tongue, on listening, on affirming the subjects that rise to the surface.
Personal Biography  
in the Form of a Monologue

The following is the transcript of a monologue I wrote and performed for Curriculum Embodiment with Dr. Celeste Snowbar in the summer of 2006. Within it, I tell at least three overlapping stories. I have included it here as it marks my progress, in the summer of 2006, towards what I later coin context responsive storytelling. This monologue marks a time of quickening, of playing with various textures of story performance. In it, I begin to court a dialogic relationship with my audience.

Here follows the monologue in its entirety. It is partly a monologue about monologue preparation, but also a story that arcs toward and away from a main event. It is also a non-linear summation of the kind of messy processes typical of how I brainstorm, create, and write a story from my life; complete with a framing introduction, a development of the issues to be considered, a poem performed in dialect, a journal entry (included in the monologue) in which I locate my subject and gather myself to write about it, the event itself, and the aftermath of the event. The final poem is another textural exploration of the issues that emerge along the way. The language is a mix of academic referencing hopefully fitting to
my audience, and also journal entry, prose and poetry. As ‘reader’s theatre’, with an academic audience in mind, the language is far more formal than it would be, were it an oral, unscripted storytelling. Performed in a university context, much of my preamble is about that experience. Every audience requires a different bridge to a particular story. Some stories, such as this, would only be told to an adult audience.

The material is presented in three sections:

I read the first introductory paragraph, put my reading down, and then recite the poem that follows. I then step back and continue to read from my transcript, affront a black backdrop, up until the description that begins on the day of the main event.

At this juncture, I have arranged that a colleague begin a slow slide show of images (I had collected earlier the same year in Boston) of early African slave life. This slide sequence ends with daguerreotypes of first generation African slaves; I had found these haunting images at Harvard’s Peabody Museum in Cambridge. My intention was to indicate some of my own ancestral history of physical, cultural devastation and resiliency (the strength and resiliency as well as sorrow expressed in these images is astounding) to contrast with what I perceived as the physical, cultural devastation I experienced on the street in Dorchester, and the resilient nature of my recovery.
After the description of the assault, there follows a narrative of my journey to heal the shock left over from this experience. At this juncture, I have arranged to have played a beautifully recorded piece of Indian sitar music, I give the transcript to a colleague to read, and as she reads, I reach down to the floor and pick up the edge of a brightly patterned silk sari, and begin, in a highly ritualized fashion, to put it on over my black leotard. I have Indian ancestry, if distantly, and I have always felt at home with dressing in a sari. As the music plays, I dress completely, taking care to make sure all the folds of clothe fall as they should. From where I stand, I then “Namaste” (a pan Indian gesture of respect) with eye contact, to each of my colleagues in turn. I then begin, with the help of all present, to remove the sari. Each person, from where they now stand in a semi circle, holds a ‘panel’ of the sari as I turn and it slowly unwinds, until there is a living, colourful ‘fence’ partly circling me. This gesture is metaphor for the undressing of layers of cultural difference; my colleagues’ assistance is symbolic of the shared human effort necessary to allow our cultural identities to shift to include each other. I then take the transcript from my friend’s hands, sit down, and read the last half of the final poem. With the last word, miraculously, the music ends. This was a loose mosaic of image, journal entry, street scene, reader’s theatre, acting, and audience participation, all of which later informed my conversations about context responsive storytelling.
Imagine if you will, me standing at the front half of the room, blank screen behind me, my colleagues, 16 people in all, sitting, their chairs arranged in a semi circular audience beyond me:

**Embodied Geographies**

*Reader’s Theatre:* I sit on a black box, with a black backdrop behind me as I read this:

In a sense I return to my roots in Jamaica, the physical site of my fieldwork into literacy, in another more profound sense I am discovering the roots are not there. My essentialist agenda, to support the essential Jamaican, protect her against colonial annihilation while at the same time teaching her the colonialist’s language, is not really satisfying. All my ideas of cultural difference are starting to fracture, to make room for the relationships, the conversations between cultures, between souls:

*Performance/recital:* I put the paper down, walk forward, bend and reach down as though I touch sand and gaze out over a sea as I speak this. This anglicized Creole describes Jamaica with the metaphor of a beautiful woman who is praised for her beauty, but used and thrown away. Such a metaphor rings emotionally ‘true’ to some aspects of my experience on the island:

Listen! Fil mi country cominlik a ‘eaven, it a float like a pearl silver pondi sea.
Step pondi san it feel lik de touch of a sofhan woman,
‘ot an jenkle, wet an coal,
Meckinyu feel good.
Tol she pretti,
shim get use,
dem use her,
an dash er way,
an dash er way.

I rise up:
My father speaks the Queen’s English
His father too, learnt to
do everything the white man can do
but better, while
I hold the hand of a small brown child
a ghost who longs for the safety
of her mother tongue.

Reader’s Theatre: I introduce another contrasting theme here: the event of writing itself,
this time in a cafe. I step back again and sit on the black box, pick up the text and begin to read:

Could it be I am safe even here, in this cafe, are the broken floors and dusty shelves, smudged glasses and asymmetric tilt of carpet sacred, is everywhere the way home? Love is heartbreaking, the fragile, temporal nature of my skin and
bones will not, in the end, protect me. Yet it is the pauses, slips, the mistakes in a monologue that add power to it if allowed their own breathing room. Wholeness is always porous, full of holes, pores we breathe through. Derek Walcott wrote, "peel your own image from the mirror" (1992, p. 328), I think he meant sit down with it, as though a photograph, grasp it until the slick surface of the image becomes only a record, like this line of writing, and I, the real thing, breath through it to life.

I thought university would save me. It would provide a sturdy vessel for my own eccentric scatter of passions. But here I am, before my vessel is even complete, chipping holes, gently, determinedly pulling up a floorboard here, a floorboard there, needing air, craving light into my whiteness, blackness, into the unending roots of culture, into a turbulent current of language, of literacy. My foundation is not there, but a whispered promise to myself. A prayer I wrote on the blowing tips of trees, on winds, on stony paths, across the crushed extravagance of fallen leaves beneath my feet on Bowen Island. Carl Leggo (2001) talks about time and how real research can only happen along a great length of it, not stamped into two years or even five or perhaps even ten: Mastery is a long apprenticeship.
I call my strength for this story from those tall brimming trees, this storm sky, the rapid song of water from the creek below, the warm smell of dry sage, the play of wind like tongues that wash and fuss with my skin and hair, here above the foxglove banks, at my desk on Bowen Island. There is so much that must be said and quickly now before the tangle in my throat, the cool fist of hurt inside my solar plexus has time to hide from my words. Quickly now, before someone speaks and I lose this rawness in social graces that rise like paid servants or unpaid slaves out of my pores, to smile, to answer, to feed, to nurture, to be ok.

I am not ok. Just to say this is a kindness. The creature curled and quiet inside my body can rest in that truth. It wants to heal or be allowed to return to earth. With no agenda it relaxes into the sigh of my own arms, the cradling strength of my ribcage, and rocks with the minute tides inside my own skin.

Last night I didn't sleep well. I woke feeling hemmed in by a lack of courage left like an aftertaste from my night dreams. Later, the bluff, the green place where I walk on my island, its beauty a gift, guided me back into wonder. As I walked over the moss I conjured a monologue word for word. This was an unplanned urgency. The interruption of birds and shadow brought me back again and again to a new present. An avalanche of words came, a feast of words. Did the words come out of the landscape, or out of the silence, or out of a permission suggested
by it all? Did they come from that very place of fright still in my body as I woke up today? Who thinks, writes, finds words, who is it that raises my arms in the air and whispers to the silence, who leans out over the view and strains to see the shape of that small white craft carried by ocean?

In contrast to that wonder, I am tired in this effort to construct academic structures that can tolerate the weight of a top-heavy system. I am sorry not to want to represent the dry filigree shape of a new educational theory but instead want to belong to the earth and be part of her knowledge of herself. Writing this makes me feel slightly ill. This writing, flies in the face of what I am usually asked to produce. Not that I am a stranger to solitude, to writing, or even magic. It is that usually these are kept apart as though they were the academy's younger siblings, not grown up enough to face reality. Though in the end, I know it is the bluff I will remember as comfort on my deathbed. Not the term papers, the proven points, the pages of academic referencing, but the quiet unplanned reach of my arms and hands into the silence, the air's kind touch on my face, the ferocious greeting of a hummingbird. Why am I sorry then? Is it not possible for theory and earth to exist together? The sounds from the creek here outside my bedroom insist on endurance. The water falls forever into itself and then re-emerges, clatters bright with the marriage of oxygen and hydrogen. At our simplest, we share that same thirst.
Reader's theatre continues and the slide presentation begins here on the screen behind and to the left of me:

Listen. There was a morning in March, in Boston, when the air surprised me with its green shaft of spring. Not opulent like this lush air, but in such contrast to the dust and garbage, the smell of rotten food and discarded liquor bottles along the street where I lived in the inner city of Dorchester, that the smell of green was to me a shudder of joy.

I went there in 2004, on exchange from one university to another to paint, write poetry and study early slave narratives, to be with my 84-year-old aunt and to decipher the mysterious life of my black grandfather, who did or did not graduate from Harvard medical school. He had a practice there in the twenties, on the high street edge of Dorchester. He was handsome with golden skin, part Welsh perhaps, part African, perhaps part East Indian scrambled into an exotic generous face and lithe body. He laughed easily, loved rhymes and parables, stories that turned and ended within three or four lines, whose meanings lingered like koans long after he left the room. In Jamaica he was a middle class psychiatric doctor. Somewhere between the wards, the green lawns, the residencies and the white beach, the brittle demands of Black English schools, violin, tennis racquets, gramophone and rowboats, my father and aunt grew up
and wrestled with the rich diversity of their lives. In America, not far from my grandfather's doctor's office in Dorchester there was an invisible pencil line outside of which he would probably rarely go. That was a long time ago.

It is a cool March morning; I wear my long grey winter coat, carry a shopping bag and lists; marvel at the whisper of new green everywhere, through the broken pavements and crumble of garden paths. There is a hungry sweetness to the birdsong this early spring day.

He arrives so quickly beside me; I have little knowledge of his coming. His own disturbed murmur is background to the birds at first. Then I know he is talking to me, not to himself, with such intensity, the sound is gathered into his throat. I turn as I walk and draw in a breath. Already he lopes across the road, his body an unfamiliar animal, driven and fearful, not held by any social code I can conjure. I want to say yes or hello but instead it is too late. His hand is already pushing down against my shoulder so that I spin and fall, my head in the filth of the ditch, the air knocked from my body. With his other hand he scoops an easy handful of garbage from the gutter, muck and paper waste together, and goes as if to shovel it in to my mouth.

I fight at first with the strength all threatened things find for their life. I push back while he lies rigid the length of me, obsessed with his garbage. Into his face
I yell, "You have to stop", a whole sentence, again and again, from the very core of my being.

And he stops.

For a moment, we look into each other, and in that oddly silent street I stare into his horror, his broken culture, and he looks back at mine. We are shattered. Some body chemistry, a physical mercy flushes through me, allowing a euphoric stillness like no other and we continue to look and to look.

Then his energy returns, a tortured electric current stiffens his body, he hovers over me like a shocked man. I cannot say his will is his own. He is a manikin, blind at its centre, unravelled by some long forgotten choice. Around the corner, footsteps; someone runs and yells in a fog horn voice, again and again, "Get off that woman! Get off that woman!"

He pulls the man off me, and while they fight, I get up and walk away to the end of the street, knowing now my presence is a red flag. I continue to walk on to the next block until I hear the sirens behind me. I turn; the blood on my coat an announcement as I walk towards the ambulance. The street has filled up like a carnival. Everyone is there, neighbours, community police, young mothers, men, the elderly, and children too.

I feel intimate with the community on the street, through the damp heat of my face, their kindness, I feel a pain that is ours, not only mine or even his. The
police say he left his weapon in someone else's face before he reached me. A nurse washes my hands and face, checks my vital signs. Two police escort me home, past his prostrated body, half naked, a dog sits at his face, a policeman's boot rests solidly on his bare back. Where is his vest? I want to talk to him but can't even look. Several weeks pass where I will cross the street or even turn around at activity that might signal violence.

One night, the distress I feel as I leave on the bus is so acute I whisper a silent prayer. My icy hands lace together over my pack and my belly burns with my determination to understand. I feel a tremble of heat from stomach to ears as vivid as a hum and in my throat something unpacking hot and layered, life returning to my body, an extraordinary moment in ordinary time.

Reader's theatre continues; I pass the transcript to a colleague to read. The slow sitar music begins to play in the background. I bring in the sari, drop it to the floor, then carefully, ritualistically begin to dress myself in it (over my black leotard), my colleague continues to read:

I reach Harrison Street and the Bernard Toale Gallery just as the first curl of dusk colour lights the sky, the promise of a clear indigo night above it. I am assigned to attend a show opening here called, "The Home and The World," by Laura McPhee (2004).
I push my way through the heavy glass door and breathe in a celebratory atmosphere. A receptionist hands me a program about the photographs, I thank her and turn to face the entrance to the main hall but get no further. There on the wall beside the main arch, a photograph perhaps six feet by three shows the image of a radiant Sri Lankan woman. She is dressed in a careless, exquisite blend of silk sari, a pale green shirt for warmth, her hair bound back in the same iridescent blue pink of her dress. She carries a shawl, also silk, over one arm; her feet are brown, bare, planted on the green hill she stands upon, high up on the soft ridge of a tea plantation. By her hands and feet and the crease of her sari I know her to be a labourer, but also sovereign, of herself first, and then also of the land that falls and rises in green and lavender valleys behind her. The plaque beside her says that her name is “N. Yagalamar, a Tea Plucker from Westwood Ho Estate, Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka” (McPhee, 2004). But she is also to me an ancestor, temporal and present, young and eternal. Rilke wrote:

[No] experience has been too unimportant, and the smallest event enfold like a fate, and fate itself is like a wonderful, wide fabric in which every thread is guided by an infinitely tender hand and laid alongside another thread and is held and supported by a hundred others. (Rilke, 1984, p. 20)
With this Rilke quote, I have begun to remove the sari with the ‘help’ of my colleagues.

This continues until they stand with a rainbow fence in a semi circle around me.

Throughout, another colleague continues to read:

“Embodied Geographies”

There is a place in this body,
middle aged and also young,
whole like the earth; whole like the grail,
not chiselled or bidden
or shocked by life
and the blind scatter of an ancestry
I won’t know.
Who has guarded me so,
I can’t tell you.
The most perfect things in life
are not repeatable or even perfect.
I thought it was my job,
the perfection of things;
now through the revelation of water,
I see this worn vessel,
worn in just this way;
my whole history pressed,
complex, unique,
into cave walls of my skin, made rugged by oceans,
made luminous by foggy salt breath
of damp air.
My flawed curvature
is impressed just so.
With your hand like rain
In the palm of my shape
all I need do is be,
do nothing and nothing.
With labels I tried,
to name my physical geographies;
what my mouth 'says'
what my nose
what the angle of my thigh
the texture of my hair
with all my heart have tried
to be the whole of myself,
and failed.
Sometimes the words I seek
the answers I seek
the perfection I seek
comes when the furnace
in my heart is unbearable
yet I reach just a moment
closer to its heat
reach out across my pillow
how many times
With the palm of my body
To feel your silk weight
In my open hand.

