

*The Interpretive Movements of Language and Desire:
Engagements of Poetry and Place in Qualitative Research*

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The Doctor's Cove is a Sensual Salt

The brush falls sharply on both sides of the trail,
cut as a warning.

They are claws that convulse
slowly clipping at my eyes
slowly ripping at my thighs.

The roots of the trees
with their black, calloused fingers
they are touching, also tickling
under covers of wet sand.

And feeling myself pulled,
I interrupt this throbbing.

A little looped root that tangles.
A little salty danger that spangles.

The waves, they stroll shouting
at that cove, raspy roarings.

I swear that my eyes are alone in this.

Ever since—
look at that froth—
It stops up my eyes.

She shines every surface.
(So delicate, so damn dear)

Don't come down here.
Don't come down here.
You shouldn't come down here.
There are some places you just shouldn't go to alone.

In *Echographies of Television*, Derrida relates how “What we are, we inherit. And we inherit language, which we use to bear witness to the fact that we are what we inherit. It is a paradoxical circle within which we must struggle and settle things by decisions which

at one and the same time inherit and invent...their own norms” (2002, p. 26). He speaks to the challenges of being stuck in a script we did not write, but yet must take up to move ourselves forward, responding at the same time to that which we plod through; an indwelling between seemingly stable positions that is the condition of living itself.

This paper looks at some of the methodological approaches I employed in my 2008 study: *Poaching in the Landwash: An Interrogation of Cultural Meaning In a Reading Group from St. John's, Newfoundland*. In this present work, I seize on the movements of language in qualitative research, as inscriptive spaces fashioned through zones of dialogic tension, forged through encounters with others and encounters with places. In educational research, typically engaging the words and actions of other people, along with theoretical positionings, conceptual frameworks, and histories of research within a given field, I examine the impressions and effects of one researcher's desires in this meaning-making process, in which language serves simultaneously as a point of alienation, and as an inevitably imperfect enunciatory tool forever directed at satisfaction.

Working with the writings of Butler (2003), Chambers (2006), Felman (2007), Robertson (1999, 2002, 2003, 2006) and others, I regard the affective, and indeed, poetic nature of methodological work as an act of translative necessity, thus valuing the possibilities in provoking a haunted analysis of autobiographical place in research. Through what Chambers (2006) refers to as “the challenge of the curriculum of place” (p. 30)—what and how we learn from where we are, and how the footsteps we inscribe in a place walk over and alongside the footsteps of others—my understandings of research encompass an awareness of the lack that defies narrative totality, an awareness that subverts narcissistic fantasy. If we imagine the curriculum of research as not merely a site for the presentation of information, but as also embodying a process of autobiographical interpretation in relation to histories of knowledge, then the languages we use can more safely abandon the mantels of conquest and finality, instead engaging the challenges that inhere from within this hybrid space.

To establish the context of my research, I will briefly describe what brought me out to Newfoundland in the first place. During 2007 and 2008, I worked as part of Dr. Judith Robertson's *Saltwater Chronicles* research team at the University of Ottawa. As a whole, this research project concerned itself with looking at the complexities of reading in a popular and social literary movement, the book club. Through a number of different social contexts, though from the wider geographical space of Newfoundland and Labrador, this research enacts a grassroots examination of “the social and psychic polyvalence of reading experience” (Robertson, 2003), and seeks to scrutinize some of the forces and tendencies at work in specific moments of contemporary literary formations. For my own part, I worked with a reading group in the medical humanities at Memorial University's faculty of medicine, whose mandate, as described on their website, was quite simply “to discuss art that engages themes of health and illness.” This was a small group of medical students and faculty members, published poets and novelists, who made the conscious decision to read together, viewing the arts and medicine as complementary fields, insufficient unto themselves. While in St. John's, I worked with the members of this reading group over the course of two months. In the context of this paper, I will be concentrating on the challenges of moving as a researcher in an unfamiliar geographical space, and how I went about reading the spaces in which I walked.

