

**Flesh Mapping:
Cartography of Struggle, Renewal and Hope
in Education**

by

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Abstract

Flesh Mapping is a journey to map and make visible the personal impacts of institutional exclusionary practices. And through personal narrative, to investigate the material, emotional and social wounds inflicted, by today's dominant epistemology of education. An epistemology that rejects the multiple worlds that co-exist and imposes a pedagogical stance that is persistently static, symmetrical and fixed. This thesis maps my struggle to unlearn the mythical story of civilization, in the daily practice of living life aware, awake and participant in the re-naming and remaking of my identity and community.

To be educated is to be able to see the world as it is, to unravel our co-created worlds of words, texts, concepts that underpin our actions and to make meaning of our lived experience. In this thesis the wound (and wounded) is at once a site of pain, and renewal. To narratively map the injuries, is to speak, of the material, emotional, and spiritual impact of poverty, displacement, hunger and war on an individual life. Flesh Mapping holds a woman's desire to make her story known and recognized not solely as an individual's unique journey, but the one possible story of many that call to attention how we welcome and engage the presence and aspirations of others.

Flesh mapping is an attempt to create a Pedagogy of shared narrative, place, and politics to connect our private lives to the affects of political and economic scripts that today constitute our lives around structures of inequity. To write my narrative is to situate myself as a concrete subject, inscribed by a wider cultural and historical continuum, which Said (1983) called "wordly self-situating." Aware of this historical process the journey is not travelled alone, aware also that our private lives are not only social, they are biased, by our political, cultural, communal, and economic positions, we take the journey, travelled through the writing and sharing of our stories.

Keywords: auto-ethnography, social justice, immigration, refugee, and education.

Dedication

To my mother who taught me resilience through love and compassion and that life's joy lies in the struggle for justice. For my sisters who practice reciprocity and help see the world through the eyes of empathy.

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I have learnt from my many communities, and would like to acknowledge the work of community radios worldwide, and community engaged citizens who strive to create an equitable society every day. Thank you for inviting me into the myriad of possibilities available when we work together. And lastly I would like to thank my life companion and soul mate, Stuart Richardson for loving me as I am, and for seeing me as I strive to be. To my children Nataly and Pavel, who inspire me every day to see the world through eyes of possibilities and wonder.

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List of Acronyms

AMARC	World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NAFTA	North America Food and Trade Agreement

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Market of Wants	3
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Chapter 1.

Introduction

Flesh Mapping is a journey to map and make visible the personal impacts of institutional exclusionary practices. To hold to the light, relations of power replete with material affects and injuries suffered that are perceived as neutral, universal and “objective.” And to investigate, through personal narrative, the material, emotional, and social wounds inflicted by today’s dominant epistemology of education; an epistemology that rejects the multiple worlds that co-exist and imposes a pedagogical stance that is persistently static, symmetrical and fixed.

This thesis is an invitation to the reader to see, reflect and unsettle the constant masquerade of relations of power. To understand that our private lives are not only social, they are biased, by our social, political, cultural and economic positions. To see and recognize our implicated selves as we partake in a process of socialization within a matrix of relations of oppression that are embedded in the society within which we dwell. And perhaps more importantly to insight/incite a response to the responsibility to identify and the challenge to confront the mechanisms of ideological domination that underpin our institutions and pedagogical practices, in order to create a culture of equity and justice as the new norm.

To be educated is to be able to see the world as it is, to unravel our co-created worlds of words, texts, concepts that underpin our actions in order to make meaning of our lived experience. In this thesis the wound (and wounded) is at once a site of pain, and renewal. To narratively map the injuries, is to speak, of the material, emotional, and spiritual impact of poverty, displacement, hunger and war on an individual life. Flesh Mapping holds a woman’s desire to make her story known and recognized not solely as an individual’s

unique journey, but as one possible story of many that calls to attention how we welcome and engage the presence and aspirations of others.

The injuries that I and others have experienced are visible to those who choose to see, while the pain and suffering of isolation are silenced by practices, expectations, and presumptions of the materiality of everyday living that acknowledges or rejects my presence: a persistent blindness that dismisses my lived experiences and injuries. The many spiritual deaths of endless disappointment and penury that I have experienced, and choose to share in this writing, have led to the many re-births made possible through struggle as I continually seek to be recognized, with all my complexity, and contradictions; to be accepted as I am.

Awakening to the historical processes that have created an unjust world, those denied their humanity reclaim their right to create new ways of being, through daily refusal to acquiesce to the status quo. Freire describes the process of awakening (critical consciousness) as a radical act (meaning from the roots):

The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a 'circle of certainty' within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary the more radical the person is the more he or she enters into reality so that knowing it better, he or she can better transform it.

(Freire, 1970/1983, p. 39)

This thesis maps my struggle to unlearn the mythical story of civilization, in the daily practice of living life aware, awake and participant in the re-naming and remaking of my identity and community.

Identities and difference are constructed in and through dynamics of our engagement with each other over time, not only in the service of oppressive relations such as racism and sexism, but also in the service of the contestation of such oppression.

(Butler, 1993, p. 241)

It is critical for the renewal of education as a viable endeavour that my story be told and shared, and that others tell their stories. On the ruins of our collective past history of injustice, and recognizing the unique stories that we offer, we can rebuild in our time a society intent towards a relational, interconnected praxis (reflective practice and theory) of education as a constant searching, constantly re-inventing, reimagining, and opening of

spaces for 'unheard voices' that seek to lay down a path in walking (Varela, 1987) to peaceful, and just coexistence.

This is only one of many possible stories; it reveals we are complicit in our everyday practice of power, whether as the oppressed or oppressors, embedded in structures and systems maintained by our participation and acceptance. To tell our story in our voice is to recognize the essentiality of authorship to codify, memorialize, and make visible the relations of power and privilege that create and perpetuate a way of life that although prevalent remains on the outskirts of consciousness.

If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation.

(Martin Luther King, quoted in Hooks, 1994, p. 28)

The praxis of education as a practice of freedom, seeks to make visible the processes of alienation that distance species' relations to the world, and positions the practice of knowledge creation as an abstract, independent and isolated pursuit. In order to assert that the world is our relations, that our daily actions are the catalyst that create and maintain the many possible worlds that coexist. "Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world" (Freire; 1970 /1983, p. 81).

To be poor is to know hunger

Like stubbing needles piercing the depth of your stomach

Like battery acid corrosive fire that consumes you

Listen you will hear the chorus

We can't afford to increase the minimum salary of workers

We can't afford to increase funding for education

We can't afford to create full employment

We can't afford to provide clean water

*We can't afford to provide food for children
dying of hunger related diseases*

*We can't afford to provide generic drugs
to alleviate the suffering of AIDS' victims in Africa*

*We can't afford to cut down CO2 emissions
of extractive industries*

*We can't afford to forgive the external debt of countries
with extreme poverty, facing famines and droughts
caused by deforestation and mass exploitation of their soil*

*Then in 2010 some \$14 trillion (\$14,000,000,000,000) magically
materialized to prop up the financial institutions.¹*

Round and round we go...

*defending the tenets of privilege that distance us from the
suffering of others.*

Isn't it time we stop?

Power and privilege entrenched in the hands of moneyed, military, and religious elites worldwide imposes an instrumentalist way of seeing, being and acting towards nature and other sentient and non sentient beings (that create subject /object relations); and structure our interactions as relationships of consumption, constituted through hierarchies run by dead power (power over) mired in a domination / subordination dynamic.

¹ "If you think in terms of the number of seconds your watch ticks, and if each second represents 1 dollar (euro, pound, etc.) The impact the financial crisis has placed would be as follows: a day=\$86,400; a year = \$31,536,000; 10 years = \$315, 536,000; 100 years = \$3,153,600,000. The lowest estimates of total financial rescues are around \$5 Trillion (160,000 years); the one most reliable—that of Alessandri and Haldane at the Bank of England is \$14 trillion (448,000 years)" George, 2010, p.19).

In a world dominated by power over, there must always be a winner and a loser; someone must lose in order for another to achieve success. Students compete for grades in order to achieve the coveted spaces in post secondary schools that will provide them with a degree, a kind of currency that will open the door to affluence and privilege. Education is inherently political, whether we seemingly adopt the standpoint of “neutrality,” while silencing dissenting voices in the classroom² or overtly dismissing students’ dissenting views. What knowledge is worth knowing, what is ignored or dismissed, reflects our political engagement in the creation of the world as we understand it and envision it. For Arendt (1951), the polis is a kind of organized remembrance, where people can be actors in their own lives:

The political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds’. Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the activity which constitutes it. (Arendt, 1951, p. 198)

The promise of equity through education has been a long awaited dream for the poor, they plant their dreams in the fertile soil of their children, and through their daily toils water their collective hopes for discernment (wisdom) that will lead us to create a just world. With the hope for transformation placed at the foot of education, a world thus transformed and more just, as more people become educated, is the anticipated outcome of wide spread education. However this has not proven to be the case, because it matters what knowledge is privileged, what learners are encouraged or discouraged to learn, how knowledge is shared or withheld.

According to Illich (1970) school is the catalyst for creating and perpetuating social myths because of its structure as a ritual game of graded promotions that naturalize inequity and competition. He warns:

Schools direct rivalry into an international game, which obliges competitors to blame the world’s ills on those who cannot or will not play. School is a ritual of initiation, which introduces the neophyte (beginner) to the sacred race of progressive consumption...whose academic priests mediate between the faithful and the gods of privilege and power, a ritual of expiation³ which

² To speak of neutrality is to be in agreement with the status quo, and inscribes legitimacy of power and privilege. Thus the dominant stand points are given primacy.

³ A kind of corporal penitence/punishment.

sacrifices its dropouts, branding them as scapegoats of underdevelopment.
(Illich, 1970/1971, p. 63)

Millions disenfranchised by poverty, perpetuated by economic structures and values that limit the sharing of wealth, are denied the privilege to attend school yet a fundamental lesson has been learned that “they must have schooling and lots of it. A system of inculcation that reifies class hierarchies, where those without schooling are considered to be without knowledge” (Illich, 1970, p. 63), that inscribes their relationship, in a power over world, as inferior.

Education then becomes a process of legitimating the privilege of those ‘educated’ with the power to speak for others. “The School appropriates learning, and we are led to believe that learning is the result of teaching” (Illich, 1970, p.63). And not the reciprocal exchange of ideas and collaboration socially mediated and situated. The sharing of experiences, that every human being takes part in as a social being living in proximity to others. However, in a hierarchal society, those privileged with the power to know and to speak for others, inscribe a world of enclosures. Where knowledge (with few exceptions) becomes a privilege for those who can afford it. “What is happening to knowledge and research, under the influence of corporate science with monopoly on knowledge, is dangerous for the human condition” (Shiva, 2005, p.39).

The enclosure movement has been called the “revolution of the rich against the poor,”⁴ as the enclosure of biodiversity and knowledge, become the exclusive property of corporations, under the latest form of enclosures, intellectual property rights (IPRs).

And yet, learning takes place not only within the walls of institutions, but also on the streets or under a mango tree. In other words, learning is part of living and being alive. Imagine if instead, classrooms were spaces where students are not degraded by standardized modes of conformity, or adherence to corporate wants, but instead strive to learn in order to imagine, create and nurture “untested possibilities” (Freire, 1970) that create wider access, to endless opportunities?

⁴ The phrase was coined by Arthur Hocart quoted in Rifkin, Biosphere Politics, p.39

Imagine what a world would be like if power were not 'over' but 'with,' if we understood that our power can be magnified in collaboration with others.
(Jensen, 2009, p. 102)

In a secular society, consciousness—the capacity to align our intellect with our heart (emotions)—informs our actions. We create, maintain, and perpetuate ways of being and acting based on our understanding and interactions (relations) that, together, help us make meaning of our world.⁵ Ancient knowledge of Aboriginal peoples worldwide sees the world as the actualization of cyclical events, constantly changing and transforming the 'who,' that ancient wisdom of Aboriginal Peoples' worldwide call the essence of being, the 'breath of life', recognizing our interdependence with the world and all who create it through relations.⁶ "Indigenous cultures of the Amazon, of the Andes, or the Himalayas are examples of living cultures that have been sustainable over millennia and, were not destroyed by globalized economy, are sustainable even today" (Shiva, 2005, p. 51).

Through awareness of our interconnectedness and interdependence with all the relations of species: rock, mountain, trees and sentient beings of all walks, the horizontal relations that births consciousness of who we are and what untested possibilities we may create, aware of the complexities of our situated and temporal location materializes. Arendt speaks of the 'who' as the essence of being (as action), the characteristic, and capacity to think and make meaning that connects us to the transcendental, and makes humans immortal through the action and the stories their praxis produce.

...men's life together in the form of the polis seemed to assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made action 'products,' the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable.

(Arendt, 1951, pp. 197-198)

⁵ We as a creative force is an encompassing of all relations that create the world (the 'we' includes species of all walks, two legged, four legged, and those with branches as arms...)

⁶ Interview with Aymara elder Marcelo Saavedra, and Haida elder Bill Lightbaum, both elders although speaking from a different context Saavedra from Bolivia and Lightbaum from Canada, share a spiritual connection of interdependence with earth and all other sentient beings.

The Straightjacket: Policies of Control

Why are we as societies creating a world that we as individuals abhor?
(Lappe, 2007, p. 3)

No one I know, wakes up every morning vowing, “yeah, today I’m going to make sure another child dies needlessly of hunger” or, “Sure, I’ll do my part to heat the planet and obliterate entire species” (Lapee, 2007, p. 3). Yet each minute, 15 children die of hunger and poverty related illnesses. Over twenty-five thousand children die daily because they lack clean water and food to eat. More people die of hunger than from all the wars combined, and roughly one hundred more species will be gone forever today, tomorrow and the day after... And the crises are only getting worse and more numerous: extreme weather and natural disasters due to climate change; terrorism; racial and religious divides; life-stunting poverty; pandemic diseases, and the machinery of endless war in full throttle as the earth rich deposits of oil, and precious minerals become scarce.⁷

In telling my story, I choose to speak to it within a wider context of how we shape and are shaped by our location (Davis, 1981/1988) within a historical context and temporal present dominated by dislocation, colonialization, capitalization, politicalization, and globalization. The invisibility of the relations of power that concentrate wealth, cultural, military and political power, lies in the everydayness of our actions, the habitual existence without reflection.

The peasant begins to get courage to overcome his dependence when he realizes that he is dependent. Until then, he goes along with the boss and says “What can I do? I’m only a peasant?” (Freire, 1983, p. 61)

Whether we choose to act with blind adherence or are willingly complicit to hierarchal ordering of: laws, work and political participation. Our lives are constituted over time to maintain the very hierarchies that subjugate our being. And empower, the institutions to constitute our social interaction in ways that create what I would call horizontal violence embodied within: education, legal authority, cultural influence and the media, to reproduce

⁷ The war in Iraq set a precedent where one country could invade another with impunity.

and maintain the hegemony of the ruling class. Unable to imagine ourselves as powerful, we exorcise the violence we receive on those more vulnerable than us: child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse occurred with alarming frequency (though not exclusively), among the disillusioned, chronically unemployed, the down trodden. Language gives power to those able to name and bring into being⁸. And so, in telling my story, I name and resist.

Yet, I will be a more noble creature, and at the very time when my natural necessities debase me into the condition of the Beast, my Spirit shall rise and soar and fly up towards the employment of the angels.

(Cotton Mather, as quoted in Federici, 2004, p. 298)⁹

As a woman forced by circumstances (political, cultural, historical, and economic position) to work since childhood, the process of production and reproduction have inscribed my being. Those who own the means of production have authority and agency over their lives, those who do not, become dependent (with rare exceptions to the rule) on wages or vomited to the outskirts of the margins. The struggle to own the right to our own labour is centuries long and continues today.

The new global expansion of capitalist relations, of a set of phenomena usually associated with the genesis of capitalism. Among them a new round of “enclosures” that have expropriated millions of agricultural producers from their land, and the mass pauperization and criminalization of workers, through a policy of mass incarcerations recalling the ‘Great Confinement’¹⁰...We have also witnessed the worldwide development of new diasporic movement accompanied by the persecution of migrant workers, again reminiscent of the “Bloody Laws” that were introduced in 16th and 17th –century Europe to make ‘vagabonds’ available for local exploitation. (Federici, 2004, p. 11)

⁸ When asked if the generic basis of language is universal? Noam Chomsky said: “Yes, but we are only one species. You can imagine a different world in which a number of species developed with different genetically determined linguistic systems. It hasn't happened in evolution. What has happened is that one species has developed, and the genetic structure of this species happens to involve a variety of intricate abstract principles of linguistic organization that, therefore, necessarily constrain every language, and, in fact, create the basis for learning language as a way of organizing experience rather than constituting something learned from experience.” In Wiktor Osiatynski (ed.), *Contrasts: Soviet and American Thinkers Discuss the Future* (MacMillan, 1984), pp. 95-101.

⁹ One of the preconditions for Capitalist development was the process that Michel Foucault defined as the ‘disciplining of the body.’ Described by Silvia Federici as an “attempt by state and church to transform the individual’s power into labor –power” (Federici, 2004, p. 133).

¹⁰ The Great Confinement was originally described by Michel Foucault in his study of history of madness.

When conditions are established for persons to experience ongoing evaluation according to particular institutionalized 'norms', when these conditions cannot be escaped, and when persons can be isolated in their experience of such conditions, then they will become the guardians themselves. In these circumstances, persons will perpetually evaluate their own behaviour and engage in operations on themselves to forge themselves as 'docile bodies'. (Foucault, as quoted in Episkenew, 2009, p. 23)

The "collective self control" (Innes; 2003) whereby citizens engage in a kind of self censorship and make their bodies malleable to conform, is for Foucault the result from the specific deployment of what he called "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1970) which are intended to produce the 'normalization' over various forms of deviance. The art of government was the development of mechanisms of security that regulated relations between citizens and state, and between sovereign states (Gordon; 1991; Innes; 2003). Foucault saw controls directed ultimately to effect 'normalization' of deviance and serve as justification to legitimize the use of discipline. And most importantly the projects of normalization were dispersed throughout the operations of a range of social institutions, founded upon bodies of 'knowledge' that facilitated classification and definition of different forms of deviance.

Castel (1991) has argued that we have started to see the emergence of a 'post-disciplinary order, wherein individuals are 'assigned social destinies' on the basis of profiles constructed for them...providing some people with enhanced opportunities for self actualization, while the life-chances of others are artificially restricted. People are being locked into 'circuits of inclusion and exclusion (Innes, 2003). A system that imposes inequity (unwittingly, deliberately, complicitly or willingly) can only do so through the use of terror, fear, and exclusion. "Pauperization, rebellion, and the escalation of 'crime' are structural elements of capitalist accumulation as capitalism must strip the work-force its means of reproduction to impose its own rule" (Federici, 2004, p. 82).

The verb, then, is marginalize. We are marginalized by the profit of capitalism. We are the footnotes to Citibank and the Mobil Oil Corporation and Chiquita Brands International. We are the edges that form the outline of the behemoth that tells us he is the only way. (Mosley, 2000, p. 52)

The process of invisibility, marginalization of people, nature and sentient beings is part of the mechanized, standardized logic of capitalism, now in its form of globalization. To

live in the margins means to lack authority and voice; to be silenced by the dogma of economic development, proselytized with the aid of B52 riffles, and automatic drones. The masses of displaced peasant, indigenous people and the working poor, struggle to rid themselves of the markings of oppression imposed as identity. To rid them-selves of the “white” norm that set the value of human life, and models a prescribed way of being. To reclaim the voices of ancestral wisdom of **Suma Qamana**¹¹ that declares our need to live well not better. To live well is to live in coexistence as a part of nature, not apart from nature.

Name the World, Make the World

We lack words to articulate a world not yet imagined, without ‘us’ and ‘them’, without hierarchies and structures of domination. The colonial state is implicated in mediating a particular culture that binds bodies to a mechanical system of production and consumption. A disembodied logic that creates the conditions for a compartmentalized social life that fragments our ways of being into binary forms of existence and linear causalities that are constantly in conflict with one another, this simplistic and utilitarian way of framing our relations to impose ideologies of ‘order’, and ‘self discipline’, devalue the complexity and multiple capacities of beings.

We learn through repetition, dictums that inscribe our identity and if followed daily, soon become habits and render privilege invisible. People, who are the recipients of its excesses, are rendered powerless: “feeling powerless, we’re robbed of energy and creativity, with hearts left open to depression” (Lappe, 2007, p.4).¹² Over time we adjust to the new norm and internalize the discourse of power, and ‘technologies of self’ that have become a part of our daily routines.

¹¹ Suma Qamana is the ancient wisdom of Aymara Peoples of Bolivia, a philosophy of life, “live and coexist well not better” To live well is to live in co-existence and balance. A sustainable way of life based on relations of respect and reciprocity with all the species (sentient and non sentient).

¹² The World Health Organization reported that depression is now the fourth leading cause of lost of productive life worldwide—expected to jump to second place in 15 years. And the suicides worldwide now exceed homicides by 50%.

As Gramsci pointed out the effective control of the proletariat relied not simply upon repression, but in the establishment of a perceived legitimacy for the capitalist regime through the control of the dominant ideas and values in a society. The affected defend the system that oppresses them as the 'natural' system. Unaware of the complex web of power relations that limit the life opportunities of millions, individual choices serve as justification for a person socio-economic success or failure. The capital accumulation structures that allow or impede our movement are blurred.

And yet, we are not powerless and the conditions are never fixed, they are constantly changing and shifting. Foucault (1970) argues that power is relational, and never absolute nor 'unipolar.' Power is constantly shifting and its location can be at times invisible, when our behaviours become naturalized, as habits set in.¹³

Renewing Commitment to Education

Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity. (Fanon, 1965)

In order for education to transform we must begin by looking at how power is systemically and structurally organized, how this power over is used to authorize, legitimize and naturalize, particular outcomes that preserve the status quo.