About here, we have finished the ritual of 'undressing' the sari. In my black leotard, I take a moment to look at the brightly coloured 'fence' and the people who hold it, then step over to where my colleague reads. She hands me the text and I continue to read:

Then, how I love this life
this chance
this adventure.
Perhaps the exquisite threads that we are
were only ever meant as gestures.
The history of tides, winds,
bloodlines, continents, shared geographies
brushed on parchment with aeonic care and patience
over centuries,
scribed in water without pigment.
I wanted to know
who my grandfather's father was,
where my grandmother learnt
her quiet strength,
what rituals, what ecstasies, what heartbreak
what oceans, what tasks, what hopes
her mother endured to nurture
the steady smile of her brown daughter
I wanted to know the birth time of my own mother
born of white shell skin of her mother,
herself a child, thin, barefoot pink,
grown in the rough hand of northern England
adopted by lovers, cherished
but held so close, so close
that not even the truth of her blood was ever revealed
I shan’t know
I shan’t know
I shan’t know
Instead I rest
on the land I belong to,
fall on the mother,
her shape a luminous pearl beneath me.
Classroom and Community Observation and Anecdote: Seeds of Oral Storytelling

In the spring of 2004, before I began my apprenticeship to the deliberate use of oral storytelling in the classroom, I led a read aloud program for a local basic school; a Jamaican kindergarten for approximately ninety children aged three to five. I did not have a larger purpose beyond gaining experience and fulfilling the practicum requirements for a distance education children’s literature course I had the good fortune to take with Professor Meguido Zola at Simon Fraser University. In my journal I write of my nervousness, my fears of being inadequate to the needs of the children as well as fear of my own response to their need: I feared not caring enough or caring too much. These are the extremes of my heart and either one are immobilizing in the classroom. To my relief, I was not under or overwhelmed. The children were generous with their trust, were always ready for a story.

About half way through the term, I read *The Littlest Rabbit* to 70 children (Kraus 1961), packed into one narrow room of the schoolhouse; the desks were wedged together in rows with just enough space to squeeze between. I carried my book, read a line, and showed the sketches to everyone I could, page by page as they
appeared. The book was small and well worn and the line sketches were in black and white. The children strained to look. Because it was impossible to show the book to them all at once, I began to mime and tell the story roughly in my own words with the book-text and picture facing out. The quality of contact between me and the children shifted dramatically, my voice became more animated, my pacing slipped to an even rhythm, and they looked from the page to my eyes. I felt us join together in the story. I became aware that my own version of the story as I expressed it, was incrementally, slightly or vividly different from the stories I perceived (I interpreted through their wonderfully shifting body language and facial expressions), might be unfolding behind each child’s eyes. They may not have understood half of my words, but I think they longed to. Their bodies retreated minutely or leaned forward, their faces changed expression and they were all, as far as I could tell, uniquely involved in the unfolding story. My relationship to the story became multidimensional; I was the littlest rabbit, as well as the larger bullying rabbits, I was also storyteller, teacher and in the sheerest way, child as well. Thus I became organically introduced to a fascination with oral storytelling in the classroom.

Directly following from this classroom experience, in 2005 I created and led a literacy program with a central focus on oral storytelling, this time for a primary school. It was a typically crowded school complete with several partitions
throughout a one room school house to house an all age primary group of children from five to thirteen years old. I worked with the 5th and 6th grade children for one term.

My program was three pronged: I prepared and told folk stories or myths three times a week at the beginning of my classes. Once a week I held story club; an open informal club for all of us to practice telling stories we had found, read and more or less prepared to tell. I also combined the in-class storytelling with creative writing. I used Barbara Mariconda’s, *The Most Wonderful Writing Lessons Ever*; I taught her story diamond method to which the children responded positively (1999). I also learned firsthand through this process the impact of oral storytelling on the creative story writing of children; even with English language comprehension gaps, characters, objects and themes from my stories were consistently reframed and retold with varying degrees of change by each child. This confirmed for me Betty Rosen’s conclusions about the power of oral storytelling to exponentially increase a student’s literacy skill (1998). The children responded to the storytelling sessions firstly as involved audience; given the kinds of detail they were to later weave into their own text, it seemed they also absorbed the images in artful, imaginative and original ways.
At first I tried to hold our weekly story club outside amid wildly diverse distractions in the playground; then we moved ourselves, after hours, into one side of the schoolhouse. Children came from all the grades, and we managed, first with my telling and then children of all ages reading from a book, or telling an Ananci joke, or attempting to retell a folk story found in one of the books I hauled to the library. For our last three meetings we moved from the open schoolhouse to the staff room, a much smaller space, too small, but with a door that closed, and conducted the class a good half hour after regular school; it was a move to somehow control for a constant flow of traffic of young and old in the wider spaces.

The affect of this move was wild and unexpected. Twenty-five children came, some with a younger brother or sister in tow, and lined the chairs and couch in the room. I brought flowers, a red clothe for the small coffee table and a few of my books just in case. I asked if I could begin with a story and was granted permission. I told *The Wolf’s Eyelashes*, a Japanese folktale in which an abandoned child learns to see with discernment with the help of the wolf’s eyelashes, and so learns to recognize love when she sees it (Charters, 2003). We were off to a good start, the children rode the tragedy, hilarity, and wonder of the tale with me, and grew quiet in moments of tension or sadness, but shutting the door seemed to create a storm of activity outside. Children ran circles around the building, to the
door and away again, attempting to lock us in. Paper balls flew like confetti through the ceiling partition while the children inside watched it fall. They swivelled around, whispered to each other, while Neisha continued to tell her story.

It is not always possible to control for interruptions, and such storms can run up suddenly, unpredictably. Rather than fight the activity beyond our room (I attempted this several times) I sought out and presented what I felt was an authentic choice: To end story club altogether or attempt to give full attention to the teller in order to continue it. The children chose the latter. The choices I offered may not have been appropriate in another situation, but they were genuine enough in that moment. There is power in knowing where our boundaries lie. It was close enough to the end of term that I could suggest such a thing. In that moment it was my true limit.

It was a lot to ask of this room full of children given the distractions, but they responded. They had no intention of letting me go home. When we became so focused on the inside of the room the other children outside settled down too. A twelve year old student, I will call her Neisha, continued to tell a story called The Ugly Girl she had found in one of my story anthologies (Galata, 2003, 26-29). This is a complex tale within a tale; a traditional Gypsy tale to encourage the listener
to find what beauty lies inside them, beyond external appearances. Neisha had learnt enough of it by heart to do it justice for us all. Somewhere in the middle of this messy day, amid all the chaos and close to the end of term, our story club was becoming a real entity; born out of the authentic risk I took in this instance, to end it.

At the beginning, midway and end of term I told stories to the whole school of 130 children. One mature Jamaican teacher recognized a story ("Mother-of-the-Waters", p. 52) from the Haitian folktale collection The Magic Orange Tree as one her own mother had told to her when she was young (Wolkstein, 1978). The version I told was little different from the one she remembered. This was wonderful! I asked this teacher if she would like to join us in story club. She was excited yet shied of telling a story and in the end never did. This reflected other teacher responses I have had in Jamaica; while historically there is a strong tradition of oral storytelling in Jamaica (for examples, see Beckwith, 1929, Honeyghan, 2000, Cassidy, 1971, Tanna, 2000), teachers are self conscious and reluctant to use storytelling in the classroom.

In 2007 I returned to work at another rural primary all age school where I had visited, made contacts and told stories the previous year. While my presence was anticipated by the school board chair, the school itself, including the new
principal and teachers, were hesitant. The school was in transition, having not only, for various reasons, changed principals for the second time in less than a year, it was also reconciling new educational policy and mandates from the Jamaican School Board. At the time, I did not realize the extent of pressures on All Age Primary Schools to determine through testing the scholastic future or lack of it for their students. Despite efforts to the contrary, high school placements serve only sixty per cent of Jamaican children (Senior, 2003). The future for those not achieving secondary school entrances is severely limited as I describe elsewhere in this thesis. The principal of Beacon Hill kindly took time out of her extremely busy schedule to meet with me.

December 21\textsuperscript{st} 2006

I meet with the Beacon Hill All Age School principal on the porch of my parent’s home. I show her the letters and approval forms, that weeks before, had been passed by the local board chair of education, but she is hesitant. Either she has not heard about the details of my intended program, or knows but wishes for a different agenda. We spend three hours together, politely wrestle with our differences, and come to a possible arrangement. I envision me helping the grade fours, a group she views in critical need of literacy support, more so than the grade five or six students with whom, because of my original curriculum, I would prefer to work. Between us, we settle on three hours of classroom
time with the grade fours a week. To this I intend to add after school hours for story club.

It is agreed that I will spend three hours a week in the classroom with the children.

January 8th 2007

I am introduced to the classroom teacher Miss T at lunchtime prior to the commencement of class. M describes my program to her, and I add a word here or there. The introduction is strained. Again I am not sure that Miss T had any idea of my presence this term. I want to ask if she knew of my coming, but such a question feels impolite to me. Since we are all together now, it seems more relevant to establish a workable relationship now. At first she is silent. I think to her my presence is a rude surprise, an imposition, an added impediment to an already challenging term. The principal, Miss T and I have a stilted conversation. I hope for a foothold in the classroom, and Miss T grapples with how my presence might work. This is my interpretation. Perhaps, no probably, she feels she has to let me into her classroom. By the end of lunch she suggests I take two half hour spots per week. Not enough time but there is something more at stake than my agenda here. I wish to make changes in order to establish good will between us all. We seem caught in a hierarchal quagmire of individual and bureaucratic requirements, hopes and needs; I have a thesis to complete, the principal and teachers of Beacon Hill have ministry outcomes, curriculum outcomes to achieve if the school is to continue into the future. None of us feel willing or able to talk about these underlying
restrictions on the first day of school. Prior to my arrival in Jamaica it is me of course who drew up plans for this visit, yet even the agreement of the Beacon Hill Board chair came without my asking for his reflections, questions or hesitations to be vocalised.

I am from a culture that historically has always come with solutions, so the lack of shared common ground, dialogue and role sharing this first week at the school was not a red flag for me. But it is my contention that such silence is not a good sign; it indicates a moment when differences remain unnamed and passions go underground. It shows my cultural blindness. I am embarrassed by my arrogance in these initial meetings; I assumed what I had to offer would be good for everyone, no matter our unexplored differences. Yet I was also genuinely interested, eager to work, observe and participate in the school:

I begin my classroom practice inside a two building schoolhouse, where an addition sits in a T junction with the original one room school. The floor and walls are concrete, and the corrugated tin roof sits slightly above the wall so that a small gap acts as a vent for the intensity of heat and activity on the inside. The red tones of the earth outside are mirrored in worn desks, their chairs attached add a cumbersome weight. The teacher's desk sits under a small high window, a tall narrow bookshelf at the back of the space serves for storage. Charts and posters fill the plywood partition wall; the other concrete walls are bare. A blackboard fills the front wall and the space is defined by a board partition, its
base allowing room enough for children to roll under and through with ease. There is no
door but a gap where the partition ends. This last makes for some very interesting
disruptions. The space is such that the children sit elbow to elbow, several of the desks
with attached chairs designed for two, are shared by three children. This means that the
middle child sits on the crack between the two seats and writes on the crack between two
desks [Now I am told the school has all new furniture throughout!].

The children are rigidly still or lean one into the other; their arms rest intimately on
backs, on other arms, as though with so much contact they have accepted the immediacy
of each other's bodies. Few of the boys are ever still, this is like a finely choreographed
dance; their movement is liquid as they slide on and off chairs in a kind of unconscious
improve of movement. This last effect was to become a source of stress but also laughter
and sharing.

In the first few weeks with my grade fours, I developed strategies to include oral
storytelling along with the predominantly reading emphasis M had asked of me.
This effort led to the regular practice of a reader's theatre format; this involved
the re-write of one popular folktale, The Great Big Enormous Turnip, into 18 parts.
I based my own somewhat changed version on the simplified variant written by
Roney (1993). I called it The Enormous Yam, as my Jamaican children are not so
familiar with turnips. Roney suggests this story as a good one to tell along with a
felt board, which in the beginning I did. The whole anthology in which I found this story is an excellent one for teachers (Blatt, 1993). The Yam is a wonderful frolic of a tale wherein the farmer’s yam is so big, he must gather the help of his entire family; one by one, they arrive to help, including the dog, the cat, and lastly the mouse, in order to pull it out of the ground. Later on I also wrote, and divided up for our reader’s theatre a fairytales of sorts called The Magic of Beacon Hill, based on the children at school and their imaginary interactions with a magical man who lived high above Beacon Hill in an enchanted house. Allice Bernards and Linda Stednar, my visiting professional storytellers from Canada, brought with them a hilarious Ananci Tale, Anansi and the Rock that we also divided up into 18 parts.

Reader’s Theatre was a consistent hit with the children. The children learned anywhere from four lines to a paragraph or more of these stories each. They took ownership of their lines and developed them dramatically. It sounds little as I write it, and yet I think the language confidence and confidence in reading was increased immensely by this simple task.

Without talking too much about it, the reader’s theatre also allowed me to introduce a group practice of listening and watching each other for cues: it was communal and individual practice all at once. In the end we also performed all
three of these stories; once for the basic school, once for the whole school on literacy day. The performances seemed to increase the children’s confidence exponentially.

Writing practises were less successful. Although I tried to duplicate the pattern of story and then creative writing I had implemented the previous year in another school with grades five and six, the grade fours struggled even to grasp the notion of writing their own stories, and even rewriting what was heard. I let go of writing all together for the first month and focused instead on the stories, the reader’s theatre and weekly sessions with library book reading. This changed a little with the introduction of Brett Dillingham’s VPS, Visual Portrayal of a Story charts (2005, p. 74). The relationship between writing practice and oral language is an issue I return to later in this thesis.

At about this time I also reached a new evolution in my storytelling practice. I was inspired by several different readings all at once; the simplicity of Dillingham’s Visual Portrayal of a Story (2005) for literacy development wherein he demonstrates specific elements of oral storytelling; combining sound (voice and instrument for instance), with expression (facial gestures for instance), and movement; for example, the playful imitation of different creatures (p. 73). Vivian Gussin Paley’s insights influenced my perception and expectations in the
classroom with her sensitive understanding of how sound maps into words, and then story in a young child’s world, and the importance of allowing real room between the elaboration of this story making, and the additional requirement for a child to write it all down (as cited in Novick, 2002, p. 119). Helen Mellon’s *Storytelling* (1992) helped me to focus on theme for my own storytelling: she writes about the importance of telling stories, however magical or fantastic, that also connect directly to a child’s world in familiar ways. For instance, I wrote and performed “Fire Truck Rescue”, a story that integrated sound effects, plenty of gesture, mime and a cast of characters that could have been from the very village in which I worked. The content was unlikely, to say the least, and involved the rescue of an old woman’s cat stuck in a tree. Just about everyone in the village and the fire department from Kingston came to rescue that cat.