Narrative structures, as they organize the world through words and action, are always “spatial trajectories” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 115). As de Certeau remarks, *space* is “like the word when it is spoken...caught in the ambiguity of actualization,” and whose very existence is inaugurated “by the ensemble of movements deployed within it” (ibid.). In this sense, while *place* is a ‘proper’ and founded relation through which we can situate ourselves in conditions generally recognized as legitimate, *space* is a shared and communal concept whose margins (or lack thereof), in acts of imaginative re-creation, are always involved in a creative process of flux and deliberation. For de Certeau, the act of reading is already understood as inhabiting a space that is not where one is (what he calls a “deterritorialization”), and it is through this that the question is proffered of ‘who’ is reading, since the ‘I’ who reads is less the all-encompassing ‘I’ at the core of one’s existence than an erratic and fluid uncertainty. In this, he also positions reading as an act of appropriation, and where “everyday life invents itself by poaching...on the property of others” (p. xii). Reading a landscape can then be understood as an act of clandestine labour, where meaning is accomplished through a hidden struggle of inventiveness and translation, as readers engage the possibilities of place through acts of dispersion and association, themselves motivated by a series of secret desires. I think back to my time in St. John’s, when I first noticed how each manhole cover held the inscription *Silent Knight*, and I found this a beautifully poetic image, as it also whispered some notion of myself as an introverted interloper, scurrying through these streets I did not know. Acts of poaching are like the insensible plodding of footsteps—they come to pass whether or not we think about them, yet they’re always involved in the string of a reader’s and a researcher’s decisions, where the choices made determine where they go and what they poach, and as Greene (1995) writes, “to be personally present to what they see and hear and read” (p. 104).

Newfoundland, as an island in the Atlantic Ocean, with its gusts of seaborne air and its grammar of land and sea, brings to its residents and visitors all sorts of psychic tension, enabling particular modes of consciousness. Despite its significance both geographically and historically, it is frequently located neither fully within nor fully without popular representations of Canada and its history as a burgeoning nation-state. As an isolated urban centre, such tension is also evident in the city of St. John’s. Some questions that I use as a guiding framework, and which Chambers (2006) regards as essential when examining “the topography of Canadian curriculum theory” (p. 30), are: “What is the significance of this landscape and what can it teach us? What is the curriculum of these places? What knowledge is held in there and here, and what if any is still accessible to us, and what is gone? What are our responsibilities to these sites? What can these places teach us, not just about the past, but about now and two days from now?” (p. 35).

In regards to “spaces of language” (Crang & Thrift, 2000, p. 6), what is most significant is how space, and its myriad distributive possibilities, constitutes itself in our thoughts, and thus, in our uses of language, which transform these thoughts into tangible constructs of meaning. As the restless constitution of individual subjectivity emerges in part as a “textualization of the self” (p. 8), I understand the boundaries of our subjectivities not so much as restricted margins, but as permeable frontiers, allowing for a partnered and relational process of self-sculpting with the textures of our surrounding world.

Through asserting the primacy of context in the transformative potential of words, Ashcroft (2001) establishes language “as a tool which has meaning according to the way in which it is used” (p. 57), and not as a de facto generative principle. Working with the dialogic manner through which meaning is constituted in and communicated through textual engagement, Ashcroft positions the written text as a “social situation” (p. 59), and the meanings which emerge in discursive interaction as socially “situated accomplishment(s)” (p. 60). As writing functions to give language a scriptural and spatial permanence, what becomes central in the meaning-making of language is the communicative “site,” and the distances and distancing which arise between the text’s persistent material integrity, and the participants’ overwhelming instability towards the categories of absence and presence. For Ashcroft, this distancing implies the creation and reinforcement of a dialectically generative site, whose meaning is engendered through words and is “inextricably tied to the discourse of place” (p. 67). Instead of words referring definitively to a reflection of the external world, they gain their sense of reference in relation to their situation, which is shared, and thus in no way remains exclusively accessible. This being said, how I speak of where I am refers to the specific, though fleeting, disposition of who I am in relation to when and where I am.

As I walk, then, the centres of my readings shift. From here to there, from me to you, from this to that, from past to present to projected movements of subjectivity. Sumara (2002) points to such hermeneutic tension in saying, “Every moment is two moments. Each speech act, each event (whether noticed or not) is the confluence of history and memory” (p. 76). Though such a centre in reading is always shifting, it is because of our unpredictably erratic movements, sometimes a thrashing and other times a lulling, that “reading has no place” (de Certeau, p. 174), and that place itself is a multi-perspectival concept capable of inspiring countless readings.

However, far from implying a space of emptiness where nothing develops, this lack works through a discursive tension of unfounded place, and as a generative space for innovative tactics in reading. Within my work, and as an innovative tactic of a different sort, I intersperse my findings with a number of poetic performances. Within academic writing itself, I look at the presence of poetry with an awareness that poetic perspectives are always already split at their core, and as the reader peers into the fog and poaches, making choices (some deliberate, some not) out of silhouettes and outlines, poetry encourages and plays out this fracture. More than simply a poststructural application of intertextual delivery (though it fulfils this function as well, stripping the text of its centre and stability), and while the poetry sometimes holds an oblique relation to the text by which it is surrounded, I also intend this relation to function as interruption, in the way that Bertolt Brecht conceives of music in his theatre, wherein, “when the actor is to sing, he interrupts the action of the play, steps forward and delivers song...The music too has its independence. It acts not as mere accompaniment, but as commentary, and brings its own *gestus*” (Ewen, 1992, p. 229). This poetic *gestus*, then, brings out the qualitative notions of research in a moving and dynamic way between text and reader, a relationship that encourages different ways of seeing and responding, and moves along with the reader as well.