We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects. (Freire, 1970/1983, p.68)

Education is inherently a political act. The process of connecting the reality of our world to the text of the classroom, as learners, the goal is to become aware, awake to injustice, to problematize and seek to transform reality. According to Arendt (1951) 'One' immortalizes one's self by becoming a 'who' that acts within a political space; our capacity and ability to act give rise to our memorable narrative. We have been schooled in the language of logic (pragmatic scientism) and linear causality, and our world bears the affects

¹³ Foucault (1961).

of our prowess in theories of development that do not include accounts of earth's finite composition, nor the voices of species unrecognized as knower.

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.

(Fanon, 1967)

Who are the visionaries of our time? who are the memorable characters of our tragedies of war?, who are the triumphant heroes? ...the invisibility of power and privilege, as it becomes embedded in our lives and out of our acceptance of structures that separates politics from social life, birth the seedlings of oppression and inequity.

There is a constant and growing resistance to unjust models of development, systems of education that continues to create hierarchies of domination, upholding and reproducing the status quo. The open wound of colonization's painful history embodied in educational institutions and children's lives today stings our heart with sorrow. And also inspires our constant resistance, we are the 'obstinate' (los necios) who refuse to forget. And accept the response-ability (not in the Western individualistic sense of rights and commitments), but in the primordial sense as indigenous people who have accepted the call to respond. "Agency is spoken into existence at any moment. It is fragmented, transitory, a discursive position" (Davies, 2000, p. 68).

I have decided, through this work, that it is time to speak another language, one that proposes new possibilities, that calls us to new awakenings. A language of education that is one of inclusion, open to reimagining and reclaiming what has been lost.¹⁴ To recognize the many ways to knowing that enable us to be response-able to transform the social institutions that govern our private and social lives.

Human essence—not human nature in general (which does not exist) nor the sum total of qualities and shortcomings in the individual, but the essence of who somebody is—can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story... Even Achilles ... remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet, or historian, without whom everything he did remains futile....

(Arendt, 1951, pp. 193-194)

Tell Me a Story

Learning is endless and in itself will never make us ethical men

(Eiseley, 1979, p. 284)

What can be learned from a story woven out of fragmented moments of joy, pain, horror, and blissful awareness? A text authored with multiple voices¹⁵ haunted by the language of a lost country, punctuated pauses, slippery tenses to draw forth the temporal and spatial, to call the reader's attention to *this moment*, to make visible the relations and fragmented experiences that weave the strands of my life (the conflicts, successes, contradictions in the learning journey). A story offered where past and present embrace, revealing the historical social, political, economic, educational processes that author my life.

The "randomness" of stories that emerged in the writing of this text, speaks to the beautiful chaos of life. The contradictions and complexity of being without being seen, the wounding of alienation that forces the wounded to enter a crossroads, "some meandering ground between innocence and maturity, from a superficial life of distance to a more intimate and penetrating awareness of being" (Slattery, 2000, p. 41).

This telling of my story seeks to make visible the relationships of power that shape the spaces we collectively inhabit. The narrative gives transcendence (Arendt, 1951), to our shared wounds, birthing possibilities and immense capacities that expand our understanding, and awaken us to the many ways to learning necessary in order to survive.

In the authoring of my life, I seek to tell my "story" and at the same time interrogate my "experience" of the stories I share (Grumet, 1981c; Pagano, 1990; Scott, 1991; Smith 1987) unsettling the habitual responses, revealing discourses that are deeply gendered, classist and racist in normalizing ways, that frame how we come to understand ourselves. Who am I in your presence? A story that reveals the complexity and contradictions of education, as institutional blindness, stubbornness, or habit produces and maintains the

¹⁵ The child, the parent, the worker and the stranger in a foreign land.

status quo that continues the wounding of the unwelcome stranger, of what we do not recognize, of those 'othered' in society.

“Our wounds are the fathers and mothers of our destiny” (Hillman, 1982, p. 103). Wounds weaken the wounded in the world; however as part of the search for identity, the wound can be a way of awakening and as I have experienced, has actually allowed me an opening into a fuller state of being; “the wound may be both a learner and a teacher” (Hillman, 1982, p. 109).

In this telling, this wound I bear, which opens a deep painful connection between present and past, moves from time present to the past, to the origin of the scar, within the same sentence. The embrace of the past and present is intended to connect the historical, social, economic, political processes that inscribe our being. Touching and tracing the scar returns life (the story) to us of the original wounding, the vulnerable scar tissue that tears open revealing its originary injury and the story of its genesis. Revealing this open wound seeks to make visible the relationships of power that shape the spaces we collectively inhabit. The narrative gives transcendence (Arendt, 1951), to our shared wounds, birthing possibilities and immense capacities that expand our understanding, and awake us to the many ways to learning necessary in order to survive.

These stories then are the 'stop moments' (Appelbaum, 1995; Fels & Belliveau, 2008) the moments a choice was made and life transformed, not always for the better. Grounded in narrative inquiry, in exploration, revelation and representation, making the wound visible invites us towards co-creation, collaboration and embodied human understanding. The decision to choose Arts-based research practice,¹⁶ as I journeyed towards and through this writing, helped to define and shape my understanding and commitments to what matters most. To create and see a world made whole again.

¹⁶ A set of methodological tools used in qualitative research, that adapt the tenets of creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways that unite theory and practice. Arts-based methods draw on literary writing, music, performance, dance, visual art, film and other mediums. Representational forms include short narratives, novels and experimental writing forms, poems, collages, paintings, drawings, performance scripts, theater performances, dances, documentaries and songs (Leavy, 2009, p. 3).

In First Nation cultures, stories are never “just stories.” They are essential ways of communicating memory, history, belief, and tradition. They require “response-ability.” The multiple voices in my story connect to the multiple stories of those silenced, and offers an invitation to all readers to share our stories, to heal our communities, to envision and create the tools to implement justice, tools of anti-racist education.

Stories are ideas embodied with knowledge of the possibilities that exist or that can be imagined. In each situation, there is always a choice! Our minds are reservoirs of memories. Stories of past hurts, renewed with each new pain of daily struggle for survival. We are defined by our stories. Happy moments fill us with hope, enabling us to embrace the unknown, and uncertainty of tomorrow with a promise of possibility. In the wound, lives a memory of the ability to heal and capacity for transformation.

This story, my story, is organized in 10 chapters intended to be read in sequence. Chapter 1, *Introduction*, establishes the broader political, social and economic context within which this work is located. Chapter 2, *Living as Praxis –the Age of Innocence*, is the grounding of identity in the lineal family, locating myself in a world that was open to discovery. Chapter 3, *Tough Times – When Money Doesn’t Love You*, investigates identity and agency in the intersectionality of poverty and war. Chapter 4, *This Letter Will Be Answered in Heaven*, relates the stories of work that make visible the privileging of profits over the lives of workers and the penury of poverty.

Chapter 5, *Children of War*, is the contextual visceral realities of war and how education helped or failed to guide my navigation of this difficult period in my life. Chapter 6, *Borderlands*, exposes life as an immigrant, the dehumanizing labels imprinted by racism, poverty and cultural exclusion. Chapter 7, *A Mouse Learns to Roar*, narrates the barriers to education in a secondary setting where students are seen as units, contrasted with a suburban school whose focus was on relationship and connection. Chapter 8, *Scarred Landscapes: in the Academy*, is my venture into post secondary education and the injuries taken for identity, markers that defined my presence and participation within the academy. Chapter 9, *Bridges Not Walls*, explores the role of the academy as the catalyst of meaning making and thus a conduit for social transformation. Chapter 10, *Community and Communion*, reveals the lessons learned through writing this thesis, and is a concluding invitation to imagine the world as if the transformation we desire was already here.

Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love... Above all, always capable of feeling any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world.

Che Guevara

Summary

We teach who we are.

(Palmer, 1997)

On the day my admission letter to university arrived, I was ecstatic! I couldn't wait to start. I immediately made an appointment to meet with an academic advisor. I was a bit insecure about my non-native English skills, and felt that setting a support network early on would help me do well in my courses. After a long journey, a survivor of war, and abject poverty, I had arrived. I was about to start a new life.

I arrived 15 minutes early for my appointment, dressed in lovely fuchsia coloured pants with a white cotton embroidered shirt, my own design and creation. There were no pictures on the ivory coloured walls and the bright florescent lights made for a cold ambiance. The gentleman who greeted me was of average build, approaching fifty, and balding a little at the top. He shook my hand with a friendly smile, and his blue eyes met mine as he asked me to take a seat.

After hearing the reasons for my visit, his eyes focused in on me, leaning forward the way someone does when about to speak something profound, he said in a very polite tone: "You seem like a nice girl... (he paused) why do you want to waste your money going to university?" his polite tone continued as he said, "the local college has great programs, you can learn a trade, and make money. I don't think, you will be able to succeed here, university is not right for you."

Like a wounded animal, too disoriented to reject the wounds being inflicted. I stood up silently, and thanked him for his time. I walked out of the office as my eyes flooded with tears. It became painfully clear to me that no matter what I did in life, I will always be judged as, someone looking from the margins, struggling for acceptance. Though it may sound

romantic in a Che Guevara sort of way, it quickly becomes exhausting. Education has always been the result of struggle. A struggle ignored in the histories and geographies of knowledge and the epistemology of what is worth knowing.

Chapter 2.

Living as Praxis (Reflection and Practice)

A Life of Contemplation

The unexamined life is not worth living.

(Socrates)

Who philosophizes? Why is it still important to human beings?...the question was allowed to linger. I was a brown face in a sea of white, afraid to be discovered as wanting. I sat silently. My first year philosophy professor looked around the room, then, as he repeated the question, he stood in front of my seat. His eyes met mine as he waited for a response. I sheepishly confessed I did not know what philosophy meant, my letter of admission had arrived on the first day of school, I had not had the benefit of an orientation on how to go about signing up for courses. My meeting with an advisor earlier in the week had left me with more doubts than answers. I felt my cheeks turn red and burn with embarrassment as I answered, "I just got admitted this week, and most courses were full, yours was still open...and I signed up" as I uttered the words I wished the earth could swallow me, as the class laughed at my response. "Welcome" was his response, as he smiled, perhaps at my honesty or at the possibility of imprinting the importance of meaning making and living life with purpose. Which clearly at that moment I embodied the antithesis to clarity of purpose.

The only thing I knew for certain was that I needed to get a university degree to improve my life opportunities; which to date had been bleak. I imagined myself, going on to do law, maybe even becoming a judge; I let my imagination run wild. The letter of admission arrived and suddenly the world was filled with possibilities. But I had no strategy for getting there. I knew I needed a writing intensive course to graduate and philosophy seemed to be a good start. In his "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger writes.

Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of Being insofar as they bring the manifestation to language and maintain it in language through their speech.
(Heidegger, 1977, p. 217)

After writing my midterm essay on Plato's Cave, the answer to what is philosophy, and more importantly why we philosophize, became evident. The allegory of the Cave was emblematic of the darkness of injustice. How people seeing nothing but the shadows of war and poverty became accustomed to the dark, unable to imagine a different world. As I had internalized the cries of suffering and pain as everyday occurrences, I also began to build a wall between the world of shadows and the other possible worlds without violence, war or hunger.

I begin to see the shadows of military power as authority. The shadows of military force feared by night, by day posed as security and protection. The children, peasants, workers and original peoples, the recipients of state sponsored terror were constantly proselytized by grand narratives of communism; the enemy we should fear; or the need to surrender our civil liberties in exchange for security. Shadows masquerade the truth. The media, school and church had also grown used to the shadows and never questioned in whose interests were the 'democratic' shells of B52 bombers, deployed. They also never explained the mutilated bodies on the side of the road, those who were invisible in life, went on being invisible in death. The question lingers... are we still in the cave? Is the world of shadows still the reality world for most of the world's population who like me lack the words to describe their world?

What we do is what we know, and ours is but one of many possible worlds. It is not a mirroring of the world, but the laying down of a world...
(Varela, 1987, p. 62)

We philosophize to make meaning; to imagine, invent, create, and to expand our moral (ethics) imagination in order to see the unseen and re-create our world. To see beyond, the shadows of prescriptive theologies and epistemologies of a world that, we are told, is fixed. We imagine and create through the act of appropriating language, to read the word. Learning to decode and create new codes, reading not as a mechanical skill but seeking understanding in order to read the world (Freire/1970), to make knowledge mortal,

and not the possession of gods. The act of creating meaning is a relational, interdependent, and thus a socially facilitated process. “All human knowledge of the world is linguistically mediated...the linguisticity [Sprachlichkeit] of our being-in the-world articulates in the end the whole realm of our experience” (Gadamer, 2006, p. 48).

My understanding of the world is grounded on the wisdom of my elders, the caring of strangers, and the guidance of teachers who have invited me into a reciprocal relationship as both a learner and a teacher along with the wisdom that comes out of struggling, surviving and living fully aware of a world in constant change. This constant change inspires, informs and forms my visions of a transformed world where every life has meaning and is valued.

My story is one of the many stories woven from fragmented moments of joy, pain, horror, and love. The fragmented kernels of living we hang on to, reveal a journey impacted and influenced by social conditions (economic, political, cultural and social), and the reciprocal impact our lives have on those around us, for as we are shaped by our environment we affect and shape the spaces we inhabit and the lives of those around us. (Davis et al. as cited in Fels, 1999).

This thesis marks the ‘stop moments’ (Fels & Belliveau, 2008) the moment a choice was made and a life transformed, not always for the better. And asks: What is knowledge in the hands of people who see the world as their rightful destiny to rule over others? What is power to those who assume they have been born to obey? What is life without relationships that give meaning to our existence? How do we unlearn institutionalized prejudice? What is justice, when so many people have adjusted to a ‘better than’ mantra? What is hope without possible alternative worlds?

Seeking escape routes out of poverty has been a constant practice in my life. Learning has been a healing balm to the injuries I bare/bear, for even the wounds have profound wisdom, that help us grow morally and nourish our consciousness. The open wound inspires the resolve to speak when words are denied. And to finally see that wisdom (knowledge) is more than prescriptive text, is the ability to see ourselves as we are, vulnerable and fallible, and yes capable of transformative feats.

Living in Two Worlds

Without money each daily human need becomes a pain.

(Berger, 2007, p. 48)

Lacking the formation of a school's education, my parents reinvented their lives many times over in relation to the economic realities of being members of the landless and poor. Their intuitive determination, commitment to reciprocity and community, helped them survive and ignite their children's ability to dream, in a dreamless world of war, poverty and hunger. They instilled in us, a dissident resolve, to feint if necessary, a path to possible new tomorrows. In their hopeful innocence, and tireless ingenuity they created for us, spaces (tiny little cracks), where dreams could become visible and loud enough to be heard.

Although money was hard to come by, my parents used to encourage us to save, by giving us pennies from time to time, to put in our piggy banks. The sound of those coins clicking with the others created a resonance, but it was the dissonance that always intrigued me; that hollow sound of an empty savings container. The dream was always the same "one day we'll have enough money ...". The get out of poverty dream, like the coins that rained in the empty container, was a pitiful attempt to believe against the odds in the prospect of a peaceful, safe and fruitful tomorrow.

Dad dreamed of having a home, plenty of food, a little land to work and a little luck to get out of poverty; like the dirt roads in our village, the way out was not clearly marked, but my parents believed an education, would at least help us map the way out. And so, began a journey to seek knowledge as a way out of misery and penury.

The rooster's morning anthem marked 4am,
time to get up!

The lights of dusk were starting to break up the night's immense darkness. I've faced the wall to avoid the incessant calling of my mother, the scent of fresh coffee brewing on the stove, and our dog barking.

The sheets are warm, with the scent of bodies that huddle like newborn puppies

for warmth and shelter. At night we would pile on to the bed trying to make our bodies fit,
in between the springs sticking out of the mattress.
The bed was a wedding gift to my parents,
all my sisters were born on this bed.
Over the years the bodies in the bed had multiplied and expanded.

Like a snail wraps its body into the small shell.
We also had learned to sleep in the in between spaces of comfort.

So it was with great glee that we welcomed the new bunk beds.

The soft mattress felt alien to my back. "you can sleep on your back" my mother told me.
As long as I could remember I had slept on my side,
proud to claim the left corner on the bed.

It seems silly, since this also meant I often fell off the bed; when in their heavy sleep my sisters rolled over and pushed me off.
But it felt liberating, to be free, at least on one side of the bed.

Life small pleasures can be so fleeting, but their imprint on us lasts a lifetime.

The Age of Innocence

Life's gifts are small and priceless.

(Berger, 2007, p. 106)

As children our life chances and opportunities are made possible by the relationships, and cultural wealth our social environments afford us. Survival is determined by our ability to learn and understand our environment. Every child learns to know and name their world initially by: tasting, touching, bumping against and stumbling through shaky footsteps. The successes or failures we experience, inform the risks we are willing to take on, expand and or limit our capacities to act upon the world.

My memories of childhood are reminders of long lost dreams, of forgotten pains of hunger and wanting. They are also lessons in the art of living in two different worlds. The hope against hope world of my parents, their refusal to give up, even when there seemed to be no option left. And the normative conditions of poverty, that robbed them of everything when they lost even their children, to hunger, and disease and later their lives to war. I was born to a home rich in love and like my siblings was cherished by my parents. Every child is a promise; they are eternal springs of hope for the poor. The clay house, tin metal sheets on the roof, the carefully crafted door told the story of our family's commitment to one another, the reciprocity that governed our actions and desire to be in the service of others, this was a way of life. We share our joy, sorrow, our hopes and dreams. Through their stories, my parents had a way to reclaim their right to name our world, to transcendence and immortality. Somewhere another person will hear our stories and they may make meaning that may further our hope that life means something worth fighting for. After long days working in the sun and elements, my parents were physically exhausted. To speak was to have found words that were better than silence. Stories were always a welcome respite to the drudgery of life as repetitive tasks. The stories they told inspire and informed our resilience, "like broken trees still seeking the sun" they created a strong foundation upon which we could lean on.

My home was a source of creative explorations, painful discoveries, and magical illuminations. My mother was a magician the way she would prepare sumptuous meals out of flowers, roots and anything she could get her hands on. She had a wonderful way of transforming the staple meal of beans and rice into a creation of culinary perfection. I watched her deliberate timing in the meal preparation; the tortillas would be made only minutes before our meal. The sweet aroma of steaming hot tortillas signalled it was time to eat. The scented beans, cooked with green peppers and apazote; everything prepared with such love and care. Our meal was followed by, a cup of corn coffee (one of mother's culinary creations). Food was sacred in our home, even when plentiful. And there was little space between the time of my first meal and the time I had to contribute to the daily struggle, to keep hunger away. From the cradle to our deathbed, learning is intuitive, a part of survival.

From the moment I discovered my hands and legs, I longed to explore, taste and name the world around me. My understanding of the world is reflective of my elders' beliefs,

tastes, practices, prejudices and values. No child takes the journey alone, the guidance of parents, siblings, teachers, economic and cultural influences articulate a particular way of being, at times contradictory to one another. I owe my curiosity and resilience to my father who died believing in the transformative power of education. I owe my courage to my mother who taught me to speak when it matters, even when I lacked language. Together they opened my eyes to see that life is a series of moments calling us to action. Like a lioness teaching her young to survive, my mother taught us to live in awe of the sunrise (to have passion for life), to seek meaning in our life the way a river is determined to find the ocean (purpose), to see that there is no separation from our actions and our being (integrity). Surrounded by death, she reminded us that “Everybody dies, but not everybody learns to live.” To live well, means to live in community and communion. Have I learned to live well? Or simply to live better?

I would later learn that living means more than simply counting by the years. It has meant a series of spiritual deaths of the old ways of seeing and rebirths to new ways of being and acting in the world. We create the world anew each day, each moment, with each choice. A journey enfolded in a lifelong pursuit to re-discover, taste, re-imagine and recreate, my identity and community; in order to know and name ‘my world’. Searching for ways to connect the fragmented pieces of my daily realities of work, parenting, and survival to the shards of memory and imagination that link the pain, joy, passion, and love that reminds me of what matters most.

A seeker of truth, like most children are, I feasted on a myriad of experiences. I was inquisitive of adults, at times unsatisfied with the answers they offered. Children learn by being participants, avid scriptwriters of their world, aware, and inquisitive of their world. My first 7 years of life were defined by the many ‘first times’ of singular experiences that increasingly coloured my inquisitiveness and curiosity of the world around me. The wonder, joy and pain of shattered notions of what the world represented, the painful contrast of the prescribed realities (the adult’s version—good and bad) and the ‘other’ reality that shocks and pains us.

I remember the joy and wonder of seeing the ocean for the first time, the immensity and power of this majestic force. The pride and joy of helping my father plant, and harvest a corn crop. The shock and wonder of seeing a baby being born, witnessing how they struggle

to break free and claim a place in the world. The confusion and sadness at seeing a baby's last breath; and the adult's unsatisfactory explanation, of why babies die. It led to my suspicion that adults didn't always know all the truths, that perhaps there were other pieces that they could not know, or had chosen to ignore.

Ways to Knowing

No one of us can see the whole. Since I was a little child, I have known that all perspectives are contingent, that no one's picture is complete.
(Greene, 1995a, p. 82)

Getting to know my world had been a practice of tasting, seeing, feeling, falling and standing up again. My positive and painful experiences informed and formed by my behaviour and the calculated risks I took that expanded my knowledge of the world. My father's gentle voice, had guided my first steps. My mother's love and herbal potions had nursed me through typhoid fever, diarrhoea and chicken pox. Ancient cures, conceived out of necessity and desperation. In her prayers she sought the guidance of ancestral faith, of a higher spirit that connected all beings as she prepared and offered me a dark green blend of roots, and herbs. The bitter taste repulsed me, and I instantly refused it. In my convulsive state, I engraved the look of her eyes in my soul, this supplicating act of love, her desperate attempts to save me. I accepted her offering and drank.

It seems that saving their children from premature death is a heavy burden for most parents. Especially since most are not successful in their efforts. Like an open wound that refuses to heal, the memory of their dead children is tattooed on their soul. You come to know your brothers and sisters even if they are long gone by the time you are born. And you soon become aware of the fragility and temporal existence of those born to a prison of poverty. By the time I was seven, I had escorted several babies to the cemetery, sometimes the tiny boxes, were no bigger than a shoebox.