We retold the story as a class, it was a hilarious, boisterous mime with a great deal of energy; we climbed, ran, carried cats, swivelled down ladders, and drove the fire engine. Afterwards, every child worked with great enthusiasm to create a list of possible story topics and titles for their own stories. I could barely keep up with the barrage of ideas. This was a marathon effort at storytelling that I could not have repeated on a day to day basis! But it demonstrated to me the power of multiple literacies to engage genuine attention! The five boys in the class, who particularly needed to keep moving it seemed in order to think, were thrilled by
the activity. However, when it came to mapping out their individual stories, a lot of borrowing and copying occurred; some children simply opened a book and copied word for word what they found there across their VPS page. We needed a whole other term to bring writing into our practice together, to map the link between their own favoured words and made up stories into written text. It is worth noting that some of the children, familiar with reading and hearing bible stories (at least one child sang in the church choir) had an easier time at least to begin the story writing process (see Honeyghan, 2000). For the most part, ownership of words, attributing meaning and life to words on a page, were still tenuous realities.

Classroom and Community Observation and Anecdote: Seeds of Oral Storytelling, Canada

Returning between programs to Canada in 2006, I began to integrate my Jamaican experience into other reoccurring themes related to culture and performance. I started to write of myself as a tri-cultural person and allowed the complications implied by this identity to affect the stories I told. In September I became narrative consultant for the Foundations of Academic Literacy Program at Simon Fraser University. This role was part of a unique and unprecedented undergraduate course designed by Dr. Carolyn Mamchur integrating oral storytelling and film study into a writing program constructed to teach
foundational writing skills to entry level students through the exploration of personal stories and memories. The course used the students' own writing as curriculum, on the page but also on the stage through oral storytelling. The inclusion of an oral practice beside the written allowed for rich cultural exchanges between the students. We incorporated the language of gesture, rhythm, sound and pause into our shared plenary stage setting. I rewrote and told in the manner of monologue, three stories from my life. I chose events that were to me meaningful, themes at once personal and universal, in the language of Dr. Mamchur, they were “high stakes” themes.

At this time the course was structured in such a way that students were encouraged to delve into their own family memories of elders, relatives and meaningful past events involving friends. Some extraordinary stories were written and shared in the individual classrooms and also on the plenary stage. One such story, written by a woman born and raised in Hong Kong, described her grandmother's journey, many years previously from inland China to Hong Kong, the shattering hardships and losses she experienced along the way, and the circumstances of her current life in a Hong Kong hospital (anonymous, 2006).

The last half of the story describes the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter; the deep bounds between them and the tensions rendered by age
and distance; the necessity of school in a foreign country, the physical illness
born of a lifetime of hardship; their parting, reunion, and parting again. The story
was poignant and beautiful, but the student could not, did not want to tell it
herself in front of her peers.

I do not think we ever knew for certain why, it could have been shyness; in a
room full of two hundred plus people this would have been understandable. It
could also have been to do with the revelation of class status, cultural discomfort,
the breaking of moral taboos or some other reason I am yet to imagine. Such
questions were beyond the psychological scope and safety of the writing course.
While the program became at times therapeutic it was not contrived to be
therapy, the focus remained on the development of sound, clear, fresh writing
composition.

Dr. Mamchur asked the student if she would be willing for me to tell her story
instead. The student was, I think, flattered, nervous, and accepted the offer on
condition that she, the author, remained anonymous.

Her simply written story flowed easily; in places her language took on a
luminous quality where it seemed she had found the exact turn of phrase to bring
an image to radiant life. As I learned the story, I shifted the language here and
there only slightly, to rend the oral telling clear, and I kept the beautifully
phrased descriptions, word for word, in my monologue. Sometimes a second language speaker constructs freshness in an English phrase that is earnestly breathtaking. To learn and speak her story I entered an unfamiliar world, a different set of values and ordering of importance for events. I took her story in and gave it back. This was valuable practice; it demonstrated to me the relevance of oral storytelling to bridge, mirror and validate our differing stories and the cultural matrix in which they are imbedded.
Theory and Explanation: Whose Story?

Of the stories that inform me, there are some which seem not mine at all, but brush like a cool shaft of wind through my being: not mine that is until I look more closely and recognize some aspect, a gesture or expression which is indeed a mirroring image, a doppelganger of my own disguised self. This unsettles, shocks, and it takes courage to remain observant and generous with my observation, not to shut the door on what I see and label it someone else’s story entirely. To notice what stories are mine in the sense I mean here, I try to notice my reactions to the life around me, to notice when I am repelled and when I am magnetised to a story, to an event, and then to remain as receptive as I can to its impact. Curriculum theorist, Ted Aoki interprets Julia Kristeva as saying, “we shall never be able to live at peace with the strangers around us if we are unable to tolerate the otherness in ourselves” (Aoki, 2005, p. 288). Whose story is it that I tell? Where do my stories end and another’s begin?

If I pause, as Ted Aoki suggests, inside the hyphenated spaces between those markers I use to describe myself; British Canadian Jamaican, pause after each descriptor, who am I there? I resonate with Aoki when he writes:
I am led to wonder if indeed these are different ways of understanding, different linguistic worlds, and different discourses with different grammars. I find myself flowing in the midst of these discourses, and I feel that I am in that little open space between the words ‘Japanese’ and ‘Canadian’ in ‘Japanese Canadian.’ (ibid, p.265)

Likewise, I find out that I am neither British nor Jamaican nor Canadian, but all of them and none of them in a continuous forming. Allowing this unpinned, roaming identity provides ground for my experience of being on a bridge between cultures, without a need to affiliate, to assimilate in any one direction, I am in that “little space between the words” (ibid, p.265). This is a freeing revelation. In contrast, to say I am Canadian, or British, or Jamaican always feels to me a subterfuge, putting British first and Jamaican second becomes guesswork.

This experience of a floating identity is also a mark of my privilege; in contrast, many others experience far less fluidity of identity, they are marked, as I am, by language difference, skin colour, cultural and economic circumstance and yet face much sterner, inflexible opposition when it comes to changing or developing identities. For instance, if a young man (a twelve year old) in the south side of Kingston, Jamaica decides he will no longer engage a gang identity in a war
where two city blocks can circumscribe his life, it is likely he will be marked and killed within a very short space of time (lawyer, S. Alcott, personal communication, April 4th, 2007). Thousands more examples might be found in Vancouver, Canada. It is a common experience of immigrants, native groups, and other visible minorities, that their cultural difference is narrowly defined by the hegemonic society around them. Anyway, none of us fit neatly into drawers or files, our shapes are never convenient to the containers others would have us occupy.

Along with these identities, there are others; my gender, sexual orientation, class, education etc. We all share in common these multiple markers, and while some of these markers are fixed, others metamorphosize. It is my contention that much of what we would consider as fixed identity is fictional: Change is constant. Can we enter and invite others to enter the fertile stream of shifting personal narratives? Identities in a multicultural classroom are inconstant. Aoki quotes Gilles Deleuze (1987) who “writes that ‘multiplicity is not a noun....’ He says, further, ‘[in] a multiplicity what counts are not the elements, but what there is between, the between, as site of relations which are separable from each other. Every multiplicity grows in the middle’ (Aoki, 2005, p.viii). And where is this “in-between” and how do we traverse it?
In Argentinean Tango, the dance unfolds like a conversation. As a dancer, I could say that I, along with my partner, occupy a narrow bridge on which we must continually negotiate space. Through our feet a story is told, as one leads the ‘conversation’, the other follows. This becomes like listening. The ‘listening’ occurs in the whole body but the feet are pivotal. In Tango, there is always one foot that supports the weight while the other is poised, on the toe of the foot, it waits there, ready to follow the direction of the dance. For me, my cultural identity and the conversations it illicits, have become like this dance; I am never wholly grounded with both feet in one place but linger in balance, ready to follow or lead, listen or speak, move into the shape of the next moment. Since I do not know from which place I will enter the next relational moment, I hold my location lightly. If I stand rooted in one place I will stop the dance.

Our stories are like portals. We travel to and throw along their narrative channels, and if we are fortunate, we meet each other along the way, and if more fortunate still, we recognize each other’s humanity. There is perhaps a startling place in all of us, where, as at the end of Sebastian Faulks novel *Birdsong* (1993), were we to meet our enemies, we would recognize each other and fall into each other’s arms. Stories can invoke this kind of visceral recognition. It takes only a moment of resonance and we are lost (or is it found?) inside the written or
spoken narrative of another’s story. How can we, as storytellers, track these moments of resonance, these portals to engagement?

An analogy might be made to *desire lines*; a landscape architect’s term to describe the human desire to traverse landscapes, not as the crow flies, not as laid down by existing paths, but according to human inclination. They are “discernible paths that have been worn into the ground by regular pedestrian use, and are not officially public rights of way” (*The Forest of Leeds*, 2008). Perhaps it has to do with where the trees are, where the water is, where the hills, where the other neighbouring buildings are, and in which direction lies the coffee, the water fountain. How we enter into spaces, including classrooms, how we negotiate learning, how we might choose to tell a story, how we are drawn to enter a conversation falls similarly into this tidal leaning toward *desire lines*. I doubt we can know in their entirety, the sway and flow of these paths as they run through our lives, the lives of others and the stories we tell. But there are places along all our paths that we each favour and perhaps would linger had we the time. What happens at these stopping places?

Places where we choose to linger are places of reflection and possibility, like a mountain top, a park bench, or a train platform where multiple tracks link to sophisticated switching devices that allow for a choice of travel in several
directions. We ought to never feel cornered by a story we had hoped to tell in a classroom. It is better to be prepared, but then to look out for signs; to look to where the life is in the classroom, to notice small incidents that indicate student pre-occupations, to know our own. Into the classroom setting we strive to bring that place of lingering.

**Taking Our Stories into the Classroom**

It is helpful to take a moment even in chaos to contemplate, take a breath, and find one small thing, incident from our lives, or incident in the room that can carry us into our story. As well, there are various ways to ritualize and ease into the advent of storytelling. In *Teacher* (1963), Sylvia Ashton-Warner describes how she would play on the piano the first eight notes from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to garner the children's attention:

> At the sound of these notes I trained the Little Ones, whatever they were doing, to stop and look at me. I trained them this way from necessity but in time I did so from pleasure. And never through those vital years in the heaving prefab did I cease to be impressed at the sudden draining away of sound, like blood from a face, into the utmost silence. And not just silence but stillness; every eye on me, every hand poised; an intensity of silence born from sound (ibid., p.16).
Not only from necessity, but also out of pleasure we discover our own fitting way to introduce storytelling. Ashton-Warner was a gifted teacher, her method to gather attention is unforgettable, and there are other ways; a simple phrase, or a more elaborate one, a chair set in a particular place at a particular time, and a simple method to exchange an agreement between all to enter into the story.

Indeed, successful stories are the ones we are, in some way, invited to tell. Even after the invitation is extended, we dwell on the threshold, and consider the terrain, the context; who else is there in the room, whether or not the atmosphere is right.

At first storytelling is more a matter of dwelling than performing. Yet if it becomes mere performance whole worlds of possibility are lost, and if it is not entertaining, then it is of no use at all. No matter what, it must begin with invitation, and as Aoki has written, "...I have become sensitive to the notion that a concern for doing needs to be accompanied by a concern for not doing, for holding back, for withdrawing, for letting go, for letting be” (2005, p. 386). Amid all our complexity, we do well to dwell on the threshold of story with an open hand and a light heart.
Personal Biography: England 1963

I am seven, I walk beside my mother along privet hedges, alive with collected dew, all the greens a gathering of listening leaves. I brush them and the water spills tiny moist tongues onto my hand, my cuffs. I wander along the pavement and take care where I put my shoes, the cracks are like fissures, my magical thinking is alive and flooded with possibility. I know that everything is alive. I listen with my ears and hands, my feet, my hair pulled tight from my small face in a braid. My shoes are my reminder of school; black, scuffed, strong, unbreakable, heavy, fully formed, impervious to my longing to take them off. I arrive at school through each hedge, my satchel full of stones. My ears fill with the clamour of voices, my eyes, the glare of oily yellow light and ordered desks. My forehead fills with a fog, and already I want to go home. We are copying words. When my attention drifts I am told off. I move further away still. My teachers don’t approve of me, assume stupidity or laziness but don’t notice disappointment, disenfranchisement. I long to be outside and since that story is not welcome here I fall silent. I colour in boxes. I fidget. I look at things I care nothing for.
Theory and Explanation:
Developing a Practice of Presence

Especially in the beginning, while a deep understanding of our subject is essential, it is easy to imagine that who we are as teachers is irrelevant to the subject we teach, in the same vein, who the children are can also become irrelevant in the modern preoccupation with teaching to the test. The subject then occupies an elevated place while student and educator are arranged below it. Meanwhile, the elephant in the room is our breathing presence, the life that will not keep still. It is within that space between set curriculum and lived curriculum that good teachers spend a good deal of time negotiating learning. Teaching is a physical job, it requires kinaesthetic connection, an awareness of where we physically are in a room, and how where we are effects the students around us. We may tend to ignore it but children notice our physicality, our animal nature; our perfume and the natural scent beneath it, our idiosyncratic mouths, our teeth, our hands, our posture as we walk across the room, the way we might absently touch our hair, pull on our shirts and clear our throats. They very quickly know when we are likely to sigh, gesture with our hands, raise our voices; they recognize our gestures of delight, when we glory in the flow of language, or our
dismay when our performance meets a kind of internal resistance, the moments, minutes or hours when we lose faith in our own teaching.

What happens when our performance meets our resistance? In such stalemate the voice looses resonance and becomes hollow, the body pales and becomes weighted or worse, numbs and has no presence at all. This state is reflected back in the body language of our audience. But even without this unfortunate signal, we know our story disconnects from ourselves, no longer reflecting the very thing we are talking about. It is unfortunate and disappointing when this happens in a class that shares our language and cultural location, but in a class with language and cultural differences, it is a disaster. Every teacher knows that to the extent that we do not engage attention, we become focus police instead and begin the quickly spiralling down monologue of prohibition and resistance.

A Jamaican Classroom

In a rural classroom I have visited in Jamaica, one poster dominates: it is a photograph of a solemn young Jamaican boy, on his cheeks flow a river of tears and the caption beneath reads “hard work and effort are the road to success” (anonymous, n.d.). Not that I object to hard work or the joy that can be generated through its application, but this poster has another more onerous tone; it suggests that learning is also a kind of grieving process, a humiliation, realized
at the cost of something or some way of being to which the Jamaican child is attached. What is it this Jamaican child must give up? Why should school make him weep?

I think this poster is representative of a cultural ripping. It reminds me of two issues in Jamaican education that are indeed painful. Firstly, there is the rip of mother tongue usage from the classroom for those students whose first and only language is Jamaican Creole. Secondly, and this relates to my first point, there is an insistence on using English, and only English to teach all subjects. This is very complicated territory. But such language biases suggest the privileging of one culture over another, indeed one class over another.