In regards to the hostilities that might emerge from indwelling between what Aoki (2005) calls “the worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived experiences” (p. 159), he determines that to be alive in the world is to already live in tension (p. 162).

Through engaging the challenges and difficulties that inhere within this hybrid zone, it is, for him, “not so much a matter of overcoming the tensionality but dwelling aright within it” (p. 163).

Likewise, Ng-A-Fook (2006) remarks, “How does one learn-to-live within the aporias—a language of undecidability—of such hyphenated third space” (p. 7), or as Palulis and Low (2006) declare of such a flooding: a “languaging in the space of an interval” (p. 50). Ng-A-Fook’s method of autobiographical writing “supports a curriculum-lived-as-migrancy, one in continual transit, of departing, returning, thinking back and writing forward” (2005, p. 55). In speaking and writing, away from and towards oneself, he observes how “the universal landscape of language” itself functions as a conduit for indwelling, and what he names an “invisible prosthesis for moving between the shifting terrain of self and other” (2006, p. 10).

I remember walking down the street where I stayed while in St. John’s, arriving at the corner of Patrick and Power. Of a sudden, my thoughts turned to the name of J.F. Powers, American storyteller, and his stories of men of the cloth. As these thoughts tumbled around my head, mixed in with the idea of reading as an act of production, a movement of consumption, I noticed the number of steeples that flanked a couple blocks of Patrick St.: Wesley United, St. Patrick’s and others. Almost instinctively, I began reciting this poem, whose rhythms to this day I cannot escape:

On the corner of Patrick and Power
My mind it rests on J.F. Powers
And his stories of frocks and men that walk
On the pages that words devour.

There’s an energy in such impulsive expression, as it represents a striving to convey through language a desire that is barely articulable and slightly nonsensical. Our affective relations with texts, as Ibrahim (2004) notes, can in large part “only be accessed in and through the performed, that which can not be fully captured through language” (p. 113). And of course, I here employ a broad understanding of textual forms, what Willis (1990) calls “the very material of our daily lives, the bricks and mortar of our commonplace understandings... what we wear, hear, watch and eat” (p. 13). From books, magazines and films, to the experiences encountered in everyday lived social relations, including the practices of a shared reading community, the intersection of street signs, and the shorelines of a raging ocean.

For my understandings of desire, I look to Felman (2007, p. 99), who situates it as a constant striving for satisfaction in a void, worked through the applications and patterns of language use. Desire is also what motivates our textual endeavours, and as she writes, “the arbitrariness of the sign necessitates its *reading*” as a “constant temptation to fill in the void of desire” (ibid.). In this relationship of an enunciatory space, Robertson (2002) describes how “language is the elaboration of desire,” and that a “taking up of story holds out one way in which to learn how to talk about desire and thereby seek to make sense of it” (p. 199).

Language thus stands at a point of alienation, and at a vector of enunciation forever directed at greater satisfaction. Since, as Robertson reminds us, “meaning antedates the use of words in context” (Robertson, 1999, p. 167), the control I possess

over constructions of meaning is always mediated through symbolic conditions that predate my own enunciatory existence. From this understanding, Felman's characterization of desire also functions to incorporate a corporeal (derailing of) meaning into our discursive patterns of "nonsemantic excess," in what Butler (2007) refers to as "the pulsional character of desire in language, the insistence of the body as it both motivates and derails the workings of speech" (p. 150).

For myself, the methodologies of qualitative research that I employ are at their core a mode of address towards my project, and a way of thinking about my own shifting subjectivities. Following Rienharz (1997), I proceed with an understanding that we not only "*bring* the self to the field...[we also] *create* the self in the field" (p. 3). As another tactic of reading, instead of referring to the material culled from interviews, journals, transcriptions, etc, simply as *data*, I instead choose to refer to it all as *figurata* (or figurative-data). Most importantly, *data* (often conceived as a contained entity) refers to the Latin *datum*, which means "something given," and usually as something *that is what it is*, while I instead prefer to look at what I've assembled in a deeply metaphorical nature, whose meaning fluctuates, and whose shape depends more on context and the politics of representation than on the so-called immutable laws of nature. The meanings of *figurata* thus emerge through always-problematized acts of poaching on my own part, and with reference to what Derrida (2002), in *Echographies of Television*, calls attention to, remarking that:

What I call "exappropriation" is this double movement in which I head toward meaning while trying to appropriate it, but while knowing at the same time that it remains—and while desiring, whether I realize it or not, that it remain—foreign, transcendent, other, that it stay where there is alterity. If I could reappropriate meaning totally, exhaustively, and without remainder, there would be no meaning. (p. 111)

To differentiate between 'methods' and 'methodology' involves a conceptual distinction between the tools of inquiry on the one hand, and the principles that underlie how such tools are employed and interpreted on the other. The former involves the collection of *figurata*, while the latter refers to the theoretical analysis that determines how I look at what I have *witnessed*, which Robertson & McConaghy (2006) note, "addresses us as a voice we cannot fully know, but to which we must bear witness, commanding us to awaken to something that 'burns' at our edges" (p. 4). In this sense, the *witnessing* extends far beyond the actual event, and was born before its breath.