Other Ways of Telling

My mother was a talented dressmaker. I remember my first ruffle dress. It was white with an embroidered bodice, ruffled skirt and a big ribbon at the back. My joy was immense upon first sight of the precious gift. Sadly, I soon learned to associate my obligatory pallbearer duties with my beautiful white dress. Whenever it appeared on my bed, it signalled that another baby had died. When a baby dies who had not yet been baptized; legend has it, they will go to purgatory, a place where babies stay until they are allowed to enter into heaven.

Heaven, a marvellous place we learn about in church. I learned that people die, especially babies. They seemed so vulnerable, like newborn kittens, they seemed blind to the world. They sometimes just closed their eyes and refused to open them again. Some babies cry a lot just before they die, other were silent. As if, they had known all along, they would not stay in this world.

Facing Our Fears

Until the age of seven, I lived in a world where I did not yet read words. The priest's litany of prayers in Latin was a lovely symphony of words. Pretty utterances devoid of meaning, beyond the emotional reaction they evoke in the adults. The adults' world seemed filled with ghosts: the ghosts of children that reappeared to parents, the ghost of a mother who appears at night to her orphaned child.

Ghosts needed darkness to appear—they revealed secrets, like where their bodies were hidden. Many ghosts are wanderers, wailing the pain of their guilt, begging for forgiveness, and asking for prayers. I grew up with the stories of our family ghosts who made regular appearances.

In our village, most homes did not have the luxury of electricity; we relied on a single kerosene lamp to illuminate our home. The streets were dark without lamps of any kind. The darkness, cast shadows on the walls of our homes, and our imaginations. I remember

the nights, when consumed by fear I would refuse to make the trip to the outhouse to relieve my bladder, until the pain would become so unbearable that I would cautiously face my fear and venture into the darkness. The moonlight would be bright and the sky cluttered with stars. And in the quiet of the night the only sound would be the cooing of owls, and lonely crickets. The ghosts I had feared seemed to have had already been banished to their resting place.

The more I confronted my fears, by learning to see, and feel in the darkness, the sound and scent of the world that I knew so well in the day light. The more familiar the shadows of trees became, as I remembered the branches of my old friends, the more my night terrors seemed to diminish. The same mango tree that in the day had sheltered me from the sun and offered me its branches to swing from had been a source of terror in the night. The familiar sounds of leaves I observed with joy dancing in the air, in the silence of night seemed alien and scary. I hated my hurried breathing and loud thumping heart that seemed to join the chorus of the night.

The World of Words

As the seventh child in a family of eight children, I had envied my siblings every time they left for school leaving me at home. I wanted to learn, to decipher the encrypted texts they so enjoyed and to see the images hidden in those letters, secrets waiting to be uncovered. My mother understood my constant disappointment. She had never had the chance to go to school. And being of an inquisitive mind, she had managed to teach herself to read. She would shyly admit “only a little” if asked, if she could read and write. Then, she would proudly declare, “I can also sign my name”. This was a claim of dignity and pride in her identity. To sign meant to be authentic, to have a presence that could not be forged by the standard X, put on an important document to acknowledge agreement. It meant to have importance, to be valued as a member of the knowing group. As I later would have discovered, this meant to have visibility. To be seen as an equal.

My world was filled with superstition and myths of poverty, assumed as ‘natural’ or the result of ‘unfortunate luck’. The only right we were allowed was the right to obedience. To follow the laws, religious rules, and norms that politicians, priests and educators told us

were good for us. My mother believes that every head is a world “cada cabeza es un mundo”, a way of seeing, and being that is constantly changing. She dreamed of a different tomorrow. And she could imagine a different world other than the vulnerable reality of living in the shadows, the calamity of unpredictable floods and extreme weather storms; especially the threatening storm of war that was fast approaching, like a hurricane during rainy season.

She believes that no matter what the circumstances, we still make a choice. The lessons began at an early age, intuitively taught and learnt. We all contributed to the work needed at home: cleaning, cooking, fetching water, doing laundry, and feeding chickens. Work was always about helping, we chose what we were able to do, and everyone contributed, we all understood the interconnectedness of our world. What we did mattered, and what we failed to do, bore consequences.

Chapter 3.

Though Times: When Money Doesn't Love You

It is in the attempt to walk and live on the rickety bridge between self and other—and not the attempt to arrive at one side or the other—that we discover real hope.

(Phelan, 1993, p. 174)

School was this unknown world that both my parents idolized, even though neither had the chance to attend during their childhood. My mother's younger brother was the only one who had finished grade 6. Born six years apart, my mother took care of him, when their mother died.

My uncle, was a poet by choice, but employed as a bricklayer out of necessity.

He admired my mother, and loved to tell me stories of her youth, stories I now tell my children of their grandmother. The stories of my mother ground me; her struggles to self identify, to be seen and to have her existence validated; moves me to tell her story.

My uncle would speak of how beautiful she was, her love of dance and music. He respected her defiant stance against rigid norms of 'appropriate' ways of being. She designed and made her clothes and she would make rice paper screens to divide the bed from the dining table which cohabited only inches away from each other. Most of all, he respected her struggles to carve up a profession for herself in a world where women, did not learn trades. You know he'd say, "your mother was the best shoe maker in town, but no one even suspected that a woman could produce such high quality shoes."

I love hearing of my mother's clandestine resistance to norms of what's 'appropriate work' for women. Still, a trade she acquired watching her father, and playing "cobbler" only, when he was ill or away. My Grandfather too, admired her resilience and determination. He always seemed to become pensive and with a sigh he'd say softly "she's had a hard life". There was longing in his voice, the loving desire of a father who wished he could have been able, to give her more. A sadness of resignation, at the pain, he could not protect her from.

The Act of Seeing

No-one can see me twice as I am, in each fleeting instant of my life, as all instants are fleeting...as is life. I am not; I am being.

(Boal, 2006, p. 13)

The day was sunny and a beautiful rainbow had appeared after three days of rain. My parents were ecstatic. Dad was holding my hand when we arrived. It had been a long journey. He gleefully pointed to the wooded area, filled with tall grass and some fruit trees and said, "We are home." I was only 4 years old and although my imagination was boundless I was expecting a house. My eyes betrayed my anxiety. I saw a wooded area; my dad saw a home.

My dad was a carpenter by trade; though actually he was a bricklayer, a pipe fitter, a farm hand, and a labourer of whatever kind was needed. He had left home at the age of 13 when his mother passed away. He never went to school and signed his name with an X. The stabbing pain of his empty stomach had been his only faithful companion. And his many apprenticeships were the legacy of being a child slave to many employers. Underpaid, overworked and ill treated he would leave one job hoping to find more dignifying conditions elsewhere.

Years of living in the liminal spaces afforded to the landless and poor, had taught my parents to adapt, and to expect little for their efforts. We were constantly moving from the city to the country to work in coffee, cotton, or sugar plantations. And back to the city again, when the harvest ended. We would find ourselves in the outskirts of the city, as mom and dad worked in a multitude of servitude jobs, exhausting and poorly paid work: cleaning,

cooking, doing laundry, carrying food, building houses, gardening...whatever brought food to the table.

At times, when they could not find work, they would drop us off with relatives in the country, while they would disappear for months at a time, to work in fancy resorts by the beach, or manufacturing sites in the city. My mother used to be allowed 2 days off after a month or two of work at the resort. She would arrive home with gifts: two meters of fabric to make us new outfits; a bag of sweet tamarinds, and milk candies (my favourites); and money to leave behind for our care. She would spend her whole day sewing, making each of us unique outfits. I always preferred shorts to a dress, and she would make my outfit out of left over remnants, producing interesting patterns.

When she was away, wearing the clothes her hands had produced made me think of my mother and wished her near me. The bliss of her short visits, made the departures painful. She would leave in the dusk of morning, while we were asleep, hoping to minimize our sorrow at seeing her go; but I always knew, and would swallow my tears to spare her.

One of dad's most stable jobs was at a department store, in the day he would do maintenance: unplug toilets, clean the floors, and fix pipes. At night he was the un-official and unpaid security guard. He was given a tiny closet on the rooftop of the building, amidst the brooms and cleaning buckets, he had a thin mat, a chair and a night table he had built out of scrap wood and a two bricks.

Over the years they had managed to scrape together some small savings, and had purchased a stamp sized lot of land. The area was either a well-kept secret or a flooding zone, because there were no other people there when we arrived. As we later discovered it was no secret.

As he looked at the stamp sized lot marked with, a red ribbon indicating the boundaries of our homestead. He looked my way and winked as he proceeded to clear the area and declared "I am going to build a house for you." Years later, I still cherish the time and care of his work. He was like an artist working on his life's masterpiece, 'a house for his children'.

I love my father's kind and gentle manner, in his eyes there was an infinite sadness. If he had them, he never spoke of his dreams, forgotten desires and unsatisfied hungers. His face revealed the scars of pain. In his hurried existence, always working, when, would he have found the time to heal the wounds of his youth and childhood? Building a house for us, the act of creating with his hands something he desired; was a healing balm on his wounds. He first cleared a corner of the lot, furthest from the trail, and with the wood from the two trees fell, built a wood structure where later tin metal sheets would fill in the walls. It was almost dark when he finally stopped working, no roof, no walls, just the promise of a home.

Lying there under the dark sky with a million stars above us, the night seemed magical! I fell asleep to the sound of crickets, frogs and owls, as we rested our tired bodies. I don't remember if we ate that night. All I remember is the incredible love that bounded me to my parents and my siblings on that night. This was our first home, it was more than a home, it was a tiny crack, a promise of a new beginning.

*Because, when I look around
the sky today, is the same, as yesterday and tomorrow
the water in the river runs whether summer, fall or spring*

*Because, my mother's brown eyes, are still the pool of infinite
sadness, bountiful Joy, and unconditional love
that feeds my soul in my moments of fear and despair
Because in the laughter of my children
I find love, tenderness and compassion
that encourages the steady pace and the rhythm of my steps*

*Because through our collective songs, stories and myths
my eyes were opened,
I see in today, the tomorrows of yesterday.
And the circular time and place we inhabit
the pain, cautious hope for renewal
and the love that births a new world*

Unlike my father, who was destitute from birth, my mother had been born to a modest but comfortable home. Her mother, much like her, was an industrious talented woman. She had a diner at the local market, and employed three women to keep up with her clientele. My mother was destined to have a life of dignity and relative comfort. However, the tragedy of war disconnected her future, from her parents' prosperous past. The constant struggle to stand up to impunity and the penury of seeing children condemned to die of hunger, forced the poor and landless to continually rise up. The blood shed of many revolutions, unspoken of in schools' text books; are alive in the stories of elders who speak of the military massacres, torture and the violence against the landless poor.

On the day my mother's life changed, she was at home while her mother made deliveries about town. The sound seemed distant, and it wasn't until grandma saw her own blood streaming from her head, that she realized she has been wounded. My grandmother, a woman known for her strength in character, and physical prowess collapsed by the side of the road with her basket of bread strewn all over, the blood covered street.

The fact that grandma survived the seven bullets lodged into her body; was a testament of her strength. However, it left her in a debilitated condition, forcing the family into the depths of poverty. They lost their home, and all their possessions. As my mother started her seventh birthday, her possibilities of achieving an education and improving her life chances and opportunities, also evaporated.

Their survival became dependent on the solidarity of relatives, friends, and kind strangers. Whenever they were able to afford the rent of a small room in the city, my mother would get excited at the prospect of going to school. However, their stays were short and instead of the classroom learning that children her age were entitled to, she was introduced to the learning that is the destiny of children doomed by poverty.

The poverty that denied my mother her childhood also taught her to see the temporal existence of those around her. Only death seemed to free the wretched dirty faces of children from the talons of hunger and misery. She remembers, knocking on doors of wealthy homes asking for the scraps of food that would otherwise be thrown in the garbage. When successful, she would run home excitedly with her offering to share it with her family. Begging is a child's profession, the fate of children who own nothing. The coffee plantation

pesticides poison their lungs and the bites from rats and snakes shorten their lives. She was taught, as she would later teach us, to not touch our faces before washing our hands for fear of ingesting pesticides. While she worked alongside her father, she dreamed of other worlds, where the poor can be more than arms and legs for work. To be poor is not a crime, to accept poverty as inevitable; that is the crime.

Reciprocity

We seldom visited the city. My parent's preferred the quiet of the mountains, and the thunder of the ocean to the noisy city sounds of constant buying and selling. They did not have money to spare and when we went to the city, my parents always pointed to the injustice of having large statues and ornaments built while children slept in cardboard boxes. In their poverty they taught me to experience abundance. If someone asked my father for a coin, he never refused. My parents believed that in the manner we give, we also receive. To give someone a coin was not an act of charity but of solidarity. "Hoy por ti, manana por mi" I give to you today, you may give to me tomorrow.

My uncle reads the paper daily, and loves to do the crossword puzzles at the back. I enjoy sitting with him and watching him uncover the secrets in the boxes. As words come together, a sequence of meaning appears. I point to the box and declare that's a "b" he looks excitedly and tells me "you can read!"

I feel proud at being recognized as a knower. To be seen, and be regarded as someone who can name the world was a defining moment. Suddenly, the world around me seemed somehow accessible. At school, the teachers would further encourage me to expand my knowledge by introducing me to the rules of reading and writing. Having no books at home, I would read everything in sight: the names of streets, the signs on the road; every label on a can, or a box of food in the local store. Though at first exciting, my ability to decode the symbols and to see words; seemed unable to explain the complexity of my daily life. The ability to read words alone did not help me understand for instance, why so many children die; why parasites continued to be our eternal companions, even after repeated treatments to relieve our inflated bellies of the critters? Why we go to church, when God doesn't seem to hear us?

My mother disapproved of my questions of God. She believed we must make things better ourselves; God can't do everything. I still wish he would help a little. In our house everybody helps with whatever needs doing. The responsibility was also to our neighbours. If someone was sick my mom sent me over with a bowl of soup or fresh vegetables from the garden. The bonds of community were more important than money.

Once I discovered reading. I uncovered a new world of great adventures. I loved reading and spent my free time reading under a tree. At school I was given a medal of excellence for my academic achievement; and was offered a scholarship to study at a private school. My parents beamed with pride. The stories of my prodigious intellectual ability were soon widely known in our small community. Some of our neighbours like my parents had never attended school. When the war forced many of their children into exile; they longed to be in contact. My mother decided I was just the answer to the problem.

I became the unofficial scribe in our community. I enjoyed writing love letters, good-news letters, and bad news: "please send money, your sister is pregnant" or "dad is sick, please write home". It felt good to be of service. To be valued by my community as someone with skills to contribute. I was humbled by the trust bestowed on me by my fellow citizens and, felt privileged to be a link that brought people close that were worlds apart. I enjoyed seeing their faces light up when a letter arrived. I specially loved reading the response letters. To feel connected to so many worlds.

Most letters spoke of the harsh condition of cold climates, and long hours of work. One of the letters spoke of a unique job in the US. Our neighbour's daughter was working as a nanny to a dog. At first we thought it was a child, and maybe we had misunderstood. She spoke of taking him to school, and of walks in the park. Most of the children in our village, had to work with their parents after school, and visits to the park were reserved for special occasions, when we visited the city. What a wonderful world where even dogs got to go to school!

Schooling the Poor

As I shared this story of dogs going to school with my family, my mother would mourn the contrast to our reality. Our dogs didn't go to school but neither did half the children in the country. Most children had to do jobs, that their bodies were not fully developed to support yet. Carrying things seemed to be an easy enough job for a child to do. My mother remembers working for a distillery carrying empty bottles from the bar. A large case of 24 empty bottles would be set on her head with the aid of a rolled up towel that resembled a nest, this would help cushion her head from the heavy load she was carrying. My mother's skinny frame would wobble as she carried the empty bottles, to earn 15 cents. The production of alcohol was prohibited. And while the laws that enforce morality, for the poor, made the potion price's increase; the demand for it did not reduce.

At age 13 she paid a city hall official two pesos, the equivalent of her entire month's pay to change her birth certificate. And just like that, she became 15 years old. She was, in paper at least, old enough to be exploited legally at the local factory making cookies. Her job was short lived. Her mother was dying. She asked for time off to look after her, but the request was denied. She quit the same day.

After years of agonizing pain, my grandmother took her last breath. My mother remembers how after not being able to eat for several days, she requested a peach. Although not in season, the request was met, as this would have been her last meal. She ate the peach slowly, savouring every bite. The soft, ripe flesh, juicy and sweet, seemed to awaken long forgotten pleasures, or maybe just memories of better days. With her children around her, she inhaled deeply and closed her eyes, never to be open them again.

Chapter 4.

This Letter Will Be Answer in Heaven

...The heart is never far from what matters. Without the heart pumping its words, we are nothing but an outdated dictionary, untouched. (Pelias, 2004, p.7)

Their grief of her death was only surpassed by the horror of not having any money to offer her a funeral. In panic, they closed the doors and windows not wanting people to know until they could locate, somewhere under the stars, money to offer my grandma a descent funeral. In spite of their secrecy, the town soon discovered the sad news. Within a matter of hours, my mother received several of her neighbours who came bearing humble gifts: candles for the vigil, some coffee, food, and a pine coffin for her final journey. Honouring the dead with music and food is an act of wishing them in death, what they were denied in life: rest, comfort, joy and peace.



Figure 1. "The Faithful," by Sylvia Richardson (The Faces of Despair, Fall 2009)

My uncle was only 10 years old when his mother died. His offering was a poem; only three lines.

*Mother, Eternal beacon of wisdom, suffering and pain.
You gave me life, your compassion taught me empathy and love.
Now please teach to live, without you.*

The education of both my parents, was a ‘know how to’ kind of education, though sadly not always to their benefit. They were ‘unskilled workers’ not for a lack of capacities; but due to a lack of authority to claim their skills and be paid accordingly. Members of the masses of unemployed and landless, they were constantly learning how to train their arms and legs to adapt, to whatever work they could find. This imposed on them a life long journey of indentured servitude. What they longed for was an education to break free of their prison, of imposed poverty and scarcity, of too much work and too little rest, of too much pain and too little comfort. In Latin America there is a refrain: “the poor adore comfort, is only academics that like poverty.”

What if they could write a different script for their lives, what if they could write a new story of their lives and what their lives are worth?. What if poverty were to no longer be naturalized, exoticized, and explained away as inevitable, by those with authority to describe and name the world? The censors and government officials too often get caught up in their minutia studies of the poor, what they eat, who they vote for and do not vote for, what their minimum caloric intake ought to be to stay alive...all the while ignoring the most important questions. Why poverty exist amidst so much wealth?

My dad was a man of few words, slow to anger and gentle when correcting his children. He used to say when he was overwhelmed by the insults of the foreman “just because we have nothing, doesn’t mean we are nothing.” The lines around his eyes revealed a man of many years, though he was barely mid forties when he died. A lifetime of constant learning to bear insults and abuses, had taught him that those who tell us we are doomed to live in poverty, are the same ones who have robbed us of our lands, our labour, and our dreams.

They don’t do it alone; God has been appropriated by the rich, and forgotten the poor. My father trusted the wind, the colour of the earth and the clouds to tell him if he would have a good harvest, rather than praying to a God that did not understand our simple

words. In his opinion, we experienced life's pains, hunger, illness and constant threats of bad weather right here and now. Our backs ache from back-breaking labour is suffered in this world, in this body. How can we hope, or expect justice and peace in some imaginary world, when we are not sure if it even exists. The only certainty we have, is the peace of the cemetery that awaits us.

He was suspicious of God's laws that seemed to only apply to poor people. He was not a religious man, though he insisted we attend mass on Sundays. He felt that like the newspaper or TV the church also spread bad news. To close our eyes to the injustice around us; was a kind of wilful blindness. He didn't know how to paint a world with words, so he showed us with his actions. To claim our dignity, he taught us, we are more than our possessions. Everyone comes into the world naked, and we will leave this world with nothing. The value of our being is not in what we own but what we do. "You are not inferior to anyone, not a king, a priest, or rich person."

It was not just the laws of God that seemed skewed in favour of the rich, my father was highly suspicious of the laws of the land that seemed to also side with the rich. But dead people can't challenge rich owners in court, so we learned to adapt, in order to survive. This does not mean we become adjusted to inequity. Survival requires certain things in the daylight, while our dreams are relegated to the night, imagining new dreams of who we are, who we could be and seeking the spaces to make those dreams reality.

My dad believed education could give people like us a voice that others could hear. It could help us define the tools with which we would build a new tomorrow. And the opportunity to share our view of the world, based on our experience of the world, our dreams of the world, and our judgment of the world—that reflect our individual and interconnected presence in the world. The hurriedness of life, denies our lives creativity, leisure and contemplation. So we must learn to make the most of every moment. Always running, chasing the clock, hoping to arrive before our time runs out!

Community and Identity

Hopelessness can become tragic despair.

(Freire, 1994)

We learn very early that our lives are defined by work. The little basket wrapped around my waist allowed me to contribute to the efforts of my parents and siblings in the coffee plantations. It also earned me the insider status that, allows me to laugh along with the others, when hearing of my uncle's disastrous work experience while picking cotton. Children too, knew of the labour intensive and insulting wages, cotton pickers got paid.

He loved telling the story.

It was a hot summer day, the heat was suffocating, since cotton plants grow close to the ground; most are 3-4 feet high. The unfortunate wretch, who has to pick cotton for a living, had to spend the day bent over to harvest it. Only 17 years old, his youthful figure had spent the day bent over picking cotton and had filled several sacks by late afternoon. His body was exhausted and his shirt wet with his sweat. Feeling quite accomplished at his young body's ability to move fast and accumulate what seemed to be a substantially larger amount of cotton than his co-workers, he decided to take a well-deserved rest. With his shirt and two sticks he had built a nice canopy and was happily resting, when a woman approached him. Looking at his several sacks of cotton, she said "you've had a very good day". He smiled and nodded in agreement. She asked if he had patted the sacks. Confused by the question he said no. She proceeded to press her foot into the sack. As the snow-flake size bulbs melded together under the force of her foot; she observed he did not have a full sack. Not even close. In fact his entire day's work, barely amounted to less than half a sack of cotton. At this point my uncle's smile would turn into a frown, and he would pause for effect. Then he would finish his story as he turned to the woman and said "No!, please, save me the humiliation and take the sack" he then put back on his shirt, and walked home. The whole family would burst out laughing (including my uncle), as even children, understood his disappointment.