Subtly suggested here in such imagery are traces of the racially biased observation, once and in some circles still considered grounded in western scientific evidence, that children of African descent suffer a lower level of intelligence relative to their Caucasian and Asian counterparts (Rushton & Jenson, 2005, Lynn & Vanhanen, 2002). Thus goes the thinking; black children must work harder. This analysis has a long timeline, framed by the perception of some early Christian missionaries to Jamaica and later based on the results of intelligence “tests” and questionnaires conducted comparatively in various countries around the world.
In recent decades, the work of an array of linguists, psychologists, educators and various others has revealed the language biases inherent to such tests, and the cultural socio-economic lived lives such tests affirm or deny (Baugh, 1999, Delpit, 2006, Hooks, 1994, Kamin, 2006). Leon J. Kamin of Cape Town University has written a thorough and scathing critique of the tests and test result claims of such scholars as Rushton, Jenson, Lynn and Vanhanen, in his article, “African I Q and Mental Retardation” (2006). Such tests do not take into account cultural, ethnic, linguistic differences, but assume intelligence and clarity to be functions of Standard English language. Such tests are racially biased with erroneous assumptions imbedded in the premise of the questions.

Despite my tri-cultural heritage and my best conscious intentions to the contrary, it is sobering to recognize the internalized racism I myself have espoused. The difficulty is in the generous nature of the camouflage, the eagerness with which I have wanted to help or give back to Jamaica. Like a large house long boarded up, new post colonial definitions of give and take need air on every level and through every door and window, and need time for the fresh air, new thought, to do its work. What I wish to emphasize is that internalized racism is not something I can decide will no longer influence my thinking or motivation. While I strive to unravel them, the roots of racism are long and complicated, and much of the time, look dangerously similar to something far healthier. What complicates
things further is the evidence that internalized racism is also an aspect of Jamaican educational practice.

I am a product of my culture, yet I can choose to crack and fracture my cultural coat of assumptions. It is not a journey I find easy: at times I have experienced a vertigo-like nausea when I have looked down and seen that the ground beneath my feet is in fact, myth. Myths surrounding the language I speak are particularly hard to undress, so well rooted are they in my perceptions and assumptions about the relationship language has to intelligence, social worth, job worthiness, morality, quality of life, and on and on it goes. But the rewards of such undressing are promising when it comes to relationships in the classroom between teacher and student, between Creole speakers and English language speakers for instance. Rewards have to do with changed perceptions which in turn lead to changed attitudes, and a shift of teaching approaches in the classroom.

In order to disrupt the deficit view of Jamaican Creole language, and overturn ideas of literacy impoverishment among Creole speakers, I explored the idea of what Victoria Purcell-Gates describes as ‘literacy use as cultural practice’ (2006, p.128). She asks that educators take note of the home experience of students when it comes to reading and writing practices, but in a manner that registers all
the rich ways in which families communicate their experiences and life skills. Of an Appalachian family she worked with over a period of two years, Purcell-Gates writes:

In Donny's home, because neither parent could read nor write, the children grew up understanding that life did not include print. In fact, they did not understand that print existed as a meaningful semiotic system; it did not "mean," did not function in their lives. And they lived full and interesting lives without it. This was, I believe, a key insight I came to as I worked with and collected data from this family over two years. Donny, the little school-aged boy of the family, did not, could not, make sense of the beginning literacy instruction he received in school. Without an understanding that written language communicates—that it means, he had no idea what to do when he was "taught" to "sound out" words, to match beginning letter sounds, to fill in blanks using words he was supposed to have learned. (2006, p.127)

What Purcell-Gates goes on to address is this gap in experience with written and read language, such instruction is not geared to a deficit model but to a difference model: difference, not in value, but in experience (2006). Part of the key in the quote above is the line, "and they lived full and interesting lives without it" (ibid,
p.127). It is this understanding that we must take into our classrooms, it is from this base that we can draw and build on a child’s own words, and it is from here that we can expose and saturate a child’s world with new experiences in which people use reading and writing in everyday ways, and we can show them all this in ways that demonstrate our respect for their difference in cultural experience.

Jamaican Creole is a complex language with its own grammar and syntax, and most importantly, it is the language which most Jamaican children speak. Purcell-Gates (2006) writes of the necessity

... to accept [a child’s] language as that with which they learn, and use that language to help them begin their education. It is the need to conceptually separate the process of learning to read and write from the socio-political issues surrounding language use. Nonstandard, socially marked dialects do prevent people from succeeding in the middle-class world, but they do not prevent people from learning to read and write. If we insist that learners learn a different way of talking and communicating before, or as a condition of, learning to read and write, we leave them irrevocably behind.(p.137)

Purcell-Gates firmly addresses the need to begin from a student’s mother tongue, to allow the thinking, the creative problem solving, exploration, and the first
adventurous steps into reading and writing to roll from that tongue, with all its idiosyncratic shaping, its instinctive sounding; sounding out the beginning and endings, the vowels, into familiar music; allowing the mother tongue to lead the way into learning.

In conversation with a Jamaican colleague recently, a quietly spoken, fiercely loving principal and teacher in another rural all age school, I was given an eye opening vision of how she perceives the children experiencing learning in her classrooms (anonymous, personal communication, April 5th, 2008). She observes that while the teachers are directed to, and in fact do, conduct lessons in English, the children often wear expressions of bafflement, and meaning often evades them. Occasionally, when teachers choose to bridge a lesson with a phrase in Patois, the understanding grows. It is this principal’s contention that the children in her school would benefit immensely from lessons taught in Patois, and from English language lessons bridged consistently with Patois. And yet, Jamaican educational policy, while affirming the validity of this view, is slow to change (Ministry of Education, 2001, Senior, 2003, Thompson, 2007).

A volatile debate has raged in Jamaica for decades as to whether or not Patois or Jamaican Creole is a real language; a complex hybrid language of African Niger-Congo languages, English variants, and Spanish and Taino influences with its
own inherently consistent grammatical rules as linguist Fred Cassidy (1956) has claimed, or a limited pidgin English; incomplete, inadequate, degenerative, and inferior to Jamaican Standard English. The continuum between the two definitions is as long and complex as the arguments that define their value. However, sociolinguistics accepts as real the way each language is imbedded, and reproduced in sophisticated, coherent and to a large extent, predictable ways in societies. From a sociolinguistics point of view, Jamaican Creole has its own integrity. It is neither inferior nor superior to English.

In a recent survey, 80% of Jamaicans view Patois as a ‘language’, 69% feel it should be an official language alongside English, and 71% feel that Jamaican schools should be bilingual (Francis, 2005). Interestingly, recent official policy surrounding the use of Patois in schools is ambiguous (Martin-Wilkins, 2005). And while more and more evidence is presented for the necessity to teach with Patois to Patois speakers, using that language as a bridge to Standard English, objections against such usage are still paralyzing (Martin-Wilkins, 2005). While earlier public responses to the use of Patois in schools echoed the Ebonics debate in the United States, wherein a predominantly outraged public rejected the official use of African American vernacular in the classroom, and this despite its positive impact on learning dynamics (Baker, 2006), public opinion is shifting; a sense of crisis is driving a more ‘pragmatic’ response (Let’s be Pragmatic..., 2005,
Ignoring the Supercilious, 2006). However, students are still discouraged from speaking Patois at school.

Ironically it turns out that my own middle class English voice, while it is declared an ideal by the principals with whom I’ve worked, is probably the most silencing, confounding aspect of my teaching in Jamaica. Perhaps a full emersion into English would work: a life where English at school is followed by English at home, in the community and after school. This would depend of course on the confidence of the child in such a situation and crucially, the attitudes of those around her or him to Creole. In Jamaica, although a parent may demand Standard English be taught at school, they may not speak it at all themselves, at home, in the market place or in social situations. They may also not know when their children are failing in the classroom.

In 2007 in Jamaica, despite the enormous efforts of Caribbean based educators and the Caribbean Examination Council to upgrade and reform the curriculum, a literacy crisis is evident on many levels. It is reflected in the high percentage of students who do not continue with school after the age of ten or eleven, and of those that do, it is reflected in the large percentages of students failing to pass English and Mathematics requirements before leaving high school. Ralph Thompson writes, “in our non-traditional secondary schools (70% of the total
school population, mostly children of the poor) 88.54 per cent failed English and 90.3 per cent failed mathematics" (Gleaner, 2007). It is the young men in particular who are failing English. I can attest to the truth of Robotham's comment that these young men, if they find work at all, are in a labour market where they will "earn insecure, starvation wages" (Robotham, 2007). I meet these young men on the street and at my front door. This is the Jamaican reality in which context responsive storytelling needs to find relevance.

What I imagine is a literacy program that vents the intensity of youth experience, the particularity of their culture, the depth of their dreams or nightmares; that carries energy enough to bridge the language gap, and does so firstly, through the mother tongue. With the provision of an adequate social context that recognizes literacy expression as a nurtured, natural outpouring from an organic source, new pathways of social relevance might open up. The staggering Jamaican reality of a failing economy means that literacy projects cannot be an expensive affair; they need to be such that student involvement is ignited from the inside out in economically sustainable ways.

While immense challenges exist, there are continuing efforts to nurture a fertile foundation for positive literacy outcomes that do not diminish or marginalize Patois speakers while also addressing their need for skills in Standard English.
In recent years, Hubert Devonish of the University of the West Indies has developed a four year pilot project that teaches both Standard English and Jamaican Patois in four primary schools (The Bilingual Education Project, n.d., Morren & Morren, 2007, see also Devonish, 2006).

Despite challenges, texts written in Patois are slowly being integrated into the curriculum. Such a development allows children to study their own language and Standard English comparatively. As Baugh (1999) asserts in Out of the Mouth of Slaves, rather than disregarding the phonic difference between Creole and English, showing the difference allows speakers of another language or dialect to “crack the code”. Teachers need then to strive for fluency in both languages, regard for both languages, and care must be taken to not privilege one mode of expression over the other. When we privilege English in the Jamaican classroom we not only marginalize Patois but the children along with it: if, as in the words of Lisa Delpit, we are “the skin that we speak”, we must attend to Patois with as much care as we attend to the children themselves (Delpit, 2002).

This work in the schools is slow paced with funding and training constraints, and limited ongoing training and resources for teachers (Martin-Wilkins, 2005, Language Education Policy, 2001). The program so far focuses on single classrooms within the usual culture of school. I think the partnerships have to be
larger, must include whole school practices, and of course the supporting material must be available. Possibly because of funding constraints, it is the Standard English workbooks and texts that have been translated to Jamaican Creole, so the language is already once removed from its original music, from its meaning. Texts need to be freely written in Patois and then translated to English. It is difficult work this privileging of Patois in a school system where Patois is predominantly the natural language of student and teacher both and yet held at arm’s length.

As a fluent English speaker, without fluency in Patois, it becomes clear that my role is partly one of consistent, ongoing partnership that extends in several directions at once: I am partner to Patois speaking educators in the context of the school, I am in partnership with other storytellers who come with contrasting dialects to tell stories along with or instead of me, and I am in partnership with the children, the students themselves. This last would increase in relevance as Patois becomes a functioning, formal part of the curriculum. With the inclusion of Patois my own learner’s status becomes “normative”, my vulnerability as a student of Patois becomes just another factor of the program. It is my contention that the whole dynamic between our linguistic, cultural and socio-economic differences would shift so that being or not being correct becomes moot in an atmosphere of shared learning, vulnerability and wonder. The demystification of
second language learning, the revelation of steps; the normal confusion and then clarity regarding the use of any new knowledge, are modeled by the teacher, and the English teacher's interest and respect for Patois nurtures prestige for Patois speakers in the classroom.
John Baugh: Literacy work that leads home.

Inspired by the work of grassroots family literacy groups in the United States, linguist John Baugh created a method to bridge oral first language experience with written English literacy (1999, p.31). *Lyric Shuffle*, an accessible literacy game, was created in support of committed, non-white minority parents engaged in the battle to gain the best education for their children (ibid, p. 31). Important to Baugh’s conception of the game, was “that although their children wanted to become educated, they didn’t want to ‘act white’” (ibid, p. 32). Or, I would be inclined to turn this statement on its head and say Jamaican children and youth want to ‘act Jamaican’, and in many cases, this involves lyric infused dancehall, reggae, dub and rap. Here lies the Jamaican paradox; wherein, in civil society, in the shops, in the schools, on the street, life is tinged with a subtle, at times not so subtle, culture of humiliation, (where we all take turns being ignored or kept waiting, or bypassed) there is also an enormous and constant versatile, innovative, syllabically complex, creative and passionate proud vocal expression of Jamaican identity and pride. Whichever way it is coined, the sentiment of not wanting to ‘act white’, is clearly shared by Jamaican students; especially pre-teens and youths of 18 to 25 (who make up approximately 75% of Jamaica's adult
population, Senior, 2005). This observation provides insight into a chronic lack of motivation among Jamaican youth. According to Michael Bucknor, a professor of Jamaican-Canadian literature at the University of the West Indies, such objection to ‘white’ identity is compounded further by a popular Jamaican masculine street identity that sees ‘book learning’, reading and writing, as feminine and therefore to be avoided at all costs (personal communication, 2007). There is probably not a worse public insult for a Jamaican male than to be called any of the slang that suggests womanliness.

For many years Baugh has incorporated the use of popular lyric music into literacy games. He underscores that music plays a central role in the lives of most students, and no less so for African Americans. He describes how “music also represented a source of rebellion, as politicians tried to censor lyrics of ‘gangsta rappas’ who glamorized various acts of violence, including crimes against women, property, and the police. Record companies were conspicuously complicit in these trends...” (ibid,p.32). Jamaican dancehall lyrics are prone to such material, record companies and radio stations are certainly complicit in such trends here in Jamaica, and I do not mean to suggest that such lyrics be used in classrooms. Elsewhere in this thesis, I discuss the difference between taboo words that liberate vocabulary and a use of words that deflects, resists or even repels engagement. I acknowledge that this is a complex, exacting matter of
discernment for educators. However, Baugh found (and I suspect the same might be true of Jamaican popular music) that there are enough popular lyricists working in a language and subject range to provide excellent literacy models. What Baugh offers is motivational, engaging, and cost effective; this last is profoundly relevant for Jamaica:

All successful students are motivated, and many unsuccessful students are unmotivated; there are no obvious racial correlates to this fact. However, many successful students are economically endowed in ways that the vast majority of minority students are not, and it is this economic inequality, reinforced by educational inequality, that separates the rhetoric of equal opportunity from the social reality of unequal access to quality schools (Carnoy). (Baugh, p.32)

This observation is worth quoting at length particularly in regard to Jamaica where All Age Schools operating with limited resources still predominantly serve the poor, and where inadequate non-traditional high school placements are streamed, limited and won through competition at the primary level. Baugh’s Lyric Shuffle was developed with the intention that it be accessible to all such populations.
The *Lyric Shuffle* patterns itself after an old practice called *follow the bouncing ball* (ibid, p.32). Baugh describes its use in early movie theatres where piano players led audiences to sing along with lyrics as they appeared on screen, and he describes how later this became a popular way to teach poor immigrants how to read.