I here use the term *witness* through conditions illustrated by Boler (1999), who encourages learners and teachers alike not to be passive bystanders of the lives of "others," both fictional and otherwise, but instead to labour as *witnesses*, engaged in a "process in which we do not have the luxury of seeing a static truth or fixed certainty" (p. 186). The dynamics of witnessing imply an "invitation to question," and an inclination towards interrogating our "historical responsibilities and co-implication" in the pressures faced by those groups and individuals set apart from the dominant culture(s). To *bear witness* thus implies a type of "double-bind," even if it emerges only from the rhetorics of the situation, wherein, for Derrida (2002), "to be a witness consists in seeing, in hearing, etc., but to *bear* witness is always to speak, to engage in and uphold, to sign a discourse" (p. 94).

I also use this term as a tactical substitute for the words *explore* and *discover*. Because of the oppressive and exploitative history of exploration, colonization, resettlement, and ‘discovery’ in Newfoundland and Labrador, experienced by both the Native inhabitants of the land as well as settlers descendent from European cultures, I attempt a critical and judicious stance in the language I use towards the persistence of such misery, which in some places continues to this day. Instead of distancing myself, I move myself closer, at least in terms of a linguistic topography. I realize that such tactics in no way erase my complicity, or the privileges I have been afforded (nor are they directed towards such ends), but instead admit an awareness of the tangible, and hardly innocent, collusion of everyday textual objects, and the layers of history, place and people, which seep through linguistic deposits.

The point I am making here corresponds to Butler’s (2003), concerning the fact that we never write alone, and the impossibility of ever providing a coherent “account of oneself,” which is “never fully mine, and never fully for me” (p. 27).

Speaking of this impenetrability, Butler writes:

The norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not precisely mine. They are not born with me; the temporality of their emergence does not coincide with the temporality of my own life. So in living my life as a recognizable being, I live a vector of temporalities. (p. 26)

And at the point where accounts take off:

My narrative begins in *media res*, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story in language possible. And it means that my story always arrives late. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, even as I produce myself differently in the very act of telling. (p. 29)

In the reconstruction that is educational research, I too write with others, in the seeps, folds, and layers of witnessing. And at times, the thumping in the floorboards makes a brutal and persistent noise.

While in Newfoundland I kept a journal of my thoughts and impressions, through which I hoped to maintain a stance of reflexivity towards the research process as a whole. As many of our textual relations are set about through the avenues of emotion and corporeal attachment, I admit to an affinity with Warhol (2003) when she asks, “How does reading feel?” (p. ix). Since the effects of such feelings, physical and otherwise, are not only the result of abstract connections on an affective plane, but are also determined by what Flint calls “formal aspects of cultural expression in stimulating readerly responses” (p. 530), the production of meaning through reading is always a mediated and negotiated enterprise, and thus, the significance of the textual structure is itself an important dynamic within the reading and research experience. At times, the encounter with aesthetic form, or the confusions surrounding a confrontation with shifting borders of genre and geography, can also affect a breakdown in the traditional correspondences of meaning and subjectivity, further positioning the reader as an always-already fractured self.

On my second day in St. John’s, I spend an hour or so strolling at Mundy Pond with my dog. My roommate laughs when I tell her of my absorption in the place, and that my being “smitten with Mundy Pond” is not something she would have expected, as she always thought of it as a “sketchy place” to which she wouldn’t give a second thought. Compared with her learned and historied knowledge, I move with the exuberance and

solitary trail of a young child, who Tuan (1977) refers to as “so imaginative in their own spheres of action, [that they] may look matter-of-factly on places that to adults are haunted by memories” (p. 33). I have no history of this knowledge or its place as one of the many “names that stalk” (Chambers, 2006, p. 32), and so for me it is simply a body of water with a peaceful nature, lacking a prior history or a preconceived historical narrative. An awareness of this lack, while in many ways unavoidable, is an important tactic for subverting a researcher’s tendencies towards a conclusive *understanding*. Having snapped my photos with a regard only for the present, I became one who Chambers describes as “ignorant of the past and of the significance of these places, seeking a memento of what they had discovered” (p. 33). It is only now, as I write these words, that I recognize how close I was to “the challenge of the curriculum of place” (p. 30).

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