We laugh because it feels better than to cry. Our shared laughter made learning from our mistakes bearable. It healed the scars of life's disappointments.

The dehumanizing work that children and adults, are forced to do to keep from starving. The growing violence in the community as men who feel impotent in their ability to provide for their families, waste their hard earned money on alcohol and cigarettes. The despair in the women, who beat their children and feel guilty for not having the right words to help their children understand, there is no food tonight. The incessant hunger pangs bring

both women and children to the brink of madness and despair. Why can't they just explain to the hungry faces crying, who fill their stomachs with air, why there was no food yesterday and there may be no food tomorrow! Just tell the incessant child who has not learnt that crying will only secure him a hiding, and his hunger pains will only be forgotten momentarily while he nurses the newly inflicted wounds.

Learning to Live Without

Learning to live with hunger is not an easy lesson to learn or teach. Walking through life always, against the wind gets exhausting. Once the house was built the flood season arrived, destroying crops and dreams. I watched in horror as people chased down the river to rescue their meagre possessions from being washed away. We teach who we are. My parents were maladjusted to their prescribed poverty. And they refused to accept that this was inevitable. They refused to enforce the mandatory doctrine of conformity, of churches, governments and the rich land owners. Who told us we were responsible for our poverty.

On the contrary, I was taught we are forced to suffer the injuries of poverty created by the inherited power and privileged of those whose wealth, soaked with our blood, was consider their birth right. I was taught to remember that the current inequity is the result of hundreds of years of exploitation and mass killings. The plundering and theft of our hopes and dreams continues today. In the forceful displacement of people to make room for so called, 'development' in the form of mining projects, that poison the water and land. Those of us forced into starvation by institutionalized violence of hunger wages, forced to work two jobs and still the children die of malnutrition. It continues today, enabled by a bankrupt political system that steals from the poor even the dreams of a future. Believing that the poor like to eat promises, the politicians give us worlds pregnant with promises of change, but after the election the wages go down, and health and education become a luxury of those who can afford it. While the prisons are the only guarantee that many of our children have. Security is the good fortune of those who can afford it and the curse of those who can't buy it.

Survival Tips

My mother likes telling stories, of her many encounters with boa constrictors while picking coffee. One of her favourite stories is, when she was pregnant with my baby sister and I was only a toddler, we came across a 12 foot snake, coiled in the middle of the trail. It seems amusing to share our near disastrous encounters with snakes, bites from rats, and poisonous toads. However, stories teach us skills, of what to do, why panicking is not an option. What areas to avoid, and most importantly remind us of our responsibility to keep each other safe, and to respect other beings.

My mother spoke to the snake, as if to reason with it, moving backwards slowly without losing sight of the snake. As the distance grew between her and the snake she picked up a stick to protect me, should the snake decide to pursue us. The image has stayed with me; there have been many mythical snakes in my life. We do not always have a cooperating snake, facing us. But we are also never powerless. We can always do something, even if we are forced to move backwards momentarily in order to move forward.

Creating Abundance

The poor have no money to buy their children's affection, the bonds are forged through engaged acts of love. For my parents, their children were their only wealth. We were their assurance that as their bodies grew old and infirmed they will not be abandoned and alone. Our lives are intertwined in a bond of caring and mutual reciprocity instilled at an early age. As soon as you are able to walk and talk, you can help others. The offerings we made, however small, were not taken for granted.

Perhaps because she worked as a cook in many affluent homes, my mother was painfully aware of the abundance of meal choices in her employer's home and the monotony of feeding her family the same beans and rice day after day. She had an excellent palate, and she could recreate a dish by simply savouring the sauce. To this date, she is still able to create delightful dishes from scratch. A pinch of this and a dab of that...is usually her way of cooking. She'd learned to use different spices and sauces, working in fancy hotels. When

she cooked for us at home, even if the ingredients were always the same (corn, beans and rice), she produced distinct dishes. Casamiento (the rice is cooked with the liquid from the beans' soup and gives it a black and white colouring; Sopa de Frijoles (beans soup); Frijoles Amelcochados (the beans were cooked on slow flame until most of the water is evaporated and the beans have a viscosity almost caramelized feel to them. She had equally extensive ways of preparing rice. I think of the many different careers my mother could have had enjoyed had she been given the opportunity.

We never complained of our predictable diet, mealtime was a welcome respite and needed nourishment to repair our bodies from physical exertion in the fields or doing chores around the house. I remember always being hungry. Every meal is a banquet to the hungry. After dinner, we would sit outside the house, in the light of a small fire to drink corn coffee and listen to my uncle tell stories, or hear him perform his latest poems.

My uncle came to live with us, when the war left him without a home for his family. People across the country were being displaced by bombs in a civil war that seem to arrive like a tropical storm, out of nowhere. Although like a fire, whose coals seem dormant, the increasing poverty and misery of peasants and poor unskilled working people, could have foretold the imminent storm.

Living with my uncle and his wife, added the excitement of having my cousins around, they had three children. Nelson was my favourite cousin. We were the same age, we both liked to play soccer, and climb trees. We became inseparable. We always lit up a torch when we went to the outhouse at night, but sometimes the flame ran out and we scared our selves half to death, by making wailing sounds, pretending to be ghosts. It's wonderful to have someone to be afraid with, the dark seemed to be less dense, when you have a friend at your side. Specially, someone who knows intuitively your angst and sorrows that no words can describe. War is the hell on earth that acts to legitimize heaven.

“If it doesn't kill it will make you stronger.”



Figure 2. "Do you See Me?" (Photograph by Sylvia Richardson Spring 2011)¹⁷

The coca-cola thermometer at Pedro's store reads 30 degrees Celsius. I know this, because Ms. Sosa the new grade one teacher taught us to tell time and read the temperature. I like going to Pedro's store to get penny candies and my favourite, sugary tamarind (I love the sweet and sour balls that make my face twitch with delight). His store is the only store that has a freezer. On our way home from school the kids walk on mass in a straight line to Pedro's store. I always buy a fruit popsicle and linger in the store listening to Elvis songs. My coconut popsicle is melting faster than I can eat it, the juice running down my arm, evaporates leaving sugary trails on my arm. My mom hates it when I get my arms all sticky and dirt sticks to my body like a magnet to metal.

¹⁷ Photograph / painting of my daughter's eyes, part of an Artistic inquiry on the anonymity of suffering and those who suffered at the hand of power and privilege, Edu-832.

I don't mind a little dirt, but mom gets really upset when we get our clothes dirty. My dad just smiles, he says we are made of dirt anyways. "We come from the earth and we will return to earth"; my mom thinks when we die we go to heaven, she says "if we are a good and go to church on Sundays we'll go to heaven". Dad says heaven and hell are in the same place, "right here on earth" and he says "being poor is hell". My mom gets really angry with him and crosses her self, as if to protect herself from evil spells. She thinks its blasphemy to be angry at God's will. Everything that happens to people is God's will. He protects you if you are good, but bad things can happen when you don't go to church and forget to say your prayers.

Our house gets so hot! The metal roof and walls make it hot in the day and cold in the evening. And I mean it gets boiling hot! Dad always says "one day, I will build you a brick house". He usually looks sad and distant as if he is looking for something in the distance. I think he is thinking of his dad, who promised him a house, but died before he could build one. "one day..." he whispers.

I like our home, I like climbing our mango tree and sitting on its branches watching the people walk by on their way to town. During Carnival you can see the dancers coming up from the valley. And at night the sky is cluttered with stars and a beautiful full moon.

I like going to school, when I grow up I want to be an astronaut, and travel to the moon. Mom says I am a lucky girl to get to go to school. She and dad never did. They had to work to help their family. My uncle was the first in our family to get an education, after finishing grade six he went to the army and now works as a brick layer. He knows a lot about the moon and the stars. And he prefers doing crossword puzzles to watching TV.

We never had a TV until last month when my uncle came to live with us and brought his black and white 12'inch TV. He got it as a gift from his boss. He says "this TV cost me a pound of flesh". He got a hernia from lifting heavy loads of cement mix. The surgery took only an hour but left him unable to work for almost two months. His boss says he is not able to give him a cash advance but was nice enough to give him his old TV. It has a lot of static but you can still see the picture in one corner. My cousin Nelson stands next to the TV holding the antenna to make the image come clear but it only helps a little.

My mom says we are very lucky to have a TV, when she was my age she never even got a transistor radio. I am not sure what a transistor radio is, and we don't have one either, but I am glad we have a TV!

I love having my uncle and his family living with us, especially my cousin Nelson. He is seven years old like me. He likes to climb trees and is good at soccer. I am really good

at soccer and I'm the team's captain because it was my idea to bundle up a bunch of rags together to make a soccer ball. Mom says "one day we will have lots of money and I will buy you a real ball", she doesn't seem convinced. Oh well.

Before we had our own TV we used to stand outside Pablo's house to watch TV. He is the baker and has a big house with a large front window. All the kids in the neighbourhood pile up outside his house, and he never complains. Dad says one day he will build us a brick house like Pablo's with a clay tile roof, so it won't be so hot in the summer.

I used to love going to Pablo's house to watch cartoons. We like watching the Flintstones, Scooby Doo, the Smurfs and especially Coyote and the Road Runner. I feel bad for coyote; he keeps getting hurt when he tries to catch the road runner. I don't think he wants to be bad on purpose he just wants attention, to be noticed by someone. I think he is lonely. Nelson thinks that Coyote is good inside, but has no one, to teach him how to be good.

Pablo is a good baker, he lives alone with his son Xavier; his wife went to heaven when Xavier was only a baby. Pablo is a nice man and his sweet bread is delicious. It's always ready at 3pm just in time for supper. I love Pablo's fresh baked bread. His oven is almost as big as our house and could easily fit two beds inside. He is the only baker in the village and everyone likes him. His son Xavier is almost seven years old, he is the shortest of the three of us. And always cheats when we play hide and seek. When we play soccer I always pick him for my team, he runs fast and is not afraid to head the ball. We have been friends forever. We have a lot fun together.

But everything has changed now.

Last week the army came in the middle of the night and dragged Pablo and his son onto a jeep. We haven't seen them since.

I am scared, mom tells me "pray for them".

Yesterday on my way home from school I saw Pablo heating up the oven as he usually does for the afternoon bake. I ran home "he is back! Pablo is back!" my mother turned pale and cross herself "DON'T BE SILLY" she yelled at me, and she told me to not speak about it anymore.

I felt as if I've done something wrong.

Later that night I heard mom whisper to dad "they found Pablo and his son dead this morning".

Silence. Even the birds and the frogs outside seemed to fall silent. My mouth opens but nothing comes out.

I am terrified!

In the movies only the bad people get killed. But, Pablo was a good man, everyone liked him, he never missed Sunday mass...Xavier was my age!

Dad and uncle made a pine box for Pablo and one for Xavier. They will be buried next to Xavier's mom. Mom says they have both gone to heaven,

but I am not convinced.

I'm terrified.

That night I wet my bed. My mother did not get angry. I woke up screaming, and burst into tears. I cried so much my tears fell like a torrential storm during the flooding season. I thought of Xavier and how we used to go running in the rain, how the sun reflected on his raven black curls. His soft chubby cheeks covered in chocolate and black crooked teeth as he smiled with delight when we sat outside Pedro's store having our favourite treat. I cried until my voice was hoarse and my eyes swollen with no more tears left.

I feel myself fading, slowly drowning in a pool of sorrow that threatens to swallow me.

If there is a heaven, I do not know of it. Perhaps it existed in the world I once knew, where things made sense; that world is now gone. I am a stranger in this new place. Surrounded by the shadows that chase away the echoes of laughter, the shattered memories of our play time, of a place that had seemed filled with possibilities. A world now vanished to the depth of the earth. I ask dad "where is heaven?".

Chapter 5.

Children of War

The Poet is in Labour. She has been told that it will not hurt but it has hurt so much that pain and struggle seem, just now, the only reality....she hears the doctor saying. "Those are the shoulders you are feeling now"—and she knows the head is out then, and the child is pushing and sliding out of her, insistent, a poem. (Dennise Levertov, quoted in Minh-ha, 1989, p.17)

What do the scars we bear reveal of the imposed markings, we take as identity?

A life of poverty and war consumes our dreams and hopes. Even without the words to name this world of death and decay. I was intimately acquainted with the world of the living dead. Surrounded by death, we the living, walk around pretending... We know, only poor people go hungry. Mostly (with few exceptions to the rule) poor people are punished for stealing. I know that mainly poor people go to war, and are killed by wars. What can education offer us that can possibly heal the wounds of being orphaned, of being hungry, and of becoming invisible?

Searching for Shallow Graves

Like echoes chasing shadows, we search for our loved ones, those who vanished without a sound. The right to mourn our dead was the only thing we had left. Now that they are vanished even our grief has been stolen.

*My eyes have gone dry, thirty thousand tears
screams have swallowed my voice
now, hoarse and hollow*

Echoes of shadows

*How do I say good bye to a phantom
How do I release their grip on my heart*

*eternal pain of longing and waiting
searching
Have you seen her?*

*My mother has beautiful
brown eyes and black hair
She was wearing jeans and
A yellow sweater*

*The words flow out of my mouth
Half lives—they vanished before being fully articulated
She has been missing since ...
There is a pitiless hole in my stomach now...
A sharp stabbing pain
That whisperslet go!*



Figure 3. The Faces of Despair "Tell Me Why" By Sylvia Richardson, Fall 2009

I remember the look in her face, leaving the hospital. I am standing at the entrance waiting. I dare not enter the building. I know this place of death. The waiting room filled with disembodied souls, whom all have left is the capacity to feel pain. To have a body is to be visible. We have become transparent. No one sees the look of despair, on the child sitting in a crowded waiting room, searching, seeking, hoping to read the anxious glance in the surgeon's eyes; or perhaps capture a hasty gesture made in passing to signal if "she still alive". If lucky, a word of two of kindness, "I sorry for your loss" as hope abandoned us.

I have been waiting for her.

As the door opens, I am horrified. Her arms covered in bandages, her face drained of colour and her cheeks hollowed. Her lovely almond shape eyes that, although sad, had always had a sparkle; were now dull. A frowned line on her forehead had set in permanently. Fear like a cancer, spreading rapidly through her body, had poisoned the

blood in her veins, and threatened to consume her, and all those around her. You can smell fear's stench, dogs feast on it, the more you scream the more they taunt you.

A woman presumed dead, was about to return home to her remaining two daughters. Time stopped. She was now alone with two young children. Her arms, once so attuned to her creative whims, were now frozen in bandages. She had no one to look after her, no money to pay for a nurse, what about the girls? What had they seen, what had happened to them? How could she inspire hope, when she had none left. Upon seeing her daughters, and seeing in their eyes the merciless condition of the situation, she said "the world will not always be so cruel..." her unconvincing words rolled off her lips like heavy stones, slow and troubled. My sister and I did not respond. Like rocks on a garden, a shield had set in. A body armour intended to keep swords from reaching vital organs. Our hearts had clamped down, nothing comes in and nothing goes out.

At the age of nine I was instructed in the art of invisibility. My cloaking devise unlike the capes of the TV super heroes, was to show no emotions. The war had dispersed our family, those of us so called "still alive" were in different places; physically and spiritually. My mother could not take care of us. My baby sister went to live with our oldest sister abroad. My mother and I were now alone. After having a large family, the silence seemed deafening.

Terrified that something may happen to me. My mother taught me to avoid eye contact when facing an authority figure, keep your hands always in their sight and don't do anything that makes you stand out. How do you teach a child, to not feel, to not express their horror?

The war had stolen our sleep, and with it our dreams, and our hope. What do the children of the disappeared wish for? What do you say to those who envy the dead? Orphaned souls unable to cry for fear of reprisal; we watch the bodies festered on the side of the road, and our limbs move in mechanical steps, under the pretence of being alive. The school has been informed, "both parents were left for dead" the voice on the phone told the Principle of the school.

I can hear their pious words of empathy, hollowed, empty words, "poor child" distant words devoid of any power. I am the recipient of their sympathy, and pity reserved for a well

loved pet; spoken mechanically, resigned to the inevitability of the poor devil's fate. The children are silent as the teacher tells me "you can write the exam tomorrow, or next week if you like" with an air of sympathy. Perhaps that is the only thing left to do in instances of unimaginable horror, to play the part of normalcy, to pretend nothing has happened, maybe that is what is required to keep the spectacle of being alive.

My birthday is coming, in five days I will be 10 years old.

The usual 'make a wish' practice will not do. How can I get back what has been taken from me?

I walk among the living, but I am already dead inside.

*I have the same reoccurring dream,
a fish is gasping for air in the dessert,
I pick him up and carry him to water.
I see dad, standing by the river,
he is saying goodbye...
I chase after him, and get lost in woods.
I don't know my way home anymore.*



Figure 4. Faces of Despair, "Endless Sorrow" By Sylvia Richardson, Fall 2009

The funeral is now upon us.

The body had been at the house for 3 days, the minimum for a proper vigil and prayers for the departed. My voice had vanished, I had watched them bring the body into the house, it laid there for inspection, on the same table he built, where we shared so many meals.

He looked similar, sort of, but I knew that was not my dad.

The colour is different, and I can't see his eyes

What colour were his eyes? I desperately asked my memory.

What did he look like when he smiled, why can't I remember his smile

One more smile,

Please.

I can't cry. I want to, but I can't.

I can't speak. Like the fish in my dream, I am gasping for air
my lungs seized up as if a clamp was squeezing the air.

I open my mouth but there is a large knot in my throat,
And nothing comes out.

The walk to the cemetery is not far, but the oxen pulling Dad's pine coffin, seemed
sluggish like me. They move at a glacial pace.

When we arrived at the cemetery
Women were wearing rosaries saying their prayers and singing songs.
The coffin is lowered into the ground.

A woman holds my hand and hands me a mound of dirt.
"You need to say goodbye dear", she says.

But words have abandoned me
I called them but not one responds.
There was no air in my lungs and there were no tears in my eyes.

The air was warm, but my body was frozen

*I pour the mound of dirt, mechanically on the coffin and turn
away.*

*I can hear faint murmurs of people wailing in sorrow....
Though I am surrounded, I feel utterly alone.
I am like a fetus without a womb.*



Figure 5. "Becoming Invisible" By Sylvia Richardson, Fall 2009

The Weight of Despair

My teachers and my books seemed unable to explain the war that now permeated our way of life. My mother's several surgeries have left her unable to use her hands. The list of love ones killed is too long and too painful to keep count.

My mother looks at me every morning, as if this might be the last time she would ever see me. Her eyes surveyed every inch of my face, as if making a photo that can be safely stored in her memory.

She knew every detail of my face, the sound of my steps, the scent of my hair, and the look in my eyes, that now imitated the sadness in hers. I knew she wished she could spare me, save me from drowning. The way she had jumped in the river to rescue me,

when I was only a toddler. Although she did not know how to swim and we both would have drowned if the water had been deeper, she would have died trying.

She still doesn't know how to swim.

She now mourns her lack of dexterity and ease of movement her slender fingers used to afford her. Perhaps she mourned our tragic story, in the same way her mother had wished her life could have been spared of the ravages of poverty. My mother prays incessantly for our safety. I wake up in the middle of the night to her wailing to a deaf God.

The army is coming again.

My cousin and I were carrying water when we were stopped.

My mother heard the jeep screeching tires as it stopped near our home. She struggled to get out of bed, to look out the window.

In her convalescent state, her body was weak, however within minutes she appeared on the scene. She was, the sight of strength. And with her bandaged arms clamped around my cousin (who was being forced into the jeep) she said defiantly to the soldiers. NO. You will not take him! There was fire in her eyes. And they knew they would have had to shoot her to make her let go.

The moment is frozen in my memory, the in between place of fear and relentless courage.

The soldiers left. We are left standing in the middle of the street.

My cousin was sobbing, trembling with fear.

We walked home in silence.

The moment is frozen in time, archived in the depth of my heart, like an invisible shield, fragile at best but strong enough to make a tiny crack, where a seed of courage in the face of aggression was planted.

My mother seemed no longer afraid.

Fear, she tells me, is paralyzing, and keeps you from living. What does life mean? How can you see when your eyes refuse to open? I want to break free. Living would mean seeing the stars again even on a cloudy sky, I move my limbs as if to remember what it means to walk, what it feels to have the earth swallow each step, remembering what it is to get up even when you are too tired to stand. And recalling what you have been forced to forget. I am not my fears!

The atrocities of war become mundane, there are so many bodies left to rot on the streets. It's hard to imagine our lives could possibly get worse.

The worse act of terror is to disappear; to vanish without a trace. To not know if someone is alive or dead. The amnesty International office has been collecting photos of the bodies they find in unmarked shallow graves. Several people in my family had disappeared. I asked to see the files, hoping to know either way. In the insanity of war no one even asked my age. I am twelve years old, my lack of emotional reaction is misunderstood as being the stance of an older woman; perhaps like most people I too have prematurely aged. The pages are riddled with images of tortured bodies, close range shots to the head. The images no longer move me, my heart is numbed, and my actions are mechanical as if on automatic pilot.

I pointed to the image and declare "that's him". My cousin had been missing for more than six months. His wife had just given birth to twins five days prior.

My mom looks at the image, she says, "it can't be" She turns away in horror.

There will need to be an exhumation as the bodies had been buried in a public grave.

All bodies that are not claimed by relatives are buried in an unnamed public grave; those who are invisible in life. They are also invisible in death.

My aunt, had eleven children, she now has two left. My mother has four (of eight) and my uncle only two left. For the poor dying of natural causes is also a luxury.