The pervasive importance of music for Jamaican youth cannot be overstated. From Ska to Rock Steady to Reggae to Dancehall, music has emerged from the very raw roots of the island; Toots Hibbert interprets reggae to mean “untidy or scruffy. But then it start [sic] to mean...coming from the people” (Hibbert as cited in Senior, p. 412).

It is precisely from the so-called ‘rough’, ‘uncultured’ people of the Kingston ghettos that the music that has captured the world was born, and the poverty-stricken neighbourhoods continue to be the wellspring from which it continually renews and reinvents itself. Reggae has grown directly out of the experience of the Jamaican people. (Senior, 2003, p.412)

To make use of it in the way Baugh suggests would require discernment and acceptance both, and yet its genuine nature puts what is termed reggae in an unsurpassable category of culturally rooted lyrics: meaningful language born of mother tongue literacies. Literacy text books written in Standard English simply
do not have the same power. A great deal of stigma is associated and attached to texts considered representative of the dominant culture, and this is why using student chosen lyric material becomes deeply significant.

_Lyric Shuffle_ deals in the re-arrangement of lyrics, words and phrases into other original songs, poems, lyrics or even short stories (ibid, p.35). There are several levels of challenge possible in these games. By way of example, and also to introduce an issue very apropos to literacy challenges in Jamaica, I will describe one here, “the most elementary _Lyric Shuffle_ game” (ibid, p.36). It begins with one letter; in his example Baugh uses the consonant “B”. The student circles all the /b/B/’s he or she can find:

That exercise in turn would be followed by a discussion of /b/ in unambiguous context (e.g., /b/ in ‘big’ vs. /b/ in ‘lamb’). While this may seem obvious to readers of this volume, these are the very kinds of inconsistencies that make reading difficult for any student, but even more difficult for students whose native dialect is substantially different from the spoken standard dialect(s). (ibid, p.36)

To my view, Baugh hits upon a literacy issue pivotal to English comprehension in Jamaica. With the assumption that Standard English (and not Patois), is the appropriate language of instruction in Jamaican schools, whole arrays of
linguistic issues are inadvertently missed, and the transition from orality to literacy becomes guesswork (ibid, p.33). The most challenging element in all of this lies, not with the details (once they become clear), but with the educator's ability to set aside judgement concerning a student's chosen source of lyrics or prose. Nevertheless, it remains important for an educator to remain discerning, to know his or her boundaries of tolerance, and in all fairness, make these clear to students.
Personal Biography: Travelling Lessons

On the road towards the village, the car rocks and vibrates. The metallic, mono stream of love rock plays on the radio and dips in and out of radio wireless contact as my driver negotiates unpaved, rutted roads. When I am relaxed this drive is lovely, the red earth road, overgrown hedgerow, roughly cultivated fields and oversized Guango trees extend a fecund and glorious invitation, the smell is a sweet mixture of tamarind, citrus and the sweat of trees like nutmeg. Goats travel single file to the side of the road, white egrets follow brown cattle across the fields. Paul is giving me lessons in Patois, I want to try the sounds out with my own tongue, I gaze out the window, I am looking for ways to describe this country Jamaica.

“How would you say, this country is like a paradise?”

Paul’s language mastery extends from a thick Patois well into the Standard English range. He is a playwright, poet, mechanic, welder, driver, goat farmer, and involved communitarian. He takes a moment to respond. Answering in a slightly Anglicized Patois he says, “Fil mi country cominlik a ‘eaven”. I speak my
thoughts to him in English, he translates my phrases to Patois and I write it all down as best I can as we go:

Fil mi country cominlik a ’eaven/ It a float like a pearl silver pon de sea/Step pon di san it feel lik de touch of a sofhan woman/’Ot an jenkle, wet an coal/ Mechinyu feel good

The vowels are round and sensual and lilt like song. Two years before in another grade six classroom in Jamaica, the children had laughed, leaned over their bellies in delight when I had practised some lines of Patois in front of them. They were key phrases from a Caribbean folktale that needed the shift away from my English accent into something more sonorous. I am still an awkward beginner when it comes to Patois. Ask me to speak it and I will be lost in thought for a moment before I can trace it in the wide sea where new language goes to tentative roost inside me. When I speak aloud Patois to Jamaican children it guarantees comic affect. They fall about laughing every time.

At Beacon Hill, the greatest moment of failure by my own measure came one rainy Saturday afternoon as I sat eagerly waiting for six older teenage boys (I had met two weeks before) to come to story club. I had done most of the talking; offered theatre, poetry, film, writing, and song among other options to explore together. These young men were dressed immaculately, gazed with steady eye contact while I described the possibilities. If I had stepped beyond my own
enthusiasm I may have noticed they were too quiet. I expected them all back in two weeks. They were all reminded. Not one came. I stared out through the rain under the shallow shelter of an aluminum lip of roof, seated on a concrete step. The spectacular view of distant sea was shrouded in a dull grey mist. A paper bag, sodden, ripped, plastered to the playground earth was at my feet. Its sweetness consumed, decay eminent, and use fulfilled. I thought, only paper, only water. I took out a pen and a scrap of paper and started to furiously write down all that I felt. My quest to understand began in earnest that day; to know why, with so much talent, energy, beauty, dramatic ability, need for English as a currency, need for English as a passport to the rest of the world...and most young men do want to leave Jamaica to seek their fortune, why the young men avoided the club. However naive that question may have been, it was a real one, and I asked it of many people.

I came to understand that Jamaican male masculine identity is measured in vocal skills rarely written or studied on the page. I learned about the survival value of certain kinds of posturing in public places, the value of silence, and the social, political and personal power of explosive, opulent vocal displays expressed through dancehall style and rap related lyrics. The value of these lyrics is experienced as secondary to performance and vocal dexterity (Senior, 2003). I also learned that the price of literacy has been humiliation for many young men,
and the price is too high to pay. Jamaica carries a shadowy culture of humiliation, so that beside a readiness to extend support, real kindness and respect (often my experience in Jamaica), there exists an easy cruelty and callous disregard of the needs of others.
Classroom and Community Observation and Anecdote

PumPum Poetry

When do words become meaningful for Jamaican youth? How could I have approached these young men differently? Meeting Sajoya (Sandra Joy Alcott), poet, playwright, natural rights activist, radio talk show host, and entertainment lawyer for over 23 years in Kingston, marked the beginning of possible answers to these questions. Her poetry, a genre she has coined *PumPum Poetry*, has received positive acclaim and seeded and inspired other work in this genre in Jamaica and internationally. *PumPum* is street language for vagina, and PumPum Poetry as a poetic form is a deliberate appropriation of words that have been relegated to representations of shame in Jamaica. In this context, these words are recharged with uplifting, positive meaning, self respect and responsibility are reified, made wholesome through language that names, claims and affirms the beauty, symmetry and resilience of the sensual, sexual body. PumPum poetry is at once cathartic, erotic, dialogic, educational and entertaining, at times it sings, and it moves. Sajoya has been invited to perform her poetry before as many as two thousand teenage girls in Jamaica. Her performance and the dialogue it
engenders have had discernable positive impact on the students' school lives (Alcott, personal communication, April 4th, 2008).

In Jamaican society, where women are vulnerable to sexual abuse and heavily prescribed codes of sexual behaviour where sex is often a commodity dangerously linked to masculine prowess, pride and social status, this poetry has become a counter force. Through it, "black women are defining their own sexuality in a positive, unique way, sending a message of self worth and self-empowerment" (Alcott, [poster], 2007). Physical and sexual abuse are such large and pervasive issues in Jamaica, I have found any attempt to mention them in this thesis has tended to either understate their significance, or alternatively throw the important concerns I attempt to tackle in this thesis into shadow (Senior, 2005, see also Tafari, 2006). However, while I write little about these issues, they remain deeply relevant to this work.

I met Sajoya by chance at my cousin's funeral. He had been a popular radio host, a cultural icon; he had supported and encouraged Sajoya through a complicated initiation into the world of Jamaican radio hosting. She happened to sit next to me through the three hour service, and we found ourselves in easy conversation afterwards. She had at that time reduced her law case load to almost part-time, and was instead focused on developing her poetry. At the time, Sajoya was talk
show host for *Frank and Upfront*, a popular midnight Kingston talk show on RJR 94 FM.

I invited Sajoya and Chandis to bring their poetry and way of interacting to Beacon Hill community. The event proved to be pivotal to a new understanding dawning in me about the power of context responsive storytelling.

The silhouettes of fifteen people gathered in the schoolyard, and while I worried we were late we were probably exactly on time. Inside the classroom we were a handful of mature adults, two men, the rest women, most were teenagers, a few children, Sajoya and Chandis. I was pleased with the turn out and the numbers steadily increased with each poem, song and story throughout the evening. The failing light and dim electrical lamp were perfect for story, the audience expectant, Sajoya and Chandis well prepared. The gathering had already altered me. Without a trace my role shifted from visiting teacher to visitor, from needing to speak to not wanting to speak at all. I introduced the women briefly; I had already spread the word and distributed flyers about the kind of poetry our guests performed. I turned the floor over to the poets.

Sajoya began with definitions of emancipation, a historically large issue in Jamaica in a population predominately descendent from slaves. She wove a brief summary with occasional direct, individual greetings and inquiry, and
seamlessly moved her talk from Jamaica’s emancipation history to an intensely sensual, passionate distillation of personal experience made public and universal through poetry. This first song-poem, sung and, except for the clap of hands on thighs, moved to without percussion, celebrated women’s sexual nature and, with intensely sensual prose, directed a fierce call to women to demand respect for their bodies. This was an articulate distillation of experience combined with unencumbered, large, rhythmic, joyful movement. In this performance, the beauty of the body, the need to protect and respect it, was a constant refrain. This was the anthem of the evening. The poem riveted our attention, the issue broad and right for the moment, perhaps it reached into private lives and engaged core concerns in the room. We had all come to vivid life.

To put this in its Jamaican context, this original poetry was conceived within an island wide movement of spoken, sung word. In dancehalls, which may be fields, beaches, yards or rooms, the word has become a lightning rod for competing deejays, a medium for the decimation of sexual, gender politics and expressions of machismo and is claimed to be a forum for women to claim power as well (Senior, 2003, p.147). There are dark extremes of this expression in rap with misogynistic, homophobic images of violence, killing and punishment. Sajoya and Chandis’ use of poetry follows another vein, combining the ubiquitous peace
focused sentiments of the Rastafarian religion with a feminist view for the
emancipation of women.

The poets’ dialogic performance crosses boundaries between public protest and a
profoundly positive and private reclamation and provokes and confronts
women’s ways of coping and caring as much as it protests and confronts male
attitudes and behaviour. Indeed it is the young women that Sajoya was most
interested in hearing from as the evening progressed.

I think what occurred in the schoolroom was very unusual, and this was
confirmed by the response of the young men. They were there at the beginning,
and as the evening progressed they continued to come in the door and line the
back of the room. They hovered between voyeur and participant and at least
three of the men talked earnestly into the space provided for dialogue. It was the
first time I had heard the candid concerns of these young men.

Sajoya continually returned to the young women in the audience, and asked for
their response. It was a focused dialogue, an encouragement, expressed with
respect. The women responded sparsely at first, but as the evening progressed
they talked about the poems, mirroring the issues back in their own words.

Sajoya continued with another poem telling the tale of a young woman’s journey
through love, pregnancy, marriage, betrayal, divorce, love again. This poem
wove in the experience of many Jamaican women. The salient feeling of this performance was a guileless expression of self respect extended as an invitation. As an observer, I was moved by the extent to which the poets embodied their words; theirs was a whole body performance, vulnerable, unpredictable and generous.

The poets spoke and sang probably less than ten poems, but the structure of the performance was such that poems would become songs and songs became dialogue in a fluid transaction. The audience responded with enthusiasm and requests for a return visit. The atmosphere was a mix of relief, excitement, embarrassment, self-consciousness and a quickening towards new possibilities. I watched and listened as the young men I had hoped to work with began to speak, articulate their interest and appreciation. My thinking returns to education and I see how the quickening in the room happened out of what mattered (see Stock, 1995, 2001 for more on this point).

This whole interaction was not part of usual school culture, and I realized as the evening progressed that the kind of outcomes I wish for with the young women and men can only occur in a community atmosphere, unfettered by traditional curriculum requirements. The challenge is to use the curriculum in service to life lived, not the other way around. There is a misconception with which we are all
familiar, born of stress and institutional pressure, that covering a lot of ground requires only moving faster. While covering curriculum is premised as learning a lot, it is no way to teach. I realize I am stepping into a quagmire of issues here. The main thought I wish to convey is about the nature of quickening, by this I mean where and how a vivid engagement with subject and a desire to extend, relate an understanding about the subject are a vital mix of ingredients in the classroom. It does not mean the abandonment of rigour, but the inspiration of it.

Additionally, it may seem that this evening's entertainment is a far cry from what might happen in grade four or six classrooms, but there is a connecting point, and it is to do with that link between subject and enthusiasm. For the majority of students, much of the time it is the fuel, the spark, that is lacking, not the engine, the mechanism to learn. We have layered, piled and linked curriculum until it is separate, a solution on which learning is appended. And yet we all learn best through engagement.
Classroom and Community Observation and Anecdote

The Sistren Theatre Collective

Shortly after I met Sajoya she introduced me to the women of the Sistren Theatre Collective, a grassroots women’s collective who since 1980, have used community theatre, dance and most recently, photography workshops, to at once entertain and educate, workshop and tackle community issues in the war torn inner city of Kingston (Drummond, 2006, Green, 2006, Drusine, n.d.). The original collective worked entirely through theatre, “to get women to find solutions to their problems and present them transformed into drama, song, and poetry” (Drusine, n.d.). The women I meet are buoyant and purposeful. While their office space is functional and adequate, their dress is breathtaking. Jewellery and clothing are sophisticated and artful, and suggest to me identities steeped in self respect and a socio-political stance at least partly grown out of Rastafarianism. As Myrna McKenzie relates some of her own experiences in the inner city, it becomes clear that wearing such an identity might contribute to physical protection in the all too real war zones. On at least one occasion,
Myrna's dress has identified her to gunmen as a Sistren, and hence, they have spared her life.

At dusk one evening in Kingston, I travel with Myrna and her colleagues into Hannah Town. I am grateful to ride in a neutral car through the inner city. We pull into a large bare playground, with a wire mesh fence surround, stamped red earth, a sparse scatter of trees and, at one end, several two story concrete buildings built squarely around a central courtyard. Along one wall of the open yard, a string of bare, ordinary light bulbs are draped in a half moon against red fabric. In front of this, the stage is empty except for four enormous speakers, a turntable and a worn tarmac floor. Wooden seats and benches are arranged in a long semi-circle facing the front.