As children, we were given a world where we can't live, so we prepare to die. The languishing bodies of moribund children litter the streets. They can't afford food, shelter or

safety; these are all too dear a luxury. They will die slowly sniffing glue to numb the pain of hunger in their stomachs and to try to silence the cries of their murdered parents. The screams that kept us awake at night, and torture us by day. The dreadful screams of loved ones, are now our only companions.

A Harvest of Sorrow

Like a nightmare, I can't seem to wake up from. I closed my eyes for only a moment and now the whole world has changed. The war came to our town like a February torrential storm. The thunder of war drums came after. The compounded effect of military violence with economic hardship, as prices made the staples of beans, rice, and corn, prohibitive for the vast majority of people. The shortages of food were only surpassed by the ominous sense of terror of mass disappearances of students and workers. The stench of blood on the streets was now intertwined with the smell of gun powder, and the bullet holes that adorned several homes in the neighbourhood.

The maimed bodies of those who survived tell of the horror and cruelty of death squads. The children continue to die of hunger, and diarrhoea. Those lucky enough to have had escaped typhoid fever, malaria and tuberculosis; can now be butchered by the military and death squads. The rich are doing just fine. Their children get carted around in bullet-proof automobiles, destined to live in fear of the legions of poor people. They are the victims of vice, taught never to see the poor they will go on fearing the phantoms they create. Their lives discarded by their greed and egoism. Their fear will continue to raise walls to help them enjoy their privilege and wealth, without ever seeing the pile of bodies amassing at their gates.

At the private schools, bodyguards wait outside the school doors. While the rest of us ride in overcrowded buses, subject to several spot checks by the army. We are patted, ID, sexually molested and interrogated several times on our way to and from school. If by our miserable luck we should be caught in a cross fire between the military and the rebels the only option we have is to drop to the ground and pray that a stray bullet does not find us.

This too is learning, schools don't teach us to survive.

We move like thieves in the night. The moon refuses to come out from its hiding in the dark clouds. The darkness envelopes us and threatens to swallow us. There is little hope I will make it to the US. But hope is so hard to find, in a place of decay. My grandfather is the only one to see me off. He looks at me the way you see a newborn baby, looking for likeness you can recognize, his eyes met mine as he said "You have changed so much" he pauses, the words are straining out his mouth "I may never see you again, be happy."

I never did see my grandfather again. He died shortly after. I did not hear of his death until almost a year after.

Chapter 6.

Borderlands

From a certain point on, there is no more turning back.
That is the point that we must be reached.

(Kafka)

The imaginary lines that declare my existence as 'legal' or 'illegal' also imprint a way of being. The poor who defy their prescribed destiny by crossing borders without documents are made into criminals. To call someone an 'illegal', is to inscribe their identity as a law breaker, the immigrant identity is fluid, regardless of, how many years you have lived in a place you are tainted with the stigma of being an outsider. The lands of our people are being robbed, 'sanctioned' by international treaties that impose an impossible way of life of misery and hunger.

Those on the margins move in the shadows, learning to become invisible for fear of being discovered; while simultaneously longing for visibility. And the opportunity to belong, the displaced and invisible people run out the clock, searching, hoping to arrive.

To the guards the people are the same, a lawless mob trespassing. The bullets always fly in the same direction from here to there. The penury of hunger and misery also flows from here to there. Nice Christians armed to the teeth ready to assist where necessary and stop the shoeless mobs of peasants, orphans and widows running from hunger and war. "They should have come through the proper channels like everybody else" I heard their pious utterances. But for those displaced by hunger and war, there are no queues. There are no embassies where those displaced by international treaties for economic 'development', may seek a visa to request entry to another country and thus escape their death sentence of hunger and misery.

The journey was propelled by desperation, fear and yes a distant hope, that I may find refuge and safety somewhere. A place to rest, hope and be able to dream again. To be recognized, to have my life valued and respected. When I was a child my mother told me we are our relations, the reciprocal act of seeing and being seen.

He looks out of his window searching for something,

not quite sure what...he stares at the reflection on the window, the way one looks for the familiar sites when lost in a city or in the depth of the forest.

At 43 years of age his body shows signs of an unkind existence, the lines around his eyes and forehead betray his attempt to fake a smile when he greets friends at the local café.

He lives in his father's basement apartment, a bachelor with no romantic stories to remind him of his youth, except for his temporary engagement.

The four walls hold everything he owns, a set of dumb bells, ignored in the corner of his closet since he purchased them almost 10 years ago; a large flat screen TV that lulls him to sleep, he tells me, he has set it on a timer to go off by itself at 11pm. A double bed with lion print sheets, and a leather chair in the corner that was rescued from last year's spring clean up.

There are no pictures on the beige colored walls. And there is no curtain on his only window, which faces a dead end cement wall, of the adjacent building.

In his wallet he carries a photo of a woman he dated long ago, and became engaged to after only his first date. The romance ended when she broke off the engagement and married another man. That was 10 years ago.

His eyes are the windows to an infinite ocean of sadness and longing. A moribund soul longing to squeeze one last drop of love's healing balm. He sighs and sinks into the couch as he looks into the distance, searching...

A million images come rushing through...his childhood, his first kiss, making love to Miriam, feeling terrified at the sound and sight of gun fire.

He has never forgotten the stench of blood and shrill screams of men being tortured in

clandestine barracks...

The hunting gaze of those who implored for mercy to deaf gods unable to hear their pleading. And the silencing arrival of death,

the bone chilling cold that spreads through your body as the screams are finally silenced.

He was only a child - about to turn fifteen when he was drafted.

He remembers his mother's screams as he was torn from her protecting arms.

His sobbing, as he trembled with fear of being taken to what he was certain would be his death.

After 3 years in the army, he deserted. A fugitive of war,

he crossed the border in the night with the help of a coyote.

If he returns he will be killed.

Perhaps, the death's bells of time have long foretold his demise.

In his anonymity he became invisible.

25 years have flown by. He moves, and lives among the walking dead. The disembodied souls, whose dreams abandoned them long ago.

In this in between existence, between dead and alive

the living feeds on the dead.

The moribund souls without identity exist solely to be consumed

they are the arms and legs, the cogs in the machine of profits.

He looks at his wallet and pulls out a picture—the tattered ends revealing its age.

The photo is the image of a child, age five or six, the brown eyes cast a magical spell

that spark of wonder and inquisitiveness,

reflecting an eternity of possibilities.

A beautiful face framed by thick waves of raven curly hair,

with an unruly cal lick defiant and characteristic of the free spirited boy...

his smile, frozen in time.

He smiled back; he tells me

He may be already dead to the world, but inside him

a small flame still burns a defiant desire to live.

In the liminal space, the in-between nooks and crannies of time and history, millions are made invisible as they leave their birth place to cheat death a little longer. And many only returned to their familial home in boxes.

Each Day carries promise, possibilities

(Pelias, 2004, p. 75)

The lights of San Francisco, with its perfumed, colourful store front displays inviting onlookers to stop; are the backdrop of the buying and selling of goods. This goes on parallel to the furtive community of those without a validated status. I walked the streets as if in a daze, awake yet mesmerized by the chasm that divided my being in this world to those shopping, dining and 'living'.

A child begging for help on the street would surely cause dissonance to the rhythmic gaiety of shoppers if seen. However after years of ignoring the poor, the body of a beggar, whatever his form child or adult can be easily absorbed in the backdrop of glittering signs.

The large banner denounces a war, read "Stop the bombs; Stop the War." It is my first political action; to denounce a war that had long scripted my life and identity with its history of oppression and the personal cost to my family. The acts of resistance meagre as they were; created emergent spaces of dissonance that disrupted if only temporarily, the methodical marching to war drums of those distanced from war's ravaging affects. My

education, had not taught me how to question or dissent the naturalization of war, poverty or power, nor of my right to engage politically as a citizen in order to create alternatives.

It was the act of displacement and being alienated, feeling as if there were no options left; other than engagement that forced me to confront power. In the act of doing what I could, I learned the essentiality of voice, and authorship. And I realized the story is dependent on its story-teller. We all have a story that is ours alone. Encoded in our lived experiences is the DNA that connects my story to the millions of stories of others who long for justice. It is our collective voices that make visible our power, no longer the possession of elites or corrupt governments. Being actively participant we create emergent spaces of being; we chose to collaborate instead of compete, we bypasses hierarchical structures for horizontal relations, aware of the process, we learn to create a new form of power “power to” transform ourselves, our communities, and institutions alike.

Deconstruction without reconstruction or design reduces human agency,
diversity without access ghettoizes students. Domination without differences
and diversity loses the ruptures that produce contestation and change.
(Janks, 2009, pp. 178-179)

Literacy of the Streets



Figure 6 "Surveying the Landscape" By Sylvia Richardson, Spring 2011¹⁸

Education is an art of process, participation, and making connection.
Learning is a growth and life process; and Life and Nature are always
relationships in process! (Cajete, 1994, p. 24)

The school stood like a fortress intended to house dangerous criminals. The building was a square cement block, six stories high with bars on the windows and doors. The ominous presence of police cruisers on each entrance gave the impression to a new comer, that a crime was in progress, and danger was imminent. Instead of artistically crafted gardens, the entrance had a chain link fence that opened in the morning from 7am to 9am to let students in and was closed throughout the day. The large cement bunker located on the hill; was partly a juvenile hall for young offenders and the school where 'immigrant' children

¹⁸ The photograph was inspired by the metaphor of cats' and multiple lives, the cloak of anonymity of people who lack language and clarity of speech.

without English skills were assigned to learn. As I entered I was caught off guard by graffiti on the lockers and walls. The grey walls were accentuated by infinite rows of lockers. The asymmetry of every floor gave me the feeling of being in a labyrinth. I got lost almost every day during my first week.

The office was filled with students waiting to get a late pass, and amidst the cacophony of noisy typewriters with the sound of the students, and teachers chattering I approached the counter. The woman told me to take a seat without her face ever leaving her typewriter. She had done it a million times, and by now her hands move instinctively at the sound of footsteps approaching, with a brief sway of her hand she waves me away. I sit surveying the office's large counter that serves as the bunker to keep the office staff safe from the students.

I looked out the only window into the football field, and noticed that every building has bars on the windows. This is my first high school experience, I had been warned High School is hard but it feels like I am about to be sentenced for a crime I have not yet committed. I handed the principle the note of my registration, and he exits the room to print a schedule of courses. He escorts me to my first class, a room filled with immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and the Philippines. After whispering to the teacher, the principle leaves me standing by the door.

The teacher simply told me to take a seat.

The massive wave of students leaving the school as the bell rang, reminded me of masses of refugees escaping a combat area. They would run away, carrying what they could, uncertain of their future. The large backpacks were filled with gym clothes, shoes, books and weapons.

Going to high school in an inner city school; where a disproportionate number of students are black, and Latino while the majority of staff are white creates an issue of

inferiority in the students who do not see themselves in professional positions. And the only bodies that reflect our own are cleaning staff who are overworked and underpaid. Who are the role models of the Latinos and blacks when almost all the positions of power are held by whites?

In the school grounds, the gangs fight each other, demonstrating their creativity at inventing new insults that reify the status of immigrants as illegal or the common slur, 'wet back' which usually resulted in a fight. For their part Latino and Philippine students reinforced and internalized confusing notions of being, that constantly reify institutionalized stereotypes and racial discrimination that label kids as slow, special needs, or problem children. The process naturalized the blindness of institutional discrimination and multiple illiteracies of the classroom and the playground. We were not the minority on the school, but were treated as if we were.

The ongoing gang wars among students' alliances according to ethnic geographies: The Philippine gang, the Latinos, and blacks, left with limited options for friendship. To survive one must declare allegiances early on.

There were students who long ago had given up the fantasy that university and college may be a life chance and opportunity for them. They used the school grounds solely for marketing of drugs. They awaited us, outside the school borders, to offer us an escape for those of us trapped in the monotony of routine. Who longed for exercise in forgetting, as we had forgotten we could dream, imagine or create a way out. The school had strict adherence to rules that taught us to conform and not deviate from authority. You could be sent to the Principal's office for just about any minor infraction. The consequences were exile.

To survive the day, most students had convinced themselves that gangs, and violent fights among students were 'natural' and that they were unable to escape the hierarchies of power that violence imposed. The acceptance of such horizontal violence serves to naturalize power. Its invisibility makes the hierarchy of inequitable funding for schools, the real enemy of students, invisible. The overcrowded classrooms filled with students primarily

from African and Latino descent contentious as they fight each other for positioning of power.¹⁹

The classrooms were mini prisons. Dismissed, by the instructors, as troubled youth with nothing to offer; we sat in the classroom watching the clock swallow our energy and imagination. The desks were covered in graffiti, messaging of past prisoners who had served time in this same cell, lives frozen in the liminal spaces of story and history no textbook will share. Encrypted messages, revealed the longing, fears and anger at a society who had long forgotten or deliberately ignore that we existed.

In a school of primarily African Americans; Latinos; and Philippine students, the barred windows are reminiscent of the future that awaits most of its current pupils. I was a new comer, the burden of proving my worth as a member of the underworld soon became available.

Time, was regimented by loud bells, ringing mechanically on the hour to signal transitions to subject instruction. They also signal the danger of being accosted by gangs and of being targeted as the outsider. The unspoken codes of conduct, learnt intuitively to make it through the day.

Language is a barrier, even those who spoke Spanish refused to speak it for fear of reprisal. The lonely pray for friendship like a farmer prays for rain. The stranger longs for visibility, to belong, to be part of a whole, to be whole again.

My first week was the hardest, trying to find my way around the six story complex with identically looking hallways all dressed in institutional grey, and the seemingly endless walls of lockers. There are no windows. In the classrooms the windows are barred to prevent the inmates from escaping, and others from coming in.

¹⁹ Societal structures of race, economic and social exclusion denies our bodies visibility and agency. The ability to impose fear on others, is perceived as the power to be visible (misunderstood as respect).

After a month, I had learned to identify the graffiti on lockers as signifiers that served as semiotic compass. Fights occurred frequently, and I learned that if you knew you were going to get in a fight the best way to survive the fight with some dignity was to have it in the hall way, where a teacher may intercede and break up the fight before you have been too humiliated.

The students prey on each other as a way to give outlet to the rage of failed economics that leave them without any prospects for the future. Teachers are caught in a role of doing a 'job' and serving time along with their inmates. The smallest act of dissent in class can lead to your being arrested.

By week three I had learned that cutting school was a way to create community and to escape the monotony of a dead system. My first time cutting school was imbued with a sense of guilt. What if we missed something important? A classmate said, what if ...at least you will have a reason to explain why your life amounts to nothing.

What do you think you are going to university, and will be rich one day? I looked puzzled. The thought of university had crossed my mind when I was young. But after all that had happened, I knew that was a futile dream. So I went with my new found friends.

Cutting class meant sitting in the park near by listening to music and smoking. We made fun of each other and called each other 'wetbacks' a derogative to indicate our non documented status. It sadly also exemplified the lengths to which people were willing to go to save their lives only to lose them trying. The wetbacks were the wretches who had crossed the Rio Grande, the rivers currents are so strong that many have drowned in its waters; and with them, the dream of finding peace, dignity and, comfort.

The ponchos, was a derogative that identify the children of Mexicans, even those born in the US were also discriminated. We play fight, a kind of exercise to keep our bodies alert and able to defend ourselves for the aggression that is certain to find us.

The only frail security is found in keeping company with others. This also makes you a target to rival gangs. Everything from our hairstyle to our way of walking is imbued with significance. While painfully aware of the lack of opportunities available, I soon learn that most of my friends have inverted systemic oppression into a stance of resistance. They do not attend school as a way to deny the system to give them the opportunity to be assimilated into the abyss of mediocrity and conformity.

As outcasts, they are outside the rules of conformity. Is this enough?

I had been in the school only two months when a gang of girls challenged me to a fight. I was alone in the stairway. So far, I had managed to avoid being alone, but my alliances were still loosely associated with my group.

The experience of being beat up nearly choked to death for no other reason than having attracted the gaze of her boyfriend seemed absurd. A student had informed the school Principal of the fight, and he appeared just in time to save me. He expelled both of us from school for three days. He asked me to stay back and explained he was expelling me for my own protection. The girl who had attacked me was known for being violent.

I decided not to return to school.

I lack the words to describe the world around me, it confirmed my alien position. While the students in my school mechanically accepted the confines of an institution, that seemed to only, imprison their passion, imagination and creativity, they at least could communicate to the other inmates. My solitary confinement was a prison within a prison inside and outside the school.

I was invisible to those who looked at me without seeing.

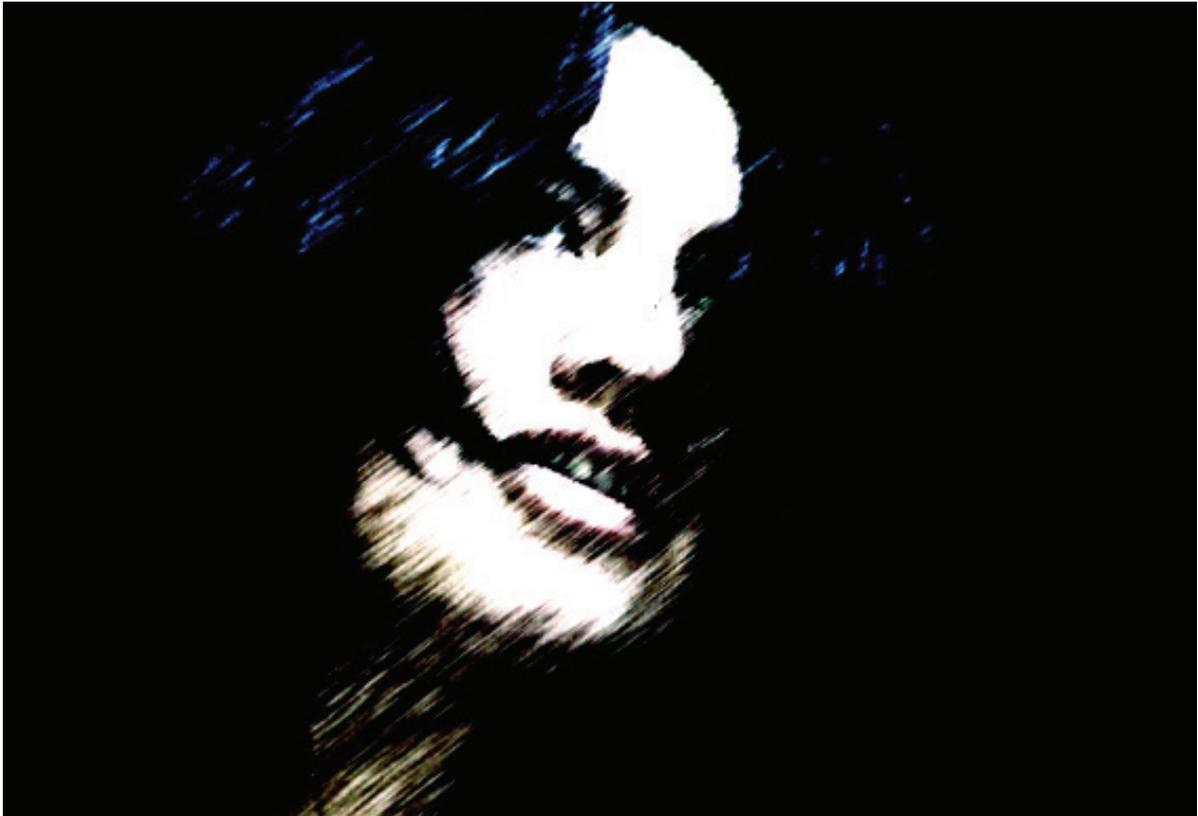


Figure 7. "Living in the Margins" By Sylvia Richardson

A few months later an opportunity to attend school came up unexpectedly, while I was working at a rest home as a living care aid. The owner decided I was too young to be out of school and enrolled me in school.

The suburban community just two hours from San Francisco was an idyllic white sanctuary, my brown skin stood out like a black bean in a bed of rice.

The school had large tracks and fields with lush rolling landscapes surrounding the football field. Science labs were equipped with microscopes for every student and our very engaged science teacher, a lovely blue eyed, blond haired, young teacher performed lively experiments to help students learn that speed plus resistance equals velocity. One of my favourite memories was to watch him build circuits and produced electricity. Once he brought a big fish bowl with hundreds of guppies. Every student got to see the guppies' circulatory system on our personal microscope.²⁰

I felt bad for the fish, he offered me the remaining fish in the bowl and, I went home excited to have received my first gift. I was sure I was in love with him. He was so nice to me.

English class was less engaging. Being the only student with ESL needs they provided me with a tape recorder to listen to phonetics. I found this boring and isolating. But I enjoyed the school's large cafeteria, with lots of seats and trees throughout the premises. The variety of elective courses: art, music, cooking, mechanics and wood shop.

I thought of the chasm between this school and my first high school with its mainly African American and Latinos students. The constant threat of violence, and insecurity; the random searches of student lockers and, the habitual practice (daily) of, seeing students accused of acting out whenever they asked a question.

I was very happy.

²⁰ Learning is a matter of life and death. The guppies were produced for our inspection, my 'right' as student to watch a life sacrificed to satisfy my curiosity. The privilege to will another being's life.

The Weight of Nothing

It's Sunday morning, outside the snow falls; the snowflakes remind me of the Cotton fields at harvest time. The rural town in Southern Ontario, covered in snow seemed still. I sit up in the cab as we drive to the motel on the highway; it will be my home for the next four weeks. Memories flood through as I imagine my new life in Canada. A lifelong battle to break free of the burden to keep hunger and poverty at bay; is behind me. If only the nightmares of war could also be left behind. A new beginning, in a foreign land; the snowflakes fall like sad notes on a guitar.

The dead now rest, but those left so called alive, endure a slow death of alienation and isolation in far off lands, unwelcome guests, without a place to go. "Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remark it" (Freire, 1970, p. 154). Dialogue is an act of reciprocity, as we listen for clues and strive to see the world anew.

The below zero temperatures make Canada the perfect place for me. A place where the cold can freeze my heart preserving it, for the dissecting that is certain for those unnamed in this world. I live in a place where regardless of how long I have been here, how well I may learn to speak the official tongues, how well I recite the cultural norms, I have always been seen as a foreigner. This alien status defined me, and the looks of disdain that tell me I do not belong still injure me, yet I remain.

I stand strong, hold my head high and with a quivering bottom lip declared that, my life has value, that the knowledge achieved by blood wounds, inflicted by hate, war and hunger, have a place in this temple of knowledge. Is survival a literacy worth teaching and learning?

Making the News

Newspaper theatre—serves to demystify the pretended impartiality of the media. If papers, magazines, radio, and TV stations are economically dependent on their advertisements, they will never allow genuine information

or news items which reveal their origin or what interests they serve or question the veracity of their publisher—the media will always be used to please those that sustain them: they will always be the voice of their master!
(Augusto Boal)

The desire to learn was at first a child-like need to be seen, and to be recognized as having value. In Canada, a thin veil of politeness masqueraded, the societal policies, norms, cultural practices that constantly inscribed and reaffirmed identity whether as white, black or other with significant implications for those outside the valorized identity.

There is a stranger among us

I am not a racist...says the voice on the radio

Let's face it, if we want to preserve the Canadian culture

We must stop letting all these people in

We should only bring people who speak our language

Oh...what language is that Mohawk, Anishnawby, Haida....

When would we realize that culture is simply the reflection of the things we value

Is our culture racist?

"I hate it when 'you people' use the race card," a co-worker told me angrily, as we discussed a talk show that advocated for temporary visas for migrant workers (intended primarily for the agricultural sector). Aren't we all workers, I asked? "These people are lucky to come for a few months and pick tomatoes or cherries, they don't have education and they don't speak the language," my co-worker continued. I replied, "If they were able to communicate well enough to be hired for low paying jobs in farms or as nannies in private homes, they should be compensated for their work like any other worker doing the same job; whether they speak the language with an accent or not is irrelevant. The issue remains that as workers they are not being treated with the same regard as say European

immigrants who whether they arrived yesterday of 100 years ago, by virtue of their ancestry their status as Canadian subjects is immediately acknowledged.” My co-worker pauses for a moment and replies, “That has to do with the accent,” he tells me. “I came here when I was 7 but I had no problem because I speak with a Canadian accent,” he continued. I am intrigued by his wilful blindness to racial and economic exclusion which seems to be the real reasons for the distinction, I asked him, “How do you know?” “Canada is a big country and when I travelled to the East Coast people there have different intonation when they speak. What is the official accent?” I asked.

The intersection of class, language and race inscribes the fragility of my being in this fluid space of constantly striving to reclaim my humanity (as a member of a valorized group) and the constant injuries of prescribed identity by a state that does not recognize me. I lacked the words to express my isolation, to articulate the pain of alienation and the dismissive glances that injured my self esteem in school.

Silenced by an economic discourse of cost efficiency, people and animals have limited stature in the race to economic prosperity. The right to be a family is highly regarded in the Canadian cultural milieu, except where immigrants are concerned. The radio show host continued his rant against family reunification. “They come here and collect pensions,” the host’s irate voice declared. The callers were all in agreement with the broadcaster’s point of view. I sighed. Visibility means having a voice.

What is knowledge in the hands of people who see the world as their rightful destiny to rule over others?

Dead power is everywhere among us—in the forest chopping down the songs; at night in the industrial landscape, wasting and stiffening a new life; in the streets of the city, towing away the day. We wanted something different for our people not to find ourselves and old republic full of ghosts-fears, the fears of death and the fears of birth. We want something else.

(Rukeyser quoted in Jensen, 2009, p. 102)

Shaping Words: Names I Call Myself

Under citizenship my passport reads Canadian. I was fifteen when I left the country of my birth. The journey to arrive took three years. In a country, where I am regarded as too young to be a mother and too old to be a child; I receive both the disdain and pity of self appointed judges. At the local High-School, I asked if I can register for courses. I am a mother and expecting my second child. A Catholic school; run by nuns. The Mother Superior tells me I am not allowed to enrol because my presence would be a bad example for the young women in the school. I asked if there are books I could borrow, to help me improve my language skills. She offered me a French correspondence course. She suggests I complete the units then mail them to the ministry of education. I accepted with gratitude.

I returned once my course was completed, hoping to move on to study English, since there seems to be little use for French in rural Ontario. She looked at me, as if for the first time and said “You really want this, don’t you?” I nodded my head in agreement, half expectantly. “If I could just borrow some books...” the words half lies?, I really wanted to go to school. But reading alone will do, if that’s my only choice. “Come with me,” she said as she led the way to the English class, the professor agreed to instruct me.

Several months later, I sat in his office while he reviewed my work and went over the corrections. Before leaving his office he paid me a lovely compliment “you can write” he said, “I could help you prepare to take the English pre-requisite and you could apply to University” he told me. I smiled, as I soared in the glory of the comment. Visibility means having value. Being validated as capable of learning meant I could also change my circumstances.

I was working three jobs, while trying to improve my language skills and raising two babies. The nuns at the school watch over my baby and daughter (a precocious toddler). I was doing well in school, although I was constantly exhausted. “You could apply for loans,” he said, “so you would only have to go to school. When you finish your school, you pay your loans.” The thought is delicious and I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like to not have to work. I am submerged in reality, bounded by my responsibilities, so many depended on me. It would be at least another year before I decided to act on his suggestion.

The stench of fecal matter is everywhere, you could smell the stench a block away. I worked in a poultry processing plant. The factory has the permanent smell of fear and disgust. The chickens arrive in tiny crates often too small for their artificially hormone induced fat bodies. Their feet are clamped together and they are tossed without ceremony upside down onto a circular line of hooks. They are fully aware of the fate that awaits them. Their eyes are wide with fear and they defecate in response. The workers have been up since 4 am. The trucks arrived in the middle of the night and are emptied usually before 10 am. Thousands of chickens are slaughtered in a matter of hours.

There are varying pays for different jobs. One of the highest paid is slitting the necks as they approach a large boiling cauldron, the temperature is so high that only seconds in the water cause the barely dead bodies to lose all their plumage. They emerge on the opposite side of the line, in plain vision of the chickens arriving from the outside who witness their fate seconds before dying.

The line snakes into the building where an army of workers awaits ready to tackle the cleaning up process of removing the feeding pouch, then another punctures a hole near the anus, to cause the gutts to fall out, while the next pulls the intestines, heart and lungs out. A process complicated by the frequent bursting of the intestines which results in the worker's face being covered in feces. You are not able to abandon the line; until a foreman takes your place in the line, to prevent delays. The result of abandoning the line without coverage can lead to being fired.

The lifeless beings on the line, are only made the more surreal, when you watch the faces of workers. Some of the women had worked in the plant for more than 20 years. I detested my life, the horrific disregard for other beings, I watched in horror as some of the chickens get kicked around when they fall from the line. Their bodies too heavy for their skinny legs, simply detached from them.

The dehumanizing conditions of work, leads to our disdain of the chickens, and turkeys whose lives ended with such horrific disregard for their pain. They cry but no one hears them anymore. The vile of fear that spreads through their bodies as they await their doom, passes on into the meat we consume.

Why are you such a wimp? I tell myself, trying to convince my soul that the horror I witnessed is justified. I can't sleep, the smell of their flesh, the taste of their feces is in my mouth, I think of their scared eyes, as they faced the knife approaching. I tell myself, if it is not me it would be someone else, and I need the work. I have mouths to feed.

Words, words, words....

My full time job was at the automobile plant, a large tin metal bunker with no windows, only peep holes on the roof to let some of the fumes slip into the atmosphere. The plant makes automobile parts and ships them to auto manufactures. The intense heat caused by hot moulds opening and closing throughout the plant, is the main culprit for the recurrent bronchitis, and permanent sniffles, the legacy of rotating shifts from nights to mornings to afternoons and back again every two weeks.

I was able to get out of the rotating shift roller coaster by asking for permission to enroll in courses during the day. Three months after I started. I requested all afternoons in order to go to school. This also enabled me to secure a job at the poultry factory and soup canning factory, which are both part-time. I was on a race to make as much as possible to reunite with my family. To be whole again, being seen by our love ones is an act of being.

In this country where I seemed invisible, the need to be seen was my most powerful incentive. The road to justice begins with us, a decision to make new choices, to imagine new outcomes. The poet Roque Dalton(1974) points to our need to create better tools to achieve our goals.

When the stone cutter
Finds his hammer broken
Just before beginning his daily work
He thinks about having a better and more powerful tool
And doesn't accuse the stone of being ultra-left
Because of its resistance and tenacious nature.

(Dalton, 1984, p. 73)

Chapter 7.

When a Mouse Learns to Roar

Learning is always a creative act... Learning is also a key to our ability to survive in the environments that we create and that creates us.

(Cajete, 1994, p. 25)

When I was nine years old I was offered a scholarship to study in the city in a girls' only private school. The local school with its adobe structures the dirt fields where we play soccer and its smelly latrines, had been a world that resembled my world at home. I had been to the city, usually only to go to the market, where the smell of backed up sewage seeped through the drain pipes mixed with the scent of fresh cut flowers, produce and herbs, and the sound of loud merchants beckoning us to stop as we pass by, was familiar and inviting.

The make shift stands of ambulant vendors that could be dismantled in a matter of an hour or two, were reflective of the world in my village, with its make shift structures passing for homes. Shacks, temporary shelter units that had stood now for several years, without the promise of new building materials, to improve them. I could enjoy the experience of wading through the waves of humanity striving to sell their goods, carted from many miles away, in our symbiotic dance to escape hunger. The cacophony of voices joined in a perfect melody as they call to the passerby to stop, hoping for a sale.

My mother had an imaginary map of how to travel through the market, which was several blocks and long and wide. She knew exactly where she wanted to stop, as a young child, I had watched awestruck at the colourful displays, the intoxicating scents of perfumed roses, gardenias and chrysanthemums amidst cabbage, mangoes, chickens and reptiles (live stock) destined for the pot.

In the middle of the market, there was a series of dinners where shoppers could have a bite to eat and linger a little over a cup of hot chocolate. I knew this world. I could name the herbs, the fruits, produce and even the animals being tendered as merchandise. The smell of fear called my attention as I walked by the chickens contained in a wooden cage, their legs tied up, so all they could do was to stand there, eyes looking at people, waiting for whatever fate awaited them.

My mother had specific sites she wanted to visit. However, like a tourist discovering the sites in some exotic place, she allowed herself to wander through the colourful displays, the myriad of scents from the incense and spices vendors; she shared my love of flowers and always took time to name each flower. *To give something a name is to enter into a relationship.* I love gardenias not only for their sumptuous scent and beauty, but also because we were introduced, on one of those magical trips to the market. My mother, a botanist, by choice, would spend hours at the market, explaining the medicinal benefits of eucalyptus, peppermint and balsam (a plant originally only found in El Salvador). She would show me the different roots and herbs to cure most common ailments from colds to diarrhoea.

On our way home we would stop at the park, enjoy a guava ice cream, while watching the goats. The park did not have mowers but the goats did a great job at keeping the grass nicely trim. Sometimes on our trip to the market, my mom would take us to visit dad at the department store where he worked and he would be allowed to take a few minutes to eat lunch with us.

We never went inside the department store.

Living in a Dream

The smell of plastic permeated the air, the scent of paper and stationary supplies.

The air conditioned store had the only electric staircase. The shoppers walk onto the step and were instantly transported.

I approached at first with some trepidation and laughed as we ascended

To the school supplies section.

The school had provided my mother with a list of supplies: including a description of the knap sack, size and color.

The list included: two pairs of shoes, one for track and field (white in colour) and a pair of dockers (black)

Writing supplies: a case of pencils, pens and coloring pencils, as well as coloring felts.

Notebooks varied from graph books for math and line note books for every other subject.

Drafting paper for art class

And a casing for embroidery

I checked the list with glee.

My parents' joy is over shadowed by the cost of the supplies.

Yes, they were thrilled at the prospect of one of their children receiving a scholarship to attend a private school. But there were so many additional costs.

We did not get everything in the list.

At home I played with my school bag, and organized its contents several times.

And placed the bag next to my pillow, ready for the next morning.

Excited, I looked at the brand new dress my mother had made me

I rested my head on the pillow and fell asleep. It has been a perfect day.

The school was surrounded by a large brick wall. There was an enormous metal door with cameras surveying the entrance, to identify visitors before gaining entry. We had

to speak into the tiny microphone to gain entrance, this was the after hours gate. My mother had to drop me off at 6am. The school will not open for another hour.

The voice on the other side of the wall tells my mother we are too early, come later.

My mother explained that she needed to go to work and it was impossible for her to arrive later.

After a long silence, a small opening in the metal gate opened to inspect the situation.

“You can wait in the court yard,” says the woman dressed in a habit who looked stern and unfriendly.

My mother thanked her and left, but not before admonishing, “Be good”.

The long marble hallway perfumed by rose gardens on each side, revealed a delicate and sumptuous oasis, I felt as if I was in a secret garden, and delighted in the pleasure of my trespassing.

The delicate wood carvings on the left, marked the entrance to the chapel, directly across on the right hand side was a dining hall with glass walls, that exposed the sumptuous feast being served, tables clad in white embroidered table clothes and shining silver cutlery reflecting the soft lighting throughout.

The perfumed rose scented air mingling with the aroma of the culinary delights being prepared in the kitchen made my mouth water and my stomach grumbled in response to the inviting feast.

The in between open spaces from the reception office to the end of the hallway, marked different living spaces; the first two-story building with its Spanish style balconies were the nuns’ living quarters (small dorms with a share living room). Immediately after the dining hall was the student dorm (a multi bed dorm, located on the second floor, for interns who live in the school—some of them orphans). The room was spacious and filled with light coming through multiple windows on the north and south walls). There were also, individual rooms for affluent students who resided in the school.

The remaining areas of the second and first floor were classrooms. The different areas were connected through large corridors facing the gardens and the rooms were covered in

windows that allowed for lots of natural light into our learning environment.

As we approached the end of the hallway, a large metal door opened and I found myself standing on the corridor the size of a two way street. This was the courtyard, a multi level playground, its combined length and width that of several street blocks. To the right a staircase that ascended to the basketball courts, there are two of them. One with benches all around them for intramural competitions, the school had a national winning basketball team. Adjacent to the courts were several swing sets and slides, and a chalet where students bought snacks and drinks during recess with their monthly allowances, a concept alien me at that time.

I sat on one of the swings, and wondered what the teachers and children would be like. This school was very different from my little school. There was no dirt, visible anywhere. The eight feet brick wall that surrounded the school made it impossible to know where I was. The silence broken only by the songs of birds that lived in the towering trees over the courtyard, made this place distant from the world outside.

I was thrilled to discover the bathrooms had flushing toilets, with sparkling white porcelain seats that were cleaned regularly throughout the day. The faucets had a lush flow of water running all hours of the day. An exciting discovery since we had no running water at home, and some of our relatives who lived in the city only had access to a scarce trickle of water that flowed only in the middle of the night. Most people I knew had to go through great efforts to collect the precious fluid that ensured our survival.

When the bell rang, the students assembled in carefully formed lines, lots of students poured out of the metal doors where I had entered, and through the wide gate at the end of the corridor in the courtyard that was left ajar for only brief periods, morning at 7:30am - 8:30am to welcome the students, at lunch 12-1pm, and when school adjourned 4:30-5:30pm. I was standing by the swings, unsure of what to do. A girl my age approached and asked "are you new to the school", unfamiliar with the morning rituals, I had frozen in place; she told me that the morning begins with prayers and announcements from the Mother Superior. The students had formed rows according to their grades; the school had students from kinder garden to grade 8. I was in grade three.

I was wearing a yellow dress, which until then, its beautiful design and bright colour, had made me feel special and filled me with joy. Standing amidst waves of students clad in uniforms, white blouse and checker pleated skirts, with black shoes and white or black socks. I started to feel a little uncomfortable, feeling centered out by the students' inquisitive looks.

The cost of the uniforms (mandatory while in school premises) was prohibitive for my parents, the sum was more than they earn in a month. My mother assured the school she would make my uniforms (I was required to have two). The cost of the fabric (only available through the school), was also very expensive.

My mother had a great job working at an animal food production plant, although her salary was better than the piece meal wages earned by people working in the coffee, cotton or sugar plantations; it barely covered our living expenses. The war had brought inflation, escalating the prices of staple foods, clothing and footwear.

By a stroke of luck a woman at work (one of the executives) offered her an old uniform, which her daughter had outgrown. Students were not allowed to give away the uniforms, because they were the identity of the institution and they did not want children wearing the uniforms who did not attend the school. My mother accepted the gift, and that night I was overjoyed at the sight of my uniform. Everyone longs to belong and I learned the power of symbols. I was still the same scared girl who felt out of place, but clad in the institutional costume I felt empowered, no different than any of my classmates (so I thought), the inscribed power in the uniform transformed me into a valued subject. At least at first glance.

My new school was filled with contradictions. The speech and mannerism of the girls were distinct from those in my village. The school's halls perfumed by multiple rose gardens, the aroma of delicious meals prepared by excellent cooks. In this place, I was surrounded by abundance: water, food, light, and cleanliness throughout. Though hundreds of students attended the school, the marble floors were always sparkling. Even the toilets were maintained meticulously by invisible cleaners whom I would only encounter during my early morning arrivals at school. It was as if the school was in a different country. A time warp was crossed when I entered its metal door and I was transported to a different time

and space. While at home we had no potable water to drink or cook with. At school the sprinklers would run for hours to water the rose gardens, which were exquisite to the senses (visually stunning and intoxicatingly perfumed). In my home our daily diet of beans, rice and tortillas was a welcome feast. At school the students frowned at the sight of sumptuous dishes and would waste food. While so many in my community cursed to hunger dreamed of having a little food.

The Rosebud of Affluence

I quickly and happily became accustomed to my new routine: art and physical education were a welcome part of the daily regimen. I also enjoyed the bright classroom with glass windows and large individual desks. Every year the classroom's walls would receive a fresh coat of paint inviting a fresh start.

Although the students did not engage in fights, there was a practice of exclusion based on perceived income status. Some of the girls had parents who traveled abroad on business and they spoke of visiting New York or Paris during school vacation. I would be required to take English classes beginning in grade 6. However, by grade three several students were already fluent in English; and when they wanted to exclude others they would simply switch to English.

There was a clear distance between their world and mine. Classes ended at 4pm, the streets in front of the school would be plugged up, a long line of late model vehicles some with body guards waiting for my classmates to board their vehicle. Many lived near the area and the nannies (dressed in uniforms) would wait to walk them home. By 5:00pm the school would be silent again. My mother did not finish work until 5:00 pm, so she would always arrive late to pick me up. And after dad died she would no longer be able to pick me up, and I would take the bus home alone. Inside the walls of the school the world was whatever you could imagine it to be. The students spoke of studying abroad, and of traveling to foreign countries the way we spoke of going to the beach during Christmas break. They could imagine a myriad of possible tomorrows. They had hobbies and interesting pastimes after school. I would feel lost hearing them talk about the latest pop star, their favourite brand of jeans and the popular diet they were following.

I did not own a TV or a radio so I did not know about their pop culture and fads.

I enjoyed math and sciences and unburdened by the demands of shopping after school, going to the movies, or frequenting fancy restaurants after school, was able to focus on my homework and even read ahead. My teachers recognized my keen interest in academics and often called on me to answer questions during class, I scored high on exams, which earned me some social acceptance among my classmates.

I was invited to sleep over at their homes.

But did they really know me?

I'm made of flesh and memories

I dream, the eternal child dreams

Dreams of a world, where every child has love,

protection from hunger and pain

that give wings to their dreams

I dream of a world,

that has vanished into exile hunger, violence and war

where childhood dreams like carefree children

grow and expand into a myriad of possible worlds

ingenuity and creativity

Siamese siblings play together into endless possibilities of being

dreams

loyal friends of orphaned children

suspicious of false sympathy

*weary of empty curtsies of pious words of empathy,
words, words, words.....
spoken without resolve, they can't transform the world
that continues to vomit orphans and wretched souls
destined to wander the earth,
hungry, hunted like rabid dogs, and discarded like yesterdays
garbage.
childhood's dreams too
are silenced by violence and the horrors of war,
dreams now recant their existence,
broken musical cords
in children that have learnt to swallow their screams
childhood's dreams vanished
Yes, even dreams flee from the wretched of the earth
Half lives - our dreams vanished before they are fully visible*

Dissonance

The two worlds are real. I travel between them.
In the week I study art and play in the basketball team.
At night I do my homework by candlelight because there is no electricity in my
neighbourhood.

My friends move freely at night in the 'good neighbourhoods' they live in and go on as if the
country was the same place they had always known.

My world has transformed.

Is it possible they do not know how different our worlds are?
The distance that shields their eyes from witnessing what is overt and mundane to me:
poverty, war and pain all around me, seemed to be alien to them.

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love
mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work,
but neither are you free to abandon it. (The Talmud)²¹

²¹ The Talmud, a Jewish sacred text, (cited in Trifonas & Wright 2011, p. 40).

Chapter 8.

Scarred Landscape: The Academy

I sought a university education at first, to escape the drudgery, exhaustion and, monotony of being controlled by machines. After working for years in a myriad of repetitive, dehumanizing jobs: auto-parts factory, apparel sweat-shop, agriculture, house-keeping engineer, nanny, to name just few of the many opportunities that my limited education and social status afforded me. I enrolled in university to escape being devoured by the clock.

*Born in a time of war life had been a constant race to cheat death.
I sought to escape my plebeian hurriedness,
and linger a little as my tired limbs longed for rest.*

*Those of us born to toil, seldom experience quiet solitude
and contemplation.*

*Though still a teen, the tic toc of the clock in the factory
sped the demise of my youth,
the endless list of unfinished, unachieved, forgotten dreams
lost in a never-ending list of menial chores
completed in order to survive,
which needed to be done in the
in between spaces of multiple jobs.*

*I applied to university to seek rest,
to let my body numbed by the premature arthritic pains
that, would latter rob me of my sleep; heal.
And perhaps to recognize myself again, the dark circles around my*

eyes of sleepless nights working night shifts, had long betrayed the polite response "I am fine" when a friend asked how are you?