People arrive in waves, and in true island style, the performance is not to start for a good hour and a half after the advertised start time. The yard gradually fills; school children of all ages, several young teenage mothers with their newborns and a mature audience of mostly women fill the schoolyard. On the surrounding roofs, the young men begin to appear, framing the courtyard like a visiting flock of large exotic birds.

This gathering is an event in itself. People chat and catch up, children including toddlers run free to be picked up and put down by relatives and friends, and
once or twice, even strangers such as myself, as I occasionally cradle a curious
child in my lap. In this context, none of this freedom seems strange. I feel safe
and exhilarated in the company of this community. I am not the only Westerner;
there is one other younger woman on a Fulbright scholarship from New York.
She had linked herself to Sistren soon after arriving in Kingston and affirms for
me the necessity of Jamaican partnerships. But that is another story.

The young men on roofs are dressed immaculately in vibrant singing colours and
earthy tones; they are self aware and positioned with a good balcony view of the
stage and the whole courtyard. Teenage women, dressed as though for a funky
gala event in jeans and exotic shirts, complicated hairdos, with prams and cell
phones in hand, come and go from the yard. I am aware of worlds within worlds
of social relevance that I know nothing about. I am welcomed by a founding
member of the Sistren, a woman of perhaps seventy-five or more. There are all
ages here; middle, late middle aged, elders and new infants. The only cohort
visibly absent are the mature men; any male of twenty-five or older. I had arrived
with one (Myrna’s friend), and I am aware of only one other in the audience.

With the gathering dusk, a young deejay approaches the turntable and sets a
soulful mood with a slow paced reggae LP; this is the classic reggae of the eighties
still popular in Jamaica. The sound from four enormous speakers is deep and
clear and the deejay proves to have a talent for mixing up the pace and the mood. Next enter two djembe drummers, adding a live sound to the taped music. The effect, as the light changes and the bare light bulbs glow dully against red fabric over the earth packed ground of the stage seems to me for all the world like a set out of Westside Story, the classic New York City gang musical (Laurents, 1961).

Five sets of dancers take the stage, first are the five year olds and the age increases with each performance, and last are the teenagers and youth. They move with purpose, energy, succinct timing in complicated, repeating, contrasting patterns that seem at once African, American and Jamaican. Every now and then they crack the rhythm of their performance in a way that leaves me breathless. Unexpectedly, they change, subvert the surface patterns, never allowing me, as audience, to grow complacent. They seem to generate or conjure up from the ground an ever more increasing source of energy and the effect is trance like and timeless.

Towards the end, the Parent Teacher Association, comprising six middle-aged women, adorn themselves with school uniforms and explore possible peace resolutions for playground fights. The community audience never quite get over the costumes, laughter and hoots drown out the dialogue. But the women are
acting out a petty argument, and a peaceful conclusion. I wonder what the impact of this resolution will be for the community.

A few weeks later I return to Sistren and Kingston to see four inner city communities; Hannah Town, Fletcher’s Land, Barbican and Grant’s Pen, “who may under normal conditions be warring factions” (Drummond, 2006) perform separately and then together at the Ward Theatre on a full scale dilapidated Victorian stage. The set is corrugated tin siding spray painted with the emblems of four communities. This is true to the corrugated aluminum walls that separate one home from the next in the inner city of Kingston. Gang warfare is a recent memory for each of these groups, which makes the performance that follows poignant. The pattern of youngest to oldest repeats itself on stage, this time culminating with two hundred dancers. The space exactly fits them with no room to spare, and the impression is as if each child of five or six or teenager of nineteen lets go into the pattern of the dance. The children of four communities move as one. There is very little other choice and not a single child falls. This is a conduit for pride, for tangible creative, vivid peace, for an expression of unique and culturally grounded power.

Looking around me I realise that reasons for the success of this event across communities so recently in serious conflict with each other are hugely
complicated. My own exploration has led me to wander if this African dance
expression is not also a conduit of cultural memory, an identity whose roots
travel below the conflicted silencing weight of colonial influence. It seems this
deeper memory as portrayed through such dance is surprisingly not in conflict
with assimilation, but exists beneath it, like water that runs below ground, only
to emerge clear and fresh.

I realize I am guilty of sentimentalising an African homeland experience. Tribal
violence, in parts of the sub-continent of Africa, is a real and present danger, and
there are currents between some family groups in Jamaica that are revengeful
and cruel. There is not the space within this thesis to give full and balanced
justice to these issues. My main emphasis here is with a positive cultural
expression; an aspect, through movement, dance and music, that ignites delight
and cultural renewal across time and borders.

As I sit in the audience, I feel a new understanding taking root in my own
thinking. Like that moment when the tongue can feel the shape of a word and yet
not re-member it, I hover on the threshold of understanding. I am pulled toward
the performance. My body leans and reaches with the unbound pace of passion
in a young boy's feet. He is emblematic: In the audience, there are waves,
currents of competitive whispers, then thundering acknowledgement across
differences. The theatre is like a birthing room, the health of the infant spirit, the 
\textit{zeitgeist} of the performance, not guaranteed, but hope carries me. This 
performance is like conversation, it is exclamation and question mark, story and 
history, and through it, on this day, several generations of Jamaicans speak a 
single language.
Theory and Explanation: Beginnings of a Classroom Model

The greatest challenge for contemporary western storytellers is to recognize and embody a story as an extension of life, not separate from it. When I imagine a blueprint for the use of CRS (context responsive storytelling) I imagine a democratic, intentionally inclusive framework. In such an environment all stories are honoured and also useful.

CRS is community rich storytelling. It is invitational; exchange oriented and honours the response it elicits. In contemporary society it requires courage to story tell from the middle of the room; to be in the midst of a cross current of stories. More than ever, we are in rooms where several differing standards, value systems, belief systems and cultural norms are all present at once. In defence, many educators still inadvertently protect and foster a colonizing worldview; our institutions still reward us for such a stance.

To know which worldview, what values we promote through our teaching, to pay attention to the impact our orientation has on our children, is to engage a daily practice of reflection (Hooks 1994, Rodgers, 2006, Stock, 1995 & 2001, Kohl,
2006). Pedagogical praxis is an ongoing necessity for all educators, should they wish to keep their teaching alive and relevant. Such praxis requires humility. From experience I know that it takes practice to ask in reference to literacy, Why tell stories in the classroom? And allow myself to be disrupted, off balanced by the answers that emerge. This is a question to ask each day, not only in times of impasse but, in the Buddhist sense, the Socratic sense of practice with humility.

True Story: Issues with writing personal biography

Paradoxically, courage to tell stories in a context responsive manner also requires a sense of safety in the telling. This is especially so when it comes to true stories. Just as writers know that a certain amount of time must pass in order to describe in writing emotionally charged events, so it is also true that oral storytelling themes that are emotionally charged for the teller must be allowed time to develop fully. We might long to tell one particular story, and find months or even years go by before we can do it justice in the telling. To rush a story (ours or our students’) is to miss crucial images and metaphors that will render our telling meaningful; after all, in the context of this thesis when we tell a story from our lives, it is not a report, but a vivid re-enactment. Conflict resolution theorist, Dr. Larry Dunn has written a wonderful phrase, “the head can set direction for the heart, but the heart must arrive at its own pace” (as cited in Sutherland, 2005, p.108). Dunn applies this wisdom to a ‘forgiveness process’, but it is to my mind equally
applicable to the embodiment of stories we have lived through and wish to retell.

Another piece of writer's wisdom, crucial to oral storytelling and related to this necessity to gain distance from material, is to write and tell a less charged story, related to the one we long to tell; one that still requires vulnerability in the telling, but at the same time is a manageable risk. For instance, in my personal biography entries for this thesis, only one story tackles an event head on. This is partly because some years have passed since and the story has ripened in me. In Jamaica we will say of ripe fruit that it has become fit. I think this is a wonderful metaphor for a piece of personal biography that is fully developed in us; that is it becomes ripe and digestible, and we become fit to write and tell it.

Other stories are still too green, too new, my mother's death for instance, to tackle head on. Instead I have approached events from a gentler, more manageable angle wherein my heart, in Dunn's sense, is still arriving at death. I choose a moment of sickness leading up to death, not death itself. (It is possible that even this story will not be ready as the deadline for this thesis arrives). We need not be overly concerned about chronologies; after all, complete chronologies are not necessarily stories, indeed I would argue, they cannot even be relied upon for truths. This is because events as they happen are read through all of our
senses. For instance, death has a scent to it, and through protracted illness it enters the bedroom long before the event of death itself. To forget this, to imagine it has no bearing on the emotional field before death, is to leave out an important truth.

*True Story, Myth, and Creation Stories*

In vibrant indigenous societies, traditional stories are again being told within a community context, with nature, the cosmos and our human relationship to it all as reoccurring themes. To observe nature, to reflect upon the patterns and cycles in the natural world, to include earthy natural elements, references to earth, to body, to land, literally ground us, and reflect back to us possible ways to respond to a changing universe. As well, natural earthly wonders and the whole array of current environmental challenges are connected to the heart of story. Our current equilibrium as we journey on the earth has never more clearly depended on our awareness and healthy response to our shared environmental experience.

As mentioned earlier, how we perceive the cosmos and how we perceive our spiritual existence manifests within it is what Das refers to as our *mythical source of meaning* (as cited in Sutherland, 2005, P.36). To ignore or trivialize the cosmological spiritual element, the doings of mythical beings, the ethical, moral and spiritual challenges represented in a culture’s story, is to erode the
powerfully spirited container wherein the story lingers, and to further disconnect community and individuals from their *mythical source of meaning* (Scheub 1998, Abrahams 1983, Chamberlin 2003, Yashinsky, 2005). This is difficult territory partly because issues relating to belief cut close to the heart of discord. In Jessie Sutherland’s terminology, a *worldview pluralism* is required; a commitment to work generously across faith, race and cultural borders (Sutherland, 2005, Hooks, 1994). In terms of CRS this means the willingness to expand our symbolic literacy across cultures, to build stories that weave together cultural difference and sameness.

*Myth, Folktale, and Journeys into Fantasy*

The existence of contradictions, ambiguities, things that *cannot possibly be so* alongside other linear temporal events in stories, are to be understood not as embellishments but necessary conditions to bring about an emotional metaphoric and poetic entry into the world of story, into trope (Scheub 1998, Chamberlin 2003). Our mythologies, creation stories and beliefs about life are full of what could be conceived as contradictions, yet the inherent tensions in these contradictions rivet our attention; their telling deepens our interest in the cosmos, and challenges us to in some way confront the fundamental paradox of our existence.
Community Uses of Storytelling

Many models exist to make practical, social use of story. There has long been a movement internationally in schools towards literacy practice through political activism. Children are invited to write letters to a variety of community leaders, to create literature to raise awareness and funds for causes, to partner with less advantaged schools elsewhere in the world to share knowledge and resources, and participate in public protests (City Montessori School, 1992), and to use story in theatre to raise awareness of critical community issues and promote change (in Senegal for instance; Tostan, 2007). The consequences to literacy mastery are exponentially increased with the inclusion of performance before a variety of audiences that matter to children and youth.

Ritual

Performance of story fosters another service; it provides the perfect psychological, social, educational and communal space for ritual. Ritual in turn, can mantle the perfect space for a "re-storying' of narratives" (Sutherland, 2005, p.121). Ritual is where stories can become transformational, where children and youth can participate in individual or shared narratives with which to mourn, to heal, to celebrate resiliency and to re-imagine the world in which they are growing up; to re-imagine but also to nurture the human qualities of dignity, resiliency and creativity in the societies around them (Chamberlin, 2003). Such
storytelling links a student’s literacy efforts directly with the world. To storytell in a manner that honours differing cultures requires reconciliation. Jessie Sutherland refers to reconciliation as “the parallel process of personal and political transformation from systems of dominance to relationships of mutuality” (2005, p.150). Such relationships of mutuality are fecund ground for grasping and finding meaning in language and literacy.

Creative Imagination and Symbolic Literacy

Creative imagination coupled with storytelling in a multicultural classroom can birth new inclusive, complex pictures, new arrangements of images, themes and symbols. As in Betty Rosen’s work with folktales, it is not necessary to ask for this kind of creativity in the classroom directly, it is not a moral imperative necessarily imposed from the outside but happens as a consequence of storying from a perspective of inclusion (1988). There is a generosity born of knowing our voice will not be silenced, that we will not be annihilated; on the contrary, a new sense of purpose emerges when those around us become curious about our interpretations, our solutions (Stock, 1995, Hooks, 1994, Rogers, 2006). The layering of images, the weave in of new ways of moving, dancing and miming in with the traditional provide ways to articulate emergent identities.
CRS is one possible conduit for the harmonious articulation of influences that are religious, spiritual faiths but also deeply invested symbolic literacies. In the classroom, writer, teacher and “Distinguished Professor of English” at City College, bell hooks [sic] encourages us to become symbolically literate across culture and race lines (1994). As a storyteller in Jamaica, with such a convergence of influences and histories all encoded into a single cultural classroom experience, I have become curious about the symbolic literacies, the mythical source of meaning each child brings to our shared world. To become literate in these symbolic literacies is at first to acknowledge my ignorance of them. It requires a surrender of my western model templates, the assumption, for instance, that I already know what is known in my classroom, based on my past knowledge, experience and scholarship concerning children.

To give up that I already know what is known in my classroom does not mean to give up research and inquiry; just as bell hooks trained herself to become literate in cultural codes, I too can become literate, with humility and over time, to the symbolic literacies of the cultures that surround me. To engage in such a process is to also imagine that there is always more being communicated than I can read; that like me, the children and youth with whom I interact are complicated, uniquely and variously influenced with intact and vulnerable social codes. By this I do not mean to suggest that they can easily tease out and explain these
symbolic literacies. Part of my responsibility as storyteller is to attempt a mirroring of such literacies, even in a rudimentary manner, and to make room for a conversation through story that includes them.

To access relevant symbolism is to begin from where I am and weave in those relevant elemental symbolic literacies that emerge, one by one. Context responsive stories emerge from conversations begun long before I enter the room as storyteller. There is time for research and collection to imbue myself with the symbols and motifs I find. While I am not a griot, a traditional teller and praise singer or master of an oral history, the muddle of my ancestry may have another purpose that thankfully requires only an elemental understanding, even if on several fronts. What I do is emergent from my own story and those stories around me, the community’s history, the personal biographies as well as the myths that inform community practice, and together we construct shared pictures, we consider which symbols work for us. There are different ways to approach building a bank of symbols and they all involve the necessity of relationship, a willingness to be disrupted by differing views with the intention to work across differences (Sutherland, p.102). Speaking over, under or beyond the symbolic landscape in a room has no impact. Symbols only have as much power as they have currency across lives.
Personal Biography: From My Bedroom

I sit across from the long view at the back of the house. Hummingbirds drink like weighted bumblebees from the feeders and flash through the air, drop on each other’s heads, their high purr breaks the peace, encouraging an endless chase. This is an urban country cottage, there are no boom boxes this afternoon, but the soft, urgent call of a distant calf, and layers of bird call, sprawl of hills and an ecstasy of trees that spread and breathe, lean back to the horizon. I have no idea what to write. Somehow I must brave this period. Not knowing. Allowing the tide its distance. Like that night Wynn and I sat perched on a rock, well out in the bay, the mud bottom of the sea under moon glow, still for hours, and utterly mysterious below us.