*Above all, I enrolled to understand the paradox of time,
to grow wings in order to soar
and stop the clock from devouring my youth
wings in th place of arms,
to move at the speed of light away from constant labour
and reach the glacial pace of time when hunger is at bay
where there is always time for creative pursuits,*

*Perhaps it was my naïve desire to learn how to slow down dying,
and to speed up the birthing of hope that brought me to the pearly
gates of academia.*

*Guided by my parents' strong warning
against ignorance and illiteracy
I seek learning like a seed searches for soil
but schooling alone would not change the systemic inequity that
oppresses the poor.*

*It was not only knowledge but authority to name our world,
to recognize ourselves once again as knower and knowledge creators.
with timeless wisdom passed on through open wounds
able to brake²² down structures that produced
knowledge as power to dominate while pretending
to be neutral and objective.*

*my wings have been clipped many times
but once I had learned to take flight
I knew I will die trying*

²² As in slow down.

Calculated Kindness: Unheard Voices in the Academy

The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. Perhaps we haven't sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today. (Fanon, 1965)

The limestone buildings, scattered through multiple acres of land have stood more than a hundred years, their walls define boundaries but more importantly their presence constitutes power bestowed on institutional knowledge. Much like a temple or Church in a colonial town the Academy's presence and identity demands reverie that exerts influence on the community's customs and laws. Unlike the castles of my childhood's books, the Academy's stone buildings, were not guarded by moats filled with crocodiles, or other man-eating reptiles. In fact the beautiful cast iron gate was only symbolic, since it was always opened, and had permitted my trespassing when I walked through it to fill an admission application.

I remember being drawn to the elegance of rigid lines formed by apt artisans who had tamed the large boulders into the thick walls that created a pleasant cool environment in the heat of summer but a very cold place during frosted winters with sub zero temperatures. The school had clearly marked boundaries, with multiple stand-alone buildings clearly defined by their academic orientation. The school of Law for instance had a large engraved stone that declared its focus. The Education building stood as a stand-alone structure almost on the outskirts, its building was not as impressive as the Law or Business faculties, which I found intriguing.

Built at the turn of the 19th century the colonial influence of its design storied the Academy's identity and its occupants. In this temple of knowledge there were many unwritten rules: it was deemed crass and in poor form to visit your professor's office uninvited; questions in class should be directed to the teacher not to the other students. And

with a few exceptions the axis of power was clearly occupied by the lecturer at the front of the classroom, students were beneficiaries of his carefully rehearsed notes and class discussions never deviated from the assigned topics in a syllabus prepared prior to the beginning of the semester.

This place, was reminiscent of the colonial cathedral situated at the centre of the city amidst all the adobe and brick homes, the place where authority resided; the shanty towns were the boundary markers of the margins separating the poor, from the wealthy and well to do. The villages instead of a cathedral had small parochial churches that also defined the boundaries of authority in the community, and the church as the seat of power. In a Canadian town with its well built homes, the areas where the poor resided were marked by their distinct characteristics in contrast to the affluent areas. In the absence of “keep out signs” at the entrance of a neighbourhood, these were rather a set of unwritten rules: the beggars simply did not go into affluent areas, the police presence was minimal in affluent neighbourhoods; but easily accessed, if needed.

The university was situated in the affluent area of town. The walls that surrounded its premises were only three feet high, as to allow the passerby the opportunity to admire the lovely lines of its colonial architecture. Once inside its gates it became clear that diversity within the school meant foreign money. The majority of the students came from affluence, (this has changed in the last 20 years as industrial jobs are fleeing the country, and a university degree is becoming the minimum requirement for a service job), and there was homogeneity in their individual privilege, which most students assumed to be their birth right.

I raise my hand to ask for guidance

But you don't see me

My coarse words, escape without approval

Yet you don't hear them

I only wish to know

Who sanctions knowledge?

Who decides?

What's good to know?

What must be silenced?



Figure 8. *“Let’s Talk”* By Sylvia Richardson, Fall 2009

Seeing through the Wall

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world.

(Freire, 1978, p. 81)

As we enjoy a picnic on a side road, in rural Ontario’s countryside my son now three says “I like this world,” his rosy cheeks are drenched with watermelon juice as he takes another hardy bite. Do you want to tell me why you love this world I asked. He looks

around and as if to say open your eyes, he said: it's beautiful, I like the flowers, the trees, the river...he went on to produce a full inventory of the world he loves, revealing he is fully present in this place, this moment, aware. To be awake to the sounds of birds, blades of grass singing in the wind is to know the world intimately. Children do this quite effortlessly.

We lie down on the grass and imagine what it would be like to ride on a cloud. To soar the sky like a bird, to roam the fields with antelopes... his laughter stops momentarily as he tells me, "I love you mommy!"

Invisible Walls of Privilege

At first, they had no interest in knowing me, or maybe it was me, I may have been too intimidated to initiate a relationship with my classmates. Years of feeling rejected, dismissed by the long silence, the way a conversation came to a stop, as I approached the group hoping to be invited to join in. I had given up.

Then one day, I had to bring my daughter to school, my friend who watched my 14 month old baby and my daughter who was now almost three had a meeting at her daughter's school and offered to take the baby but asked if I would take my daughter to school. I arrived early and asked my professor if he would mind if my child sat in class with me, only for this day, I explained the circumstances. His immediate response was "I had no idea you have children," that's not the question, I felt like saying, feeling uncomfortable at the comment. Then with a smile, he said, "Yes, but won't she be bored?" I thought this was a revealing comment, there were many times when I sat in class bored because the instructors would not invite interaction.

But this class was the only one I really looked forward to, because the instructor interacted with the students (not the typical lecturer), the desks were located at the same level as the instructor (unlike some classrooms where the instructor stood on a platform looking down at his students), and he walked through the rows engaging people in the discussion. He also never missed an opportunity to answer a student's question. Furthermore, he invited all kinds of questions, and posed questions to the students which I really enjoyed. Unlike my

other classes where I felt invisible to the teacher, in his class I was intellectually stimulated and nourished. No I certainly did not believe my daughter would be bore in his class.

As my classmates walked in and the class settled he introduced my daughter to the class, and looking at my daughter, asked her, “is there anything you like to say to the class?” She pointed to the window and said, “A squirrel lives on that tree, I think she has babies.” The teacher smiled and said, “Thank you Nataly for making us aware of our neighbours, too often we forget that we are part of nature too.” I looked at my daughter’s face, full of confidence, pleased with her intervention. I also thought of how many times I had sat in that classroom oblivious to the magnificent view of the Maple trees outside, the lovely landscape of rolling hills and all the little creatures that live there. After class I took my daughter to play in the same field outside my classroom; we searched for fallen leaves that she could later paint in her art book. We collected pebbles and gave them names.

Chapter 9.

Bridges Not Walls

The teacher perked up, as if he was seeing me for the first time. Would you go topless? A student had asked as we debated at the back of the classroom. As the teacher approached, the class suddenly focused on our discussion. It is of little consequence whether I would go topless or not, I replied, what I am concerned with, is your assertion that a woman is ‘asking for it’ and deserved the violence perpetuated on her, that in this case sexual violence can be assumed to be the ‘natural’ outcome when a woman is wearing clothing that may be conceived as ‘provocative’. The news on TV and on the local papers, had spread like wild fires, “women demand the right to go topless in public”.

In southern Ontario, a handful of women had protested at bar’s patios for the right to sit topless in a patio. “If a man can be served who is not wearing a t-shirt” the argument went, “so should women”. I personally thought that this issue was a nice decoy for what ought to have been front page coverage, the mergers of TD bank with Canada Trust, the tax

cuts to corporations,²³ the increasing poverty of women. However, in a classroom filled with male students, they seemed to be more concerned with the implication of protecting women from being victims of violence if they failed to cover their bodies. A man who assaults a woman is committing a crime, whether she is naked or clothed from head to toe, I concluded decisively. My face felt hot, I had been ignored in this class, while obeying the rules of waiting to be called upon to speak. From now on I would not be ignored.

I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will.

Antonio Gramsci

As a single mother raising two children and trying to attend school, the economic crisis of the 1990's was immediately and personally felt. The miniscule budget I used to have for entertainment was drained by increased tuition. I wanted my children to have access to stimulating social activities that would enrich their creativity. I began to volunteer at the local YMCA, and by working as an aerobics instructor two hours a week, I was able to secure a low income membership (reserved for students, and retirees). The kids enjoyed swimming lessons and attended cooking classes, while I worked out in the gym, to replenish my energy reserves. Studying at home was tricky because my children were both very inquisitive and energetic. The swimming lessons helped them spent some of their abundant energy and by the time we got home, they were relaxed and ready for bed. We would have dinner, time for bath and story time. Then I would seat in the quiet of my apartment to do my readings.

It had taken me years to realize the magic of exercise, that enabled me to establish reasonable bed times that both the kids and I would agree upon. I needed rest, and desperately. Exercising on a regular basis meant I was usually in a good mood despite our financial troubles. The children were starting nursery school and new demands arrived with this transition. New clothes, school supplies and backpacks, had to materialize somehow. New routines, new demands for time: special field trips, sleepovers, group projects, and

²³ Conservative and Liberal governments have reduced corporate taxes from 29% in 1990 (already lower than most developed countries) to 21% by 2005 and in 2006 the conservative government under Stephen Harper announced corporate tax rate will be further reduced to 18.5 in 2011. See "Canada's New Government is Providing Real Tax Relief for Canadians," Finance Canada website. For a comprehensive study on taxation read economist Robin Hanhel *ABC's of Economics*.

parent teacher meetings. I seemed to have adjusted to the increasing list of tasks that inscribed my identity as: mother, student and worker. The in-between moments of leisure, stolen from a busy schedule: coffee with a friend, reading while waiting for the kids to get out of school, day dreaming at the gym, cooking while listening to my favorite CD, playing with the kids while doing the laundry at the local Laundromat. Squeezing living into everything I did.

At the gym I met women who like me were also struggling financially, some who lived in my building. We decided to join our efforts and cook meals together. On Monday and Wednesday I cooked for my friend and her children; while our children play together we enjoyed a cup of tea after dinner. On Tuesday and Fridays we joined her family in their apartment. We shared stories of our children, tips on how to get rid of grass stains, and home remedies for colds and fever. She had amazing culinary skills and made magic with a simple budget. She had an exquisite eye for details, color coordination and food preparation. For my birthday she prepared a cake with ricotta and cream cheese icing, with a strawberry custard fill, all made from scratch.

It was a happy day when I met this woman, and I was sad to see her leave the country. The short time we shared together had made me realize that violence against women crosses economic classes. She spoke of the cruelty of her spouse, who held a knife to her throat in rage, (although it did not cut her skin, the psychological scars, were present). Her own insecurity at being divorcee; intensely attuned to the gossip of her relatives and friends. Why do you care so much about what they think? I asked her ...the question had suddenly inverted. I too felt defensive at the constant questioning, "Why did you leave?" the question always implies a choice. Women who leave abusive relationships do so at the peril of being shunned by their families and friends. To be judged by the public scrutiny of teachers as their children attend schools and are asked to produce family trees for the class project. Don't answer that, I said ...suddenly aware of my own folly.

The room is filled with the scent of freshly baked, cornbread and vegetarian chilli. The sound of Puccini playing in the back, she was a talented musician in her youth she studied music at the conservatorium but she fell in love and abandoned that dream to be married. I point to the flower center piece and remarked: "this is brilliant" to cut cost and still enjoy the look of real flowers, she bought two orchids and put them in a square base filled

with water and as the water began to freeze, she arranged the flowers in place so they were at different levels, she then let the water freeze completely, when company arrived she simply brought out the frozen block surrounded by tea candles for added drama. Imagine if we could freeze ourselves in time, I said “what moment would you choose?” We sit in silence, she is forty and her daughter barely 5, I am twenty-two and my children are almost the same age as hers. We laughed at the question, for how can we choose a moment, when to choose one means to ignore the interconnectedness of life, the thread that links our lives to those of others. Yes we are a mesh of pain, horror, and fear; but also of love, courage and power. We have opened our hearts to trust again and receive the gift of friendship.

To know myself, to find my face²⁴...

*How do I know who I am, who I can be?
Know what you can do, what you are capable of,
my inner voice replies.*

What do I know?

*I know
that I can wait a lifetime for a kind word
and in an instant see life transformed*

*I know
that fear slows my steps
robbing me of the life ahead*

*I know
that to be heard
we must first be brave enough to speak*

²⁴ For the Aztecs, to find one's face is to know your identity.

*I know
I cannot be silent no more*

My presence in the Academy has been at times that of an unwelcome guest. My questions, often dismissed as inappropriate for the discussion at hand, or silenced by the catch all phrase “that’s complicated” we will address that later in the course...

The divide between “scientifically proven facts” and “anecdotal evidence” soon became part of my vocabulary. There are polite ways to dismiss questions that challenge the status quo. And many discourses that distance the lived experience of people, from the institutional sanctioned knowledge. Unlike the days of my childhood when I was called upon to answer questions, and to pose questions to the teacher, my raised hand went ignored; while many of my classmates were invited to participate, repeatedly. Eventually I stopped raising my hand in class, and abandoned my seat at the front of the classroom for one closer to the exit door at the back.

I longed to see my identity reflected, to be seen. To finally establish a foundation that grounds me to this place, where I dwell. To find my heart and face reflected. To finally rid myself of the imprint of domination, inculcated through years of schooling in the ‘naturalness’ of privilege of those who rule with impunity and the neutrality of education who fails to denounce it.

*I have been schooled
in the art of forgetting*

*I have been schooled,
to dull the sting of my words
to hush the echos of those who screamed no more
speak lies to me no more*

*I have been schooled
I have been schooled
I have been schooled*

*but I wish to be schooled no more
In the logic of injustice
In the myth of merit that ignores privilege
In the naturalization of hunger and war
In the exaltation of lying,
In the geography and topography of greed and individualism*

*I have been schooled
I have been schooled
I am fool!*

*I have been fooled, to see my world through the empire's eyes
to peer through curtains and wait for crumbs of kindness
When will they see their world through my eyes*

*I have been forced
to make myself so small
I have been told, I am not a self like you at all*

*Then, who am I to be?
the deviant you fear,
the one who can't think clear
my logic to you is irrational
my voice is loud and coarse
What would you have me be
What place is there for me?
Arms that toil your work
The body you exploit
Invisible oh Lord!*

*When would you see,
that through my veins runs blood
that in my words there is love
When will you hear the cries of those who mourn
the life that you withhold from you ...and from me.
Injustice imprisons us all!*

Telling Stories in Radio

[i]t is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking. (Bhabha, 1992, p. 438)

My introduction to journalism was the work of serendipity. I was organizing an event for a non-profit, and without money for advertisement, I decided to approach the local radio station to ask if they would make a public announcement. The event was a Labour Day Picnic. As I walked into the station I was invited into the studio, where a live broadcast was in progress. The woman doing the broadcast played a song and muting her microphone, said, “We’ll do your announcement as soon as this song ends”, as the melody ended she announced me as the President of a local union, with an important announcement then she said, “go ahead”....

I had expected her to read my poster, but there I was, live on the air waves. She asked questions about the event and after a five minute interview, she played another song as she told me “you should do radio.”

Four years later, (in 2009) my radio program, Latin Waves became internationally syndicated. A program about community, Latin Waves is a magazine style program with music and interviews that inform the local and international communities, inspire and connect people to the issues of our time: ecological and sustainable development, food security, water protection, women and poverty... to name just a few of the many subjects addressed to date.

In 2010 I was elected to the board of AMARC, as Vice President for North America. AMARC is the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, an organization with more than 4000 stations in 115 countries. In radio, my extended family of loved ones expands across borders, and oceans. The wisdom of my elders, Aymara, Maya, Ojibway, Anishnabew, and Haida whom I had the privilege to walk along with, has opened my eyes to the living world that breathes life into all the ways to knowing known to me today.

*In 1690 identity was defined by wealth and religion
not by colour or national origin.
The settlers arriving were primarily poor
and worked as indentured labour.
We are lost in a world of despair
Open your eyes if you dare*

Unlearning Ignorance

*What's poverty?
We know this word,
it is in the news all the time,
but no one ever explains that it is violence.
It kills people slowly and quickly,
and it kills more people than all the wars and repression put together.*

Seating in a classroom surrounded by students who self identify as middle class and white, the discussions of economic development were framed to highlight the West's superior technological advances as the priori of its wealth. "We have invested in technology and it has paid off" one student declared during one of our class discussions. I asked: "Surely you don't believe that technology alone can't produce wealth? I think we need to look critically at the wealth and poverty distribution as the result of various policies that create different conditions and levels of exploitation. And ask a few questions: What has been the impact of foreign ownership on national production? How have multilateral trade agreements restrain the economic power of countries in the Global South?²⁵ Who is displaced and who profits? Whose forests get cleared cut and water sheds polluted in the

²⁵ Throughout Latin America, Foreign Trade Zones, have become the ideal sites for commodities production. With zero taxes paid by the foreign companies, zero regulation and a ban on unions.

pursuit of energy sources for industrial production? Whose economy is privileged, in agricultural production, factory farming and extractive industries?

Seeing is a Choice

Table 1. The Gap between the Incomes of the Richest and Poorest Countries

1920	3 to 1
1950	35 to 1
1973	44 to 1
1992	72 to 1

Note. United Nations Development Report, 1999

Creating a World without the Imprint of Domination

The conception of power is about domination and submission. Power is marked by the ability to impose or the ability to resist that imposition. This is what some called “power-over”, The exercise of power seeking domination and injustice leads to a zero sum game (in order for you to win, I have to lose or vice versa). The constant thread of a challenge from below means that no amount of power is enough. It is ultimately “the power of death and is also is a power that comes only to those who are dead” (Jenson; 2009, p. 99-101).

My coarse words, escape without approval

Who sanctions knowledge?

Who decides

What good to know

According to Orr (2004) data has been confused with knowledge and implies a deeper mistake that learning will make us better people. But learning as Eiseley (1979) has said, is endless and “in itself...will never make us ethical men” (p, 284)

...true intelligence is long range and aims towards wholeness. Cleverness is mostly short range and tends to break reality into bits and pieces. Cleverness is personified by the functionally rational technician armed with know-how and methods but without a clue about the higher ends technique should serve.”
(Eiseley, 1979, p. 11)

Chapter 10.

Community²⁶ and Communion

Hope is not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks with the present, the surprises...

The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness. (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 2)

In 1977 my mother found work at an animal food processing plant, she was the only female amidst hundreds of workers. She cleaned the offices of executives in the plant, and the locker rooms and dining hall of the workers. A job she was grateful for. If only she had known the price of being a member of the unionized work force during a time of war.

The workers and executives at the plant had clearly defined spaces. The air conditioned offices of the executives with their mahogany desks, art on the walls, and frosted glass walls defining their turf, a fragrant space with a pleasant scent of fresh coffee brewing throughout the day. In contrast to the open space room where hundreds of workers met for their meal and coffee breaks also clearly demarcated.

The glass panes that surrounded their office on the third floor offered a panoramic view to the plant below where the workers toil. The power relations clearly demarcated by the frosted glass walls that divided the executives from the office staff and workers were unspoken. My mother would move quickly, dusting the leather sofas and chairs in the entry way, cleaning the windows with great care not to leave streaks. She would change the

²⁶ Community is defined by what we recognize, the familiar, what is known. By speaking of community and communion I am inviting you to risk being in the company of the unknown, to stretch you comfort level and invite communion with the familiar, the unknown, the stranger.

coffee filter, ready to start a fresh brew. The marble floors would gleam as she left the offices. She began work at 7am to get the offices cleaned prior to the arrival of office staff at 9am. She then moved on to clean the high traffic areas: the dining hall and locker rooms; where hundreds of workers ate their meals and play cards during their coffee breaks. This was a big job as the large dining hall had capacity for 200-250 people. She began by lifting all the chairs onto their respective tables to mop the linoleum floors. While the floors dried she tackled the bathrooms. Mondays were especially hard, as many of the workers had gone drinking over the weekend and the evidence of their excess was now revealed in the vomit covered toilets. They had arrived to work and realized too late they should have stayed home.

Some of the men worked operating the machines that produced feed for chickens, dogs, and cattle. Others carry the heavy sacks filled with feed to the loading and storage areas. The plant had enormous pipes meshed together in different directions carrying tons of corn, wheat, and barley and other unknown ingredients, this was an extraordinarily bizarre world, as a child I was mesmerized by the sound, smell and colors of the plant. I looked in awe as the magic of technology transformed into colourful and interesting shapes the grains and proteins being carted in large sacks by men about the plant.

Both the men and the plant's floor were covered in a yellow powder (possibly the dust from all the corn and barley flowing through the air), as the grains were mashed into new forms. A goeey substance stuck to your feet, which the men dragged in their boots when they came to the dining hall. My mother would have to mop the floor again after coffee break to remove the foul smelly goo from the floors. She would mop the floors a third time after their meal break. In those days a loud bell would ring throughout the plant and everyone would stop and take their breaks together.

This was a welcome respite that provided the workers an opportunity to socialize. The union also took advantage of these opportunities to inform its members of the upcoming meetings, social events, and volunteer opportunities with their local union. It was at one of these informal coffee gatherings, that my mother was asked to be the treasurer of her union. They had an accountant; she would only be responsible for overseeing expenses and signing cheques as needed. The men roared in support of her nomination, and it was decided she would run for election as treasurer. She won with a landslide vote of approval.

Dad's income at the department store had not improved, while my mother's unionized workplace had negotiated their wages be adjusted to inflation. The war had sky rocketed the cost of food but wages remain stagnant for most workers. For as long as I can remember my parents had a savings jar (for emergencies, and there were many) ...A new job with better pay had ignited a plan to build a brick home, she began to put money aside to buy materials. At first she bought only a dozen bricks, this act, symbolic perhaps; proved to be a catalyst moment. My excitement grew as the brick mountain in the yard increased in height and size with each purchase.