Now with the birdsong beat other noises, the atom shattering frequency of a passing car’s radio, repetitive rev of motor, distant siren, and the sound of another voice at the door seeking food or money in a crushing economy. The scream of pigs in a neighbour’s shed alerts me to trouble in paradise. I remember the boy, one of several, for whom my father bought shoes and school lunches, has killed a woman. Hired by her husband, he and two other teenagers did it brutally. I haven’t asked how. I see the shadow that passes over my father’s kind
face when he says ‘brutally’ and don’t want to carry the ghost of that death in my head. My friend, the Canadian poet, Richard Osler said to me today, “bracket the horror with beauty”, and this is what I try to do. If I step out to the market, there are people there without food to eat. They are selling bread by the slice now. Not even a loaf of bread is possible.

But outside my window a self seeding papaya grows alongside white flowering hibiscus, through my garden door, banana leaves rise and fall in cooling wind rapping coconut palm and tall cedar tree. Beyond them rise up the green thickly treed hills. The air itself sings this view; the touch of it lingers thick like ocean.

This house soothes, this island is a house on fire. The water I need to put out the flames is at the bottom of a long and jagged shaft. I must be calm, my bucket must go down this well gently and return the same way, or I will lose its precious contents.

There is a mythical creature in Greek mythology said to live its life by another well somewhere in Arabia. It is a solitary bird whose song at dawn is exquisitely pure, so lovely that even the Sun god will stop his chariot to listen. Perhaps this bird, the phoenix, sings this sweetly as the Sun god passes because its life cycle is entrusted to the hot flames of the sun: when it is ready to die it builds a nest of sweet aromatic wood and lights it, to be consumed in its flames. Out of the ashes
a new vibrant young phoenix will emerge that will live, alone, for hundreds and hundreds of years, the only one of its species until it too is consumed in fire, and so the cycle continues. At the beginning of each cycle the young solitary phoenix gathers the ashes of its ancestor and embalms them in an egg of myrrh and returns this to the altar of the Sun god in the city of the Sun, Heliopolis. Then it retraces its flight to earth where it is said to live in a cool well.

This bird who is drawn to water in life and transforms itself at death through fire reminds me of the Rain Bird, a beautiful large cuckoo indigenous to Jamaica. His breast is copper red, his long tail variegated with dark blue grey and white stripes. An unusually long body relative to his shorter wings effects the manner in which he moves; he hops along bare branches, his head tilted down, his tail dropped almost perpendicular. His hunched movement has earned him the name of Old Man Bird, but I prefer his other name, Rain Bird. His appearance is rare where we live in St. Ann. When he does come he will perch high on the far reaching branches of the Guango tree. With his size and beauty and rare appearance he has become seraphic to my mind: An emblem. A few weeks before I left for Jamaica last year I dreamed of him, his long body bluish-grey and his tail perpendicular and a fiery red; as is the way in dreams, it disturbed him not at all that his tail was vivid swirling red: burning on fire. In my dream I was
surprised and pleased to see him just as I am to see him here in our own yard

and exclaimed, "The Rain Bird is here! The Rain Bird is here!"
Unexpectedly, I came across an echo of my own organic storytelling experience in Harold Scheub’s book, *Story* (1998). He came to his own view through observation and research among the Xhosa, Zulu, Swati, and Ndebele of southern Africa between the years of 1968 and 1976 (xi). He writes of the layering of images as a palimpsest, where one image reflects and subtly shifts the meaning of another; the storyteller’s biography, the history of her community, each audience member’s life experience, the doppelganger effect of repeated motifs all worked and organized together by the teller into trope (1998). He writes of the animation of these images achieved through the use of rhythm, in music, in the soundscape of language itself and also through the body’s gesturing, the patterning of rhythm and image working like a choreographed performance; body and rhythm, voice and language and also the crucial presence of audience quickening the narrative to trope (1998). He writes further:

> Metaphor, the end of image, narrative, and pattern, is the inner realm of the story. It is the aesthetic experience, the storyteller’s sanctorum where, alchemically, the message is generated. Here is where patterning achieves
its poetic fullness, where the two kinds of imagery join, where the audience is imbued with meaning. (ibid, p.15)

The phrase, poetic fullness, describes one thrilling aspect of context responsive storytelling as I have come to understand it. It is animation of metaphor, fullness of spoken phrase, and freshness of movement. The movement is in response to the internal images, the emergent metaphors, not a translation of them. It is an organic, trance like and relational space both, so that the internal stream of images takes up vivid space in the physical world around me, joining it, in Scheub's terms in a palimpsest of imagery. The wonder of it is also in its commonality: we all animate physical gestures that speak the past as well as the present, and that even suggest the future. Our personal history is carried on our faces, in our body postures and is all, to some degree depending on the observer, legible. In storytelling, this gesturing, the whole inclusion and mirroring of a symbolic universe, is like stepping wholly into a room, rather than managing imagery as a peripheral minor text or carrying it as unconscious expression. Part of the pleasure of oral storytelling is in the aspiration to conscious movement, not self conscious or manipulated movement but the intention to accompany our response with awareness. In a Buddhist sense it is becoming friendly and curious about how we go about our journey from moment to moment. It requires unruffled attention.
In southern African traditional society, the first thing children copy from the storyteller is patterning; the repetitive phrases and physical gestures that repeat throughout a tale (Scheub, 1998). These patterns are the first things grasped and perhaps are understood as something whole in their own right. The linear narrative will come later, after the phrases, gestures and songs. As the child practices the shapes inside the narrative, she learns to let her physical gestures and the words she repeats to syncopate, to attend to different images or image sets within the story (1998). Scheub describes narrative as a surface device, serving to engage the mind, while patterning; the arrangement of opposing image sequences, rhythm, and voice speak directly to emotions.

Emotion, suggests Scheub, is the essence of story (1998). He describes how traditional storytellers imbibe ancient motifs with contemporary issues. The southern African storytellers he describes show awareness of the real conundrums and dilemmas of the communities around them. As he points out, it is not the linear narrative itself that holds her audience’s attention; it is the art she displays in rendering life to the image sequences, the way she brings the ancient tradition to play, indirectly, against a current circumstance in the community. There are always at least two contrasting worlds, a binary tension of images or events, perhaps one fantastic and the other realistic that play one against the other, that in a sense, become one another. Opposites are shown to be connected.
She knows her world and the tensions that exist between the moral, ethical traditional guidelines and the ways in which the modern world impinges, tempts, and cracks the old. Myth is enacted where the fantastic tale intercepts the ordinary temporal life lived through the conduit of the audience's emotion (ibid, 1998)

It is how the storyteller's song, word, the patterns intersect, crack and subvert the surface narratives, the homilies, that make the telling fresh. It is, writes Scheub, what her audience watch for. But the process begins in the simplest way: beginning with the images, or image patterns, the storyteller allows herself to respond to their power, to respond emotionally as she re-members the story she wishes to tell, stepping, as a child would, into the stream of images, becoming a lightning rod for trope.

Words magnetise realities. For instance, while studying Cree last year, a Cree elder explained to my class that in a traditional context, a child is never scolded with derogatory language (being told they are ‘bad’ for example) because the belief is that we become what we are called; instead they are told what they can be (responsible or generous, for instance, personal communication, November, 2007). Abrahams explains that in its indigenous context, “the spoken word can actually create bonds and bring about personal or social transformations”
(Abrahams, 1983, P.2). Care is taken then, when it comes to telling tales, to properly frame the story, to ritually contain the words, only then do tales become "permissible lies" (ibid, P.2). Even so, the power of words is still not utterly contained, stories still have the capacity to disrupt, and even manifest their dramatic arcs into real life, thus a story is not found only within a storytelling event but can spill out, anywhere, anytime (1983).

As discussed earlier, part of this capacity of traditional folktales to trespass into real life means that they can have a real and current social impact, a highly charged event for instance between two members of the community, can be explored through a traditional tale. In the kinds of African village settings Abrahams writes of, everyone will know for whom the tale is intended, but in the telling, the story is intimately known by the entire community (1983). This means that stories are discussed, their meanings variously argued, and as Abrahams describes, can transmute, or give way to other tales. Thus real life is engaged through the fiction of tales.

Of the traditional village in the African landscape, Abrahams writes, "continuity and culture are a constant achievement, for the destructive forces of nature evidence themselves regularly" (ibid, P.6). Storytelling is a part of that "constant achievement" in indigenous societies where landscape and weather, hunger and
physical vulnerability are a vivid abiding part of the weave of life. This sense of a steady re-weaving of the world is also reflected in the African emphasis on what is continuous; where one story overlaps another, one song, one dance overlaps yet another. In this way a story is never done, it begins proceeds and ends as a deep layering of events.

Such a weave is reflected in a popular singing circle game: Abrahams describes it as similar to our ring games, “the Farmer in the Dell” for instance (ibid, p.5). But in its African context, this game, so popular among the Jamaican children I’ve worked with, is joined by both adults and children, is a call and response ritualized choreography, where the response often overlaps the call (ibid, p.5). “[We] have”, writes Abrahams, “[art] forms in Africa that highlight the steady thrust of life and art, an effect achieved through the interlocking of voices and the repetition, with variation, of the same basic patterns” (ibid, p.6). These patterns are polyphonic, polyrhythmic, with complicated, contrary harmonies that crack the limits of one story, one song or dance (ibid, p.5). “This interactive style relies on getting the greatest variety of timbres and textures into play—even at the expense of ensemble effects” (ibid, p.7). What I write here only whispers the African experience, which is no whisper! It is a cacophony, friendly, competitive, messy, hilarious, and “interlocked” between audience and teller;
neat conclusions are none existent, every ending lapped with a conversation, argument, challenge or call for song.

Art in this case, is intimately threaded through real life. Abrahams writes,

It would not be overstating the matter to say that in Black Africa, art is life and vice versa, not a mere reflection of humanity and community, but a directly engaged commentary on how things are or should be, rather than imitation, they heighten and intensify humanity’s most important concerns. (p.9)

Likewise this echoes my own experience as a visitor to indigenous story, song and prayer in the Sweatlodge for instance, on the West coast of Canada, where life and music, fire, story and art cross.
The Interior Social Life of Story

As we artfully bring our stories, our myths, our biographies into shared spaces, what happens to our language journeys, what happens to us? Curriculum theorist, Ted Aoki (2005) brings attention to a classic Buddhist tale, “Kisagotami’s Story”, as told in David Smith’s article, “Person as Narration: The Dissolution of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in Ch’an Buddhism” (as cited in Aoki, P.408). It is an ancient story, an oral version of which I have heard and valued for many years as “The Mustard Seed”. In it, a woman is beside herself with grief over the death of her young child. She carries its tiny body through the village seeking a cure to bring her child back to life. Eventually, a neighbour directs her to the Buddha who is staying nearby at Jevalana. He tells the woman he can help her, but she must return to the village and collect a mustard seed from a house that has known no death. Full of hope, the woman returns to her village and travels from house to house. At each door she hears a familiar tale, but with real names and unique stories attached: death has visited everywhere, and with it grief. Each sorrow has a particular colour, a quality, a certain turn, she has not heard before. As she travels, her own story gathers the echo of all the others. Her story now a weave of poignant stories, she returns to the Buddha changed. As she sits in his presence,
understanding fills her and “her mind clears” (Hershock, pp. 688-689, as cited in Aoki, p. 408).

Aoki and Hershock bring emphasis to several layers of meaning in this story, and the central meaning concerns narrative and narration, and what lies between (Aoki, 2005). As the woman travels her story is complicated into the lives of others, and what arises between one story and another becomes ground for a shared and therefore vital experience. The stories are shared along with the context within which to hold them. She “enters a space of dramatic interplay”, writes Aoki, her grief a tangential ubiquitous experience, impermanence an experience through which hope or grace is woven (ibid, P.409).

Aoki writes of the story, “Kisagotami came to realize that suffering always occurs in the context of a consciously articulated story”, within which two or more participate, exchange and nourish each other’s stories (ibid, p. 409). He writes further, “the locus of suffering is not the objective so-called “natural” world of individual people and things, but, rather, the fathomless intimacy of narration.” He concludes enigmatically, “Person is narration, a centerless space of dramatic interplay” (ibid, P. 410).
Personal Biography: Courtship

White table cloth, pale blue tile beneath, plates still half full, they stop. The view from the covered cafe patio is enormous, buoyed by the green tops of trees, their root paths hidden below among the meander of flower gardens, beside the tiny hotel pool. The Caribbean Sea is far beyond all this, a vivid blue arc.

He talks, one hand under hers on the table, while she looks at him, listens, her fork rested for a moment, meanwhile her fingers play with the soft palette of his palm; she marvels over the shapes she finds there and traces each finger to its tip. They have done hours of this; the feasts long and artful, the service reverent and patient. They begin to eat again. The whole patio is open at the sides and the cooler air makes them look up. Far over the sea a steel grey storm front has formed; a great wash of fierce life across the eastern sky. It must be miles away, but moves steadily forward. They are used to it now, the way the weather comes like this, one moment still and warm, the next, a thin shower of cool rain blown from the east, playful, the coming squall inevitable. Exhilarated, they let the edge of rain drift across the table, to sprinkle his white shirt with a hundred clear drops. Suddenly aware of the others, he grows helpful, gets up and unlashes one clear plastic tarp, lets it roll to the floor, and as the wind swells, wrestles with the hook and attaches it to the grounded eye. The waitress laughs, goes to ground the next window. Already the blasting wind is passing so they leave the west
side open, the south side half shut like a soft gaze. They refuse the offer of a dry table inside, won’t brush the water that gleams like shards of light from the table cloth.
Concluding remarks: towards a definition of CRS

Choreographer Bill T. Jones in the United States, leads HIV positive men and women through a sequence in which they tell the chronologies of their difficult stories and add physical gestures to each milestone (Jones, 1997). He literally has them walk and use their bodies to shape the changes as they occur in the spoken narrative. It is deeply moving to watch these spoken, mimed stories. They are stripped down, the phrases bare, the movement simple but emerging from the words. He took the raw repeated gestures and applied them to a choreographed stage performance, danced by professionals. This film is an articulate illustration of how the power of gesture can bring story to trope. Humility, reflection and praxis, consideration of audience, staying in relationship, knowledge of symbolic literacy, gesture, rhythm, voice and trope are all preparatory to storytelling, and creative imaging, re-membering of story, can bring all these elements together for performance.

The following description is from a creative visualization exercise I did along with others in my Performative Inquiry class with Dr. Lynn Fels (2007). Creative visualization is very much within the scope of performative inquiry. The work of
this course contributed profoundly to my exploration of context sensitive storytelling. Fels explains:

Performative inquiry is a research vehicle that acknowledges performance in action and interaction as a place of learning and exploration. Its tools of inquiry, for researcher and participants, are their bodies, imaginations, experiences (shared and individual), feelings, memories, biases, fears, judgments, and prejudgments, hopes, and desires—simply, being, becoming (Fels, 1998, p. 29, see also Fels, Collected Readings, n.d.).

Essentially, the theme of the visualization was our individual response to fear. In my own visualization:

I walk towards and into my fear, an abandoned, burnt-to-oil-slick-black wood and rock building, house of my spirit, house of corpses; my own included. I am wearing colours so alive they keep sliding off me. I have to reach up and grab the last single lightning thread/crack of saffron before it floats away and leaves my flesh too naked and vulnerable. I have it in my up stretched hands. Then I step through to the other side of the building, out into open fields.

My explanation afterward to the group was more of a re-enactment than a report because I chose, with the group’s permission, to walk my way through the imagery. The story was not finalized. I did not know how I would finish it. I had
an unusually receptive audience: As a group we were experimenting with our shared and individual perceptions of space, imagery, language, role, and responsibility in interactive performance. We had worked together for several weeks. One member brought a spool of string and had earlier, with all our help, unravelled it over and under the rafters down to the floor in a spontaneous geometric shape. The string in place across the high ceiling, and down again to the ground like a spider web-cathedral created a form inside itself, anchored the energy in the room, and seemed to interact with me as I performed. The narrative changed because of the presence of my audience and the touch of that geometric string on my head in the last image sequence as I ended the story. To me that touch of string suggested rose petals on my head, and yet that bright image of apricot rose petals was not present in my original visualization. The string that criss-crossed there like vine, that point of contact on my head, it became an ecstasy.

My audience listened, watched and we all imagined a temporal layering of images (but surely not the same ones). As I told I spent most of my focus internally observing images, watching events unfold. The landscape is the same as in the original visualization but revisited it becomes more vivid, the memory comes to life as though the whole thing happens all over again in Technicolor. Like a dream re-entry with a flashlight, I can see details I had missed earlier, and
at the same time I am aware of my audience, the live context of my storytelling, I am aware of the imperative to stay present in the room with my audience. I step into each image and give it back to the audience; this is a constant surrender to image and context both.

I constantly allow the fracturing of my story to allow for the influence of audience. As Gurevitch writes, “The serious play, or the experimental, punctures any self-fulfilling gesture and returns writer and reader to a silent ecstasy, ex-stasis, of break, enthusiasm in a broken line” (2000, p.3). The teller responds to imagery and uncovers new information as she surrenders to each frame, and each frame is in the context of audience. This is storytelling and embodiment practice. Body-memory-revelation and interaction with the audience: Interaction with the environment as well; the imagined bower of apricot rose petals that brush my head are there because of the choices we made with string and space earlier in the day.

The theme or motif of my story is archetypal, dealing as it does with a call to adventure; a journey into what frightens, horrifies, then the discovery of ‘help’ in the form of vibrant fluid ‘clothe’, and then the recovery of identity and the experience of ecstasy in the return (Campbell, 1949). It is literally fantastic and also a poetic, metaphoric interpretation of my own real emotional journey.
Scheub (1998) writes, “Each member of the audience experiences the story within a palimpsest of his own circumstances. There is thus a virtual cacophony of audience experiences” (p.242). In story, the fantastic merges with the mundane everyday world, and the emotional experience of the audience is also at once internal, individual, ordinary and also complicit in a re-enactment of myth.

In his song “Anthem”, Leonard Cowen (1992) wrote, “there is a crack in everything/that’s how the light gets in”, and perhaps too it is how something gets out; as the storyteller encodes linear narratives with rhythms that transgress, that derail the focus on homily or morality and redirect the audience back to the moment’s underlying emotional value. Stories bring dissonant elements together, first in two bodies, two characters, a minimum of two forces played, fated against each other. In the telling of the folktale, “Children of the Anthill”, (Scheub 1998) for instance, when the crisis comes and the ogre gains opensaysame entry into the home of the innocent and carries her off, all her fear and terror is cast out as an ashen trail behind her, right to the place where she will be kept captive to await her fate. While she plays for time, her good brother will follow the trail through the woods. What really are the odds of her escape? There will be a crisis. There are many ways the storyteller can enter this crisis; she can ply it with song, imply it with the rhythm of her dance, or subvert attention from it to some other familiar motion, the stirring of a pot for instance; thereby obviating the surface
narrative and refocusing, re-organizing the emotion of her audience. What tumbles out through the crack? All that is at odds with the light, the anguish discovered in the moment of loss, the ugliness, gluttony, repulsive, grotesque gesturing; the animal fear that is also human. In this story light and dark, the ogre and the good brother exchange places next to the young girl, like two sides of the same living coin.

In one haunting Ashanti folktale, a poor beggar is mysteriously offered a furnished mansion filled with every possible delight for worldly fulfillment (Michael Mitchell, personal communication, May 6, 2007). There is of course one stipulation; that he must never, under any condition enter one particular room. The poor man quickly agrees to the condition, he can imagine no reason that could compel him to enter the room; so many other rooms are there to discover and enjoy. And sure enough for the first long while he enjoys his palace, the fame and plenty that goes with it. In every way, his plate is always full. He incurs many notable friends and enjoys an endless variety of entertainment.

But after a long while the palace grows tiresome to him, and it strikes this man that the only thing of real interest left to do is to risk entering the forbidden room. Its contents seem to him to be the only thing kept from him, and after years of enjoying an endless supply of pleasures, and thinking of the palace as his to do
with as he wishes, he secretly goes to the room and unlocks the door. The room is entirely empty, accept for one thing: a man in rags cowers in the corner, his eyes round with fear, his mouth slack from need and not a word is uttered from this mouth for terror. The king stares long in horror at this poor creature until it slowly registers that this is himself, the very same, before he came to have the palace.

Unfinished as it is, this is where the story ends. No conclusion is given, no final solution, only the horror and discomfort of the moment. It is in fact, typically open ended in an African way, inviting discussion, argument, and more story (Abrahams 1983, Scheub 1998). In a Buddhist sense, it is a meditation on impermanence. It is fantastic, but at the same time brings attention to what is real, raw and vulnerable in human nature: our yearning for pleasure, our fierce aversion to suffering. The story is symbolically rich, the solution left up to the audience. How and when would I tell such a story? What is conjured in its telling? What is the point? How would I handle the response to such a tale?

While I write this, I sit opposite the Vancouver Art Gallery in Cafe Artigianno. Outside it pours rain. In here are crowds of people who sit, stand, line-up, and chatter, their voices a low roar over the hiss of the espresso machine. The air is warm with body heat, damp with breath and drenched coats, redolent with the smell of coffee. On television plays
“Crocodile Dundee” (Hogan, 1986), the television is on mute with script. On screen, the heroine in a red dress runs for a central New York subway, discarding her high heels, she sprints in bare feet, she dodges and fights her way through all the barriers like an Amazon. When she reaches the subway platform, she cannot move for people. They are packed like penguins, all waiting attending the rails. She stares across this sea of people in despair. When she sees Nick Dundee’s black hat she calls out loud across the crowd, “I want to talk to the guy with the black hat at the end of the platform”. This message is sent, one civilian messenger to another, through the mouths of a crowd in a workaday world, until Nick Dundee turns. “What does she want” he says, and so back it goes. “Tell him I’m not going to marry Richard”, she sends back through the mouth of a work soiled construction worker. “Why not?” comes back the answer. Pause, everyone looks and waits, “Because I love you,” she says. Everyone complicit, her message moves across and through her audience who voice the “I love you” back to its mark.

Storytelling implies the complicit involvement of audience. Even when nothing is said, the expression and posture of the audience will tell us whether or not we are hitting the mark. J. E. Chamberlin (2003) writes about a Gitksan storyteller, the only elder left of his people who knew in its entirety the history and mythology of his tribe, who firmly refused to recite the traditional stories he knew by heart because all those that he believed should hear it were dead:
[And] although he could put on the appropriate regalia and go to the designated spot at just the right time, it wouldn't work. It would be just words....To perform his ada'ox without the right people there to listen would be meaningless and untrue, he insisted (Chamberlin, 2003, p. 147).

When he died a whole history died with him. Through this commitment he demonstrated the absolute significance of audience and context.

Unlike this Gitksan elder’s context, in context responsive storytelling as I imagine it here, while audience and context are still of crucial significance, in our contemporary classroom context, they are expected to be forever changing. The storyteller adapts to a contemporary world which is by its very nature continuously becoming something other. In context responsive storytelling, the story is no longer an isolated “performance” but a teller’s unravelling, unfurling, context responsive, informing of a story. It is not a linear telling, but a relived out loud re-membering. This kind of telling requires change as it goes, it is “laying down a path [while] walking” (Machado as cited in Varela, 1988, p. 48). This means that past participates with present as it glimpses the future through telling. Rather than the teller being diminished or bound by the story she tells, she mines new veins of gold from the same story plot and nourishes and grows herself and those around her as she goes. She renders her literacies transparent.
Her evocation becomes a language “lesson” informed by the necessities of her own important story. This live story provokes participation, it is a whole body performance, it involves risk taking in the space in-between, it confronts, it values chaos, disruption and listening as sites of learning, it entertains while it mediates the in-between. It is instructive, vulnerable, unpredictable and entertaining.

One night shortly after beginning the process to write this thesis, I dreamt I told a colleague, I must let the child lead the way in my thesis. I woke up elated. The dream child was to me, Jung’s archetypal Child (1968), it was at once symbolic and viscerally re-orienting, as though the voice of that child were ‘beside me’; emergent, not as audience, but as co-author, not relegated to the periphery of theorizing but given a share at the wheel of writing. Since that night I have occasionally imagined this child, perhaps eight years old, standing beside me at the computer. She fidgets with disinterest, or dances approval, or ignores me completely, depending on the sentient accuracy of what I write. Kennedy(2006) writes, “Jung interpreted the appearance of the [child] archetype in dreams and psychotherapy as a herald, ‘smaller than small and bigger than big,’ which appears in anticipation of future psychological development, initiating the individuation process...”(p.30). Be that as it may, while many of the stories I tell
in this thesis are 'grown up' stories, it is to the child that I return to in my conclusion.

This is because she is, to borrow a Jungian context, the most familiar with the inter-subjective space of play; that place between me and that other or others who exist/s around me. With practice, as a storyteller and educator, I choose to soften my boundaried sphere of story re-membering and enter the story’s realm in the space between us. Thus such storytelling takes on, pretends in the archaic sense: intends a meeting between teller and audience. This field of experience, writes Bachelard, is “the lived experience of subjectivity as a transitional space in which ‘the interpersonal and the intrapsychic realms create, interpenetrate, and transform each other in a subtle and complex manner’ (as cited in Kennedy, 2006, p. 137). At its simplest, what I am suggesting here is the very meaning a child makes when he or she says let’s pretend, and then proceeds, in the company of friends, to do so; rooms become kingdoms, dogs become horses, books become mansions, at least they did so when I was growing up and playing with my brother and sister. But this play is not meant for childhood alone, let’s pretend becomes a space for dialogue, for brainstorming, for fertile problem solving.

Pretend is also suspension of belief, it allows things to be as they might rather than as they have always been. Prior knowledge is sacrificed for the sake of a
sentient present, our knowledge about children set aside for a dialogic present held in the lap of oral storytelling. The best audiences are those that listen without the burden of already knowing everything about the story. This is an attitudinal choice.

As I reach for a conclusion to this thesis, I am reminded of an anecdote in One River, Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rain Forest wherein ethnobotanist and author Wade Davis (1996) describes new indigenous understanding that occurs to him there. While staying in the Sierra Nevada, in the village of Donachui, his guide Tim points out the curious ‘ceaseless parade’ of men and women bearing goods for trade outside their door (Davis, P.51). Most curious because many of the trade goods were near identical; the good-laden traders were crisscrossing each other along steep, mountainous, rugged paths to bring each other the same promise. To a westerner, it must have seemed an absurd and gruelling effort. Wade’s guide explained that such trade was bound irrevocably with the belief that it was necessary to continually weave the web of the earth together, that it was essential to re-make the world in this fashion every day.

...Reichel [another guide] understood that movement was in part metaphor, that in passing over the earth they wove a sacred cloak over the Great Mother, each journey like a thread, each seasonal migration
becoming a prayer for the well-being of the people and the entire earth.

The Kogi themselves refer to their wanderings as weavings. (ibid, p.52)

This small anecdote, a window into a startlingly unfamiliar worldview, has grown like a seed within me for several years. As in Kisagotami’s story, where (Aoki underscores) the Buddha does not tell Kisagotami that ‘death visits every home’, but instead, instructs her to carry her request for a mustard seed—from a place where death of a loved one has never occurred—to each household in turn, and a path to understanding is woven through the reciprocal repetitive weave of one story answered with another (2005). These stories, like repeating journeys, become threads in a communal clothe. In Davis’s anecdote, it is a story without end or beginning. It is my understanding that the most successful stories are like this, indivisible from the fabric of classroom or community life, and inevitably leading back through exchange to more stories; to richly languaged and reciprocal pathways. It is with these stories in mind that I begin to find a way to rest my story about story.

In the process of writing this thesis my own understanding quietly shifts. My English language teaching strategies are, to borrow Aoki’s terms, “decentered but without erasure” (Aoki, 2005). I enter the classroom with an array of literacies, some of which use English language while others do not. I request
songs and lyrics, rhymes and poems, ring games and riddles. I apply versions of John Baugh’s Lyric Shuffle (1999). I make the mother tongue, dialect, underclass language a subject of scholarly grammatical research in the classroom. I can move away from “right/wrong Standard English models” and, with my students, as Judith Baker (2006) describes, “study the home languages students bring into class. To “find patterns of speech, rules of grammar...tonal features, [which we can] discuss and eventually compare to the features of what we call ‘formal’ English” (Baker, p.53).

I can be elemental in my teaching, and like Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963), I can, through dialogue, or song, or image, help a student find their elemental power drenched words, show how language, in Victoria Purcell-Gates lexicon, ‘means’ (2006); assist the connection between the written word and the student’s intersubjective emotionally charged field of experience that language can articulate, vocalize and thereby liberate. In safe environments we can sound out our own words; to print those words in letters and read them out opens avenues to language ownership. As well, if I turn my thinking and seeing on its head, I can, as Herbert Kohl insists, notice how I am being heard or not heard in the classroom, and through attunement, explore new ways to listen and speak (Kohl, 2006, P.161).
And along with all this I can tell, hear, invent, learn, or reveal stories: stories that potentially join a “fathomless intimacy of narration... a centerless space of dramatic interplay” (Aoki, P. 410). It is mysterious to me how my effort to provide a comprehensive guide or argument for the use of oral storytelling in the classroom, has it seems inevitably become instead, a quest to live inside a view of oral storytelling for the duration of this thesis. Within this view, I am gently tugged to look out at my audience, just as I am also called to follow the vivid recollection of the tale I tell. I am aware of the raw edge of this tale on the surface of my own skin as I attempt this moment to gentle or sharpen the words of this story into play with the complicated weave that is (my audience’s) your lived life.
References Cited


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