When we had reached a thousand bricks we began digging the foundation. Mom, dad, my uncle (who worked as a brick layer) and my cousin who was only a few years younger than my uncle (my aunt's oldest son); had long conversations about the design, the blue prints, for our future home. In the day, while mom and dad were at work we were busy carrying dirt in buckets as the men dug a trench.

My uncle would give us lectures on the importance of building a solid foundation. We watched with glee as the large boulders were put in place and mixed cement poured onto them, to secure the large iron bars that would later strengthen the corners of the house and hold our home in place. After the foundation was set, construction was halted for several days; while we waited for it to dry. I would inspect the site daily with great anticipation! We began setting bricks on a Saturday, Mom was glowing with joy, and the house was filled with music and laughter, my uncle showed us how to use a level to ensure the bricks were place in a straight line. When we ran out of bricks construction stopped, until my mom was able to buy more bricks. I woke up each day excited to know this may be the day we finish our home, though the construction was on hiatus, there was no doubt the home would be finished. All the children had been equally invested in the construction and we saw this as our work.

Then the day came, it was time to put a roof, it had been months since the work had started, we now watched with excitement the arrival of the thick wood beams that would hold in place the clay tile roof.

A school year had began and ended before the moment our home was finally finished, a modest home with three small rooms, two bedrooms with south facing windows and enough space for two double beds (one room for our family and the other for my uncle's family). The middle room had a few chairs and a small table, the room was no bigger than 8 feet by 10 feet, it was also the main entrance to the house. And at the back was a Spanish style porch with an overhang roof top where we ate all our meals.

The home had no potable water so with the remaining materials my uncle built a large cement cistern to store water. This meant we could save rain water and use it for washing clothes and bathing.

Construction of our home began long before we had all the materials needed to see it finished. As a child this was an important lesson. The confidence that change is possible! Each day is a new day, with new opportunities, new possibilities. If you start you will be further ahead then if you wait until all the material things you need are present. To believe in possibility we must trust in the collaborative power we create when working together. We make the path by walking, putting one foot in front of the other.²⁷ The living power of working with others to create possibilities, actively engaging in whatever way was possible according to our circumstances; constantly evolving and learning with an open mind ready to adjust as new understanding reveal new possibilities. Our humble home sheltered more than our bodies; it provided shelter for our dreams. In the same way my mother watered her garden and poured mulch to protect the tender roots, we worked toward the promise of a better tomorrow. My parents kept their dream of building a home alive while constantly striving towards it.

Christmas 1978 will live forever in my memories of family gatherings, 80 plus relatives arrived with their sleeping mats in hand, although no one slept that night. The sounds of guitars playing to happy drunks singing, while others danced and talk around is imprinted in my memory. As the dawn of morning arrived, the family was still in a celebratory mood! One of my uncles who drove a transport truck said: "let's go to the beach!" We packed the leftovers from the night before and set out to the ocean. The day was perfect. The thundering roar of the waves mixed with the shrill screams of joy

²⁷ Varela,(1987) "We make the path by walking"

from the children who chase after them. We watched the sunset sipping coconut juice on the shoreline. It would be the last time we would be together.

Within two years our family was dispersed by war, a wave of despair, pain and suffering unleashed. The lovely red brick home that once was the source of infinite joy now echoed the horror of violence and bloodshed. The day my childhood ended as I held my father's head in my arms in a futile attempt to keep him from drowning in his own blood that now blended with my tears.

There are no guarantees in life. There is only living with dignity, courage and love.

Let this be my only prayer

That I may never be indifferent to pain

*That death will not find me,
emptied without having done what I could*

That I may never be indifferent to injustice

That I may never be indifferent to war

a monster that tramples the innocence of people

Let this be my only prayer

That I may never be indifferent to the future

That in my life, I be invested in creating a different culture

If treachery is to overcome us

That our struggle may not be forgotten easily

Being Woman

Let me tell you a story. For all I have is a story.

(Minh-ha, 1989, p.119)

I had named you
when you were only a promise

I felt your presence
I wished I could change the world you were about to be born into

I could not

All I can do is to try to help you see other worlds
that together we can strive to change ours

And so began a new wound,
Please God, don't let this child be a girl!

I saw my daughter for the first time 20 hours after her birth. I had gone through a difficult birth. My labour was induced, which meant the intensity of the contractions was not incremental but rather heighten and constant from the start. I did not get an epidural because it was expected the baby would be born shortly. After 72 hours of excruciating pain my body gave up and I collapsed. The surgery room erupted into a frenzy when to their horror I became conscious just as the scalpel began to cut my belly open.

I was attached to a breathing apparatus that denied me the ability to speak, I could see, and feel but I could not speak. The shock was such that I received what I am sure was a dose of anaesthetic so potent, I struggled to wake up many hours after the surgery.

And so my baby was born. A GIRL!

When we first met, she was a tenacious little infant with lovely curls and terrific lungs that denounced my neglect. My enlarged breasts were not lactating (perhaps because of the medication), the synapses in my body had not made the connection that my baby was

ready to feed. I held her in my arms and for the first time in years, I cried. The tears were of joy of seeing such a perfect miracle mixed with a feeling of impotence, at being totally unprepared to care for her.

She was a strong baby (weighed almost 9 pounds) with an iron will. She clutched at my breast expectantly but my breasts produced no milk. The nurse said she would take the baby and bring her later so I could get some rest. I begged to keep her with me, but the answer was a definite no. The nurse took the baby to the nursery only to return an hour later complaining that my infant would not desist from crying and was upsetting the other babies. I held her in my arms and she immediately stopped. I tried feeding her again and as if a spell had been cast milk came flooding through to the delight of my baby, who instinctively knew what to do.

The world ceased to exist in its former state. In this moment, time stood still, my daughter would forever change my life. In a foreign country where I had no identity, no rights, she defined me and I was reborn. Holding this miracle in my arms, the world seemed somehow full of possibilities and new beginnings. Now a young woman, she has proven to be just as wilful, fearless and generous as the baby that rescued me from the slow death destined to those whose heart has shattered with mortal wounds. In the birth of my children I was reborn anew, grounded in my stance to feint is necessary, the courage to create a world of possibilities. To give them the chances that war and poverty denied me, but more importantly to dedicate my life to create a world they could live in.

I met my husband when I was still too young to have a check list of the things that I would hope for in a partner. However I think if I were to write the list today, it would include humility to see your world through the eyes of others; empathy that is embodied in acts that make a difference; willingness to walk along even when the pain of a loved one threatens to consume you; the courage to stand up to power.

Add a contagious laughter, generous lover and a fabulous sense of humour and you would have captured the perfect soul mate, my life companion.

Together we move across Canada in search of work and to raise our family.

After getting married, we decided to move to BC (our travelling budget was 1000 dollars). We set out from London Ontario, in a vehicle that broke down every other day. We arrived in Sault St. Marie, and the car decided that was to be the end of the line. I thought oh well, at least we are still close to the great lakes, not exactly an ocean but it sure looks like one.

As fortune would have it, the car changed its mind and started again. We set out once again after taking time to visit the local aquatic museum and provincial park. Our entire worldly possessions were contained in the hatchback of our car. A 12 inch TV and a video cassette player; a camping tent; a picnic basket (a wedding gift). In the back seat, one seat was dedicated for our blankets, pillows, and coats, on the other seat two kids were comfortably nestled in. The car's roof-top carried 3 suitcases with our clothes and two adult bicycles secured tightly to the bike racks on the hatch.

We stopped at every provincial park, to swim or hike awe-inspiring nature trails.

The scene was that of a typical family on vacation, though our family was in search of a future with some economic opportunities. I was only three credits short from, graduating from University. The chronic financial hardship we endured force me to put my education in hietus. My partner was in a similar situation.

Our plan was simply to secure employment and study part-time.

We arrived in British Columbia with a fabulous sun tan, glowing smiles and an empty bank account. We had enough to stay at a camp ground for a few nights (three nights exactly). I had travelled before with a lot less in my pockets, but now I had children and the prospect of being homeless was for the first time terrifying.

I called my friends at the monastery in Ontario, where my first community was established when I arrived in Canada. When I had walked into their school and asked to enroll in courses at the Catholic High School. I had always felt heard, when I spoke with my friend Mary. She had spent several years working amidst the poor in Latin America, and she not only could speak Spanish, she knew the unjust conditions that plague the landless and poor.

I picked up the phone. "We are in British Columbia!" My friend's voice on the other side of the phone breathed a sigh of relief. It's a beautiful place I continue, though I am a little worried, we don't have any money left for shelter...I am sorry I just wanted to get it out my chest, it weighs me down.

Mary had been the only person I felt I could confide in, she had sat through long conversations and offered me her arms, where I could release one sob at a time years of pain. She was silent for a moment, then with a jolt of energy she told me "I have a cousin who lives in Vancouver, I haven't talk to her in almost 20 years, but look her up, I am pretty sure she has a home and her children moved away a long time ago. She may be able to help you."

We spoke for a little longer, she asked about the children.

I dialled information and an operator connected me to Elaine's cousin. The woman on the other side of the phone had a coarse voice almost angry sounding, I hesitate only a moment..."Hello, I am a friend of your cousin Mary, I've just arrive in Vancouver from Ontario, and unfortunately we ran out money, we need a place to stay for a few days." The receiver went silent, and for a second I felt as if I was having a conversation with myself, but the voice returned and said curtly, "I have family staying with me this week, sorry I don't think I can't help you." Before she could hang up the phone, I interceded one last time "we have a camping tent, could we have a little corner in your yard,.. it would only be for a few days..."

The pause is so long this time, I worry she has hung up. Finally she came back and said "come to the house and will discuss it." I thanked her profusely, and told the kids, "we are going on an adventure, an urban camping trip. Are you excited?" The journey to British Columbia so far, had been a great vacation. They were thrilled at the prospect of the adventure!

Salivate, secrete the words. No water, no birth, no death, no life. No speech, no song, no story, no force, no power. The entire being is engaged in the act of speaking-listening-weaving-procreating. If she does not cry, she will turn into stone.
(Minh-ha, 1989, p. 127)

Our experiences are moments engraved in a narrative that gives meaning to our journey and inspires new steps. Our family is one story within multiple stories that weave the tapestry of our collective lives, resonant of similar struggles against injustice, breathless moments of awe-inspiring beauty, of tenderness, love, friendship and joy. These stories are the threads that weave my identity. The love, tears and joy give transcendence to my visions of a better today and inspire a new tomorrow.

I was brought up to see community as essential, and to see myself as part of a natural world that is alive, ever changing. We belong to nature, and the miracle of life and renewal is all encompassing. Stories have informed my identity and ways of being in the world all my life. My journey has been a story of perseverance, reciprocity and transcendence. Connecting the strands of past and future in this moment.

To find my face (identity), my heart (what's sacred, what matters most), and my foundation (my purpose, vocation) that grounds me. A journey begins anew with every new action I take to connect my identity and my community to the place we collectively create. In the thread of our lives, there are multiple knots (stops). I am the stranger that knocks uninvited. What will you do?

I have learned that all we have is the moment; in this moment I invite sentient and non sentient beings and we are all invited to enter into relationships that shape and remake the world anew. We are our relations with the world. We are part of an endless circle of dying and renewal. Members of multiple communities created through our interaction that in turn creates who we are in this moment.



Figure 9 "Once Upon a Fish...by Sylvia Richardson, Fall 2010²⁸

I met a fish once...
Crimson red was his skin
Gone his protective scales
Hunger is his constant companion
Yet he seeks not food nor shelter
Steadfast in his journey to his birthplace
No obstacle too great to dissuade him

Up waterfalls
Against the current they swim

The female carries a thousand eggs,
She finds the perfect spot
She lays a pod of translucent pink dots

²⁸ A fish on the banks of the Adams River, Chase, British Columbia. The photograph is part of a series of photos taken as part of an Artistic inquiry on the relationships between Art and Nature.

She splashes water to signal to her partner
The male patiently waiting for her
He hovers over the eggs and
releases his sperm
The circle of life completed

The river is caked with flesh
Bodies that will become
The fertile soil that feeds the ancient trees that shelter the spring
That will carry their offspring to the ocean

Carried by the current their lives expire
flesh turns the color of ashes
In the spring their offspring will transcend the memory of life

Conclusion

The journey to being educated in the Western sense has many contradictions. This path I walked amidst the sharp rocks, risking falling off the cliffs of academic privilege, as I stumble with shaky steps. The wounding of alienation and invisibility, has also birthed a resilience to uncover the many ways of being, seeing and ways to knowing in order to survive.

A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground.
Then it is done, no matter how brave its warriors nor how strong their
weapons. Cheyenne Proverb

To live with complexity within Education is to see how the focus on conventional instruments and practices of accountability, language, and expectations devalues my capacities and locates me as an outsider. And yet I remain, needing to participate in its structure in order to attain visibility. Walking the tight rope of the unwelcome stranger, who seeks connection and visibility while being shaped by the wounds of institutional blindness that enclose this temporal space. Yet, it is also here, in the liminal spaces where learning is

a collaboration, like the melody composed out of the dissonance of notes, that visions of education as a practice for liberation can be envisioned as our opus.

We are mired in contradictions: the rigid stance of gatekeepers, best intentions and embedded conventions amidst the struggle to realize the not-yet 'unimagined possibilities' made possible when theory meets practice (Freire, 1970). When theory is contrasted with verbalism²⁹ and action with activism. What can be learned from a story, woven with our fragmented moments, created out of random stories of survival that reveal the chaos of life? This is only one story, that makes visible the historical, social, economic, political, educational processes that inscribe my identity as a child forced by war to suddenly grow up, a mother, a worker, a learner, a stranger destined to never arrive.

The journey from my village, a scarred landscape by war and painful memories, is an open wound that refuses to heal, searching to connect our voices until there is no more war, no more hunger in this world. The wound that refuses to scab is also a source of my realization that in life we do not choose the circumstances that unveil the actions of our lives, but to act is always a choice.

Life has taught me that no one has a monopoly on pain, we do not choose our parents, or our geographical birth place (this little oversight may have dire consequences) for those born in poverty in the global South. It also implies privilege for those born to wealth in Western countries, if poverty is defined as the inability to accumulate possessions, and not the inability to weigh consequences of actions on the wellbeing of others. To be educated is to have a voice (Freire, 1970). To see the reciprocal relationships of ongoing tensions between practice and theory, between freedom and authority, and respond with compassion and wisdom.

We are not all responsible for the harms and suffering that afflict the world today. But we are all response-able (able to respond) and if we all act as if we are the catalyst that will create transformative change, and take action in whatever capacity we are privileged with; then all the structural barriers we face would be unsettled and dismantled. In the dialogical spaces we co-create through sharing of ideas, and material resources. Our

²⁹ Storying connecting theory to life outside of academia.

amplified voices, multiplied actions, together, we may birth a new way of seeing, being and acting on the world. In walking we make the path to coexistence. This journey has changed me, and will continue to change who I am and who I become, in the multiple communities that embrace me. In the multiple worlds I am invited to coexist with.

“Who am I in your presence?” (Arendt, 1951). The wound inspires my strident steps guided by hopes for a world with justice. Grounded in the soil of the stories of loved ones whose lives expired long ago giving transcendence to mine. Flesh Mapping has been a journey to create a Pedagogy of shared narrative, place, and political engagement to locate my self in our shared stories, recognizing our selves as active co-creators of knowledge. Peering through, the fragmented pieces of forgotten pains, fears and dreams, in order to assert our interwoven, interdependent, location in the world. To expose our collective wounds of living within systems that create, and maintain hierarchal relations of dead power. To appropriate the words to name our world, through relations of coexistence and reciprocity.

Life is not static, and all arrangements are temporal reflections of space and location of its agents. Pain transforms our vanity into humility, and reveals we are all dependent on others. We need the fertile soil of love and care our parents prepared for us, and through our lives we depend on the reciprocity that gives visibility to our lives. Why do we deny others what we have recognized as essential for ourselves and those we love?

*Vanity forces back the tears of forgotten pasts, unrealized dreams
and adventures forsaken to meet utilitarian norms.
Behind every life is a world, a way of seeing.
Our carefully crafted identity makes meaning of a world
full of contradiction and disenchantment.
Can we find our way back?
To a place where students are not the recipients of transfers of
information but also co creators,
of imagining and making new worlds every day?
Not in competition with nature and other sentient beings but living
in coexistence and balance?
Can we imagine ourselves in another reality?*

The wound remembers those forgotten, the ones made invisible by repression and war, the beings made into objects in a human centric world. It is not too late, paradise is not lost, we simply must find our way back. Our identity is informed by what we choose to remember. What we choose to see. Open your eyes and see the wound!

What have I learned through this journey of living and writing, loving, dying only to be reborn? That through flesh mapping as the words give flesh and bones to the wounding of education, the rebirth and the renewal as new ways to knowing are uncovered and reveal that learning is life! The process, a series of spiritual deaths and rebirths. The decision to tell my story is in part honouring the wound, to share an emergent wisdom of living life against the wind, but constantly striving to ride the storm so that I may name my presence, name what I resist, name what I long to create along with others. I have learned the essentiality of learning to name my world, and to recognize the catalyst role of education to inform, and form the attitudes and practices that produce, maintain and perpetuate hierarchies of what is worth knowing.

The writing of my thesis honours the possibilities when the wound is a teacher. As we the wounded (for no one escapes some form of body of psychic woundedness) re-imagine through our shared stories, the possibilities of who we can be, what we can create, a myriad of as yet unimagined possibilities for a transformed world.

Wounds suggest to us that where we are most vulnerable is the place/time which must be most venerated, for they mark a sacred space in us that we would have ignored had not the wound brought it forcefully into consciousness. (Slattery, 2000, p. 53)

Out of chaos immense possibilities arise, hope, and renewal in the constant striving to create life out of the decay of war, poverty and alienation. To sow seeds of optimism and gratitude in the face of adversity, in order to grow roots of empathy and kindness that author new beginnings, and envision a world transformed.

Writing this thesis and reflecting on my journey has taught me the essentiality of authorship; to honour the capacity for empathy, to be response-able, awake and aware of the scripts that we perform, and prescribe for others, when we take our power for granted. To name a desire for a Pedagogy of shared narrative, place, and politics in an effort to

connect our private lives, to make visible the affects of political, social, and economic scripts that today constitute our lives around structures of inequity. To write my narrative is to situate myself, as a concrete subject inscribed by a wider cultural and historical continuum, which Said (1983) called “wordly self-situating.” Aware of this historical process the journey is not travelled alone, those who travelled with me, also take this journey, travelled through the writing and sharing of our stories.

I am an open wound that refuses to forget:

I have learned that language in a capitalist system of haves and have-nots defines my value as a human being, the imposition of English as the measure of my intelligence in the academy, in the workplace, in places of power where those who are welcomed to participate too often act as unwitting or complicit gatekeepers excluding others. And that I, seeking desperately to make a connection, am (was) too often dismissed as inadequate and wanting.

I am an open wound that begs you to remember that:

Today, the walls of injustice in the form of economic exclusion, racial discrimination and gendered oppression despite laws to the contrary, persist. In the fantasy world of free markets, we unwittingly repeat the mantra that “workers are free,” While ignoring that today, temporary Migrant workers, among many others, are the new indentured slaves upon which our privilege is inscribed.

I am an open wound, aware, attuned to the call to locate myself within this struggle for emancipation from systems of authority that imprison all but a small minority, to live in constant fear of hunger, war, and marginal employment.

A wound that refuses to forget the countless rivers turned red with bloodshed.

I chose to write an auto-ethnographic narrative, to map a fractured temporal spatial cartography of the wounds that won't scab; an embodied cartography that calls us to attention, to the moment. I abandon linear certainty in search of the moments that locate my being in this historical moment of place and time. I write, aware that life is messy, unfolding

in unanticipated, oft-times undesired ways, where a single moment can fracture what is known, destroy what is loved, a moment of a child's innocence lost. My life story is not unique, far from it. It reminds us that hope also lives in the dark. Out of chaos, life emerges in our untold struggles, striving to create a different tomorrow.

*I am an open wound
a growing river
a warrior love
a song of love
unyielding to power*

*I am an open wound
a dance
with steps of fire
a song of love
that births desire*

*I am the wound where echoes live
The resounding voices
of those fallen but not forgotten
whose songs of love
beckons an audience*

*I am open wound,
seeking the sunsets
of loves lost
never forgotten*

*A voice that soars with winds
of change.*

No one makes it alone in this world, we are interdependent on one another, we need the material conditions of community, language and culture that provide for our needs (physical and spiritual). We need the safety of our home (whether we walk on two legs or four) to raise our young, and the opportunity for reflection to realize that learning is life.

Learning in the highest sense is to make meaning, and help us to remember what is essential and sacred. “Paradise is not lost, we simply have forgotten our way.” (Cabral, 2010)³⁰ We must find our way back.

In this moment now, I turn to you, I am an open wound, who breathes in your presence, neither you nor I can surrender to what is being asked of us, by systems and structures and practices that inscribe in us complacency or complicity, disinterest, or apathy imposed by those who do not see us or each other, I invite you to imagine, to ask what if we imagine other than what is, what possibilities open in our presence, in celebration, in possibility, in hope.

What if

We saw at last, the myth³¹ of civilization

*as the virus of decay that consumes the moribund
and creates the mausoleums that
buried alive the living*

What if

The world was upside down

*waste landscapes of toxic land,
polluted water and fowled air
passed for ‘development’
a deadly compromise necessary
to create economic prosperity for a few*

What if

*we could imagine a world without children condemned
to live in poverty*

³⁰ A refrain in Latin America, made popular by the singer Facundo Cabral.

³¹ this is composed of many myths

*What if
we were no longer allowed to forget
To erase the memory of fallen times of moral decay*

*What if
for once, we could mute the rants of marketers,
and political pundits And in its place
hear the earth breathing
what if we could finally hear,
the voices of those silenced by power*

What if that moment was now

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