

*Tangled Lines:
The Art of Researching Our Lives*

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A response to “Hermeneutic Musings on Learning:
The Dialogical Nature of Teaching Interpretively”

*I want a scholarship that fosters connections, opens spaces
for dialogue, heals.* (Pelias, 2004, p. 2)

I commend and celebrate the authors of “Hermeneutic Musings on Learning: The Dialogical Nature of Teaching Interpretively” for a paper that engages the reader’s imagination, heart, mind, spirit, and body. While I paid close attention to the words on the page, and to the arguments, proposals, and strategies of the authors, I was also motivated to make many connections to my own practices of pedagogy and writing. This essay – personal, pedagogical, narrative, ruminative, hermeneutic – has a rich potential for fostering lively dialogue. I especially commend Linda L. Binding, Nancy J. Moules, Dianne M. Tapp, and Lillian Rallison for their enthusiastic commitment to celebration, and in the spirit of celebration I offer the following ruminations as dialogical, even ecological, connections that might run rhizomatically hither and thither.

The paper is especially inviting in the ways that the authors ask many questions, and their proposed answers vibrate with a keen tentativeness, a tensile resonance even. Moreover, instead of composing a seamless text that renders invisible the edges and ruptures in their different texts, the authors present their writing as full of seams that hold together and connect their reflections and possibilities for understanding. The dialogical nature of teaching and learning is well-represented in the organization of the paper, as well as in the narration of the educational experiences. My favorite sentence in the essay is: “We lived as though in the first telling of the story.” The authors have a keen understanding of how story works to compose our lived and living understandings, even sometimes both by infusing and refusing simple locations for writing “The End.” This essay evokes the present, ongoing

experience of experience, even while seeking to interpret, to stand in the midst of the experience. This is the heart of hermeneutic inquiry.

Linda L. Binding, Nancy J. Moules, Dianne M. Tapp, and Lillian Rallison challenge practices, attitudes, and views that are too seldom questioned, and in their challenges, they open up possibilities for revitalizing the place of the personal and the heart in our academic work. This essay is significantly about listening to people, attending to their stories and experiences, acknowledging their creative, pedagogical, and humane energy. I thoroughly enjoyed the use of hermeneutics to explore how hermeneutics and the spirit of Hermes permeated and enlivened the course experience. The experience of the course was full of mystery, and the authors evoke the sense of that mystery, even as they seek to reveal some of the dynamics that contributed to their enthusiastic stories of transformative teaching and learning.

The word *enthusiasm* means *inspired by a god*. We live in a world that is afraid of gods and goddesses, of wonder and mystery, of the heart and spirit. In the ancient world there were nine Muses with delightful names like Calliope, Erato, Melpomene, Thalia, Polyhymnia, and Urania. They were all goddesses who inspired with enthusiasm the musicians, dancers, orators, story-tellers, actors, and poets of their time. Our research needs the Muses. I live in the world as a poet. The word *poetry* is derived from the Greek *poiein*, *to make*. As a researcher I am a poet or maker. I do not stand outside experience in order to observe experience like a video camera recording an objective reality. I do not seek to denigrate the ideas of others in order to stake a claim about the superiority of my ideas. I am not involved in a military operation with the goal of vanquishing and conquering. I am not committed to a fundamentalist zeal for maintaining the status quo or convention. Instead I seek to live attentively in the moment, and to know the momentousness of each moment. I seek to enter lived experiences with a creative openness to people and experiences and understandings. Above all, I seek to make a story in collaborative dialogue with others, always aware that the story is one of many stories, one of many versions of the story.

Linda L. Binding, Nancy J. Moules, Dianne M. Tapp, and Lillian Rallison remind me that we are awash in stories. We live stories all the time. We attend to the stories of others. We linger in the stories of dreams, imagination, fantasy, and memory. We hear stories from friends and strangers; we view stories on TV; we understand the past in terms of stories, just as we seek to understand the future in stories. We explain

our actions in stories, and we tell the same stories over and over at family gatherings. Our spiritual beliefs, our sense of national identities, our accounts of emotional and psychological needs and desires are all woven through and through with stories. But, in spite of the pervasive prevalence of stories in our lives, most of us have great difficulty telling our stories. Most of us have little confidence about our abilities as storytellers. Where does this lack of confidence come from? One of the main sources behind a lack of confidence in telling our stories derives from our school experiences with composing stories.

I often recall how I was taught in school that good stories needed many elements. The process of making a story was taught as a process much like baking a cake. The good story-writer apparently mixed various elements together in a way that resembled the stories in class anthologies. I spent a lot of time in school trying to imitate the kinds of stories that I read or watched on TV. So, I wrote stories with convoluted plots, and lots of suspense like spices, and strong emotions, and fast action, and hair-raising adventures. I never wrote about my daily life, never wrote about the events, experiences, and emotions of growing up in a working-class neighbourhood in a working-class town. I never wrote about anything or anybody that was personally meaningful. As far as I was concerned, the ordinary stories of my family and neighbourhood experiences, lived daily, lived year after year, were not appropriate or legitimate or sufficient for writing stories in school.

Now, as a poet I seek to acknowledge the stories in even the mundane events of our lives, to invest significance in our stories by attending artfully to how the stories are composed. Just as an artist represents a still image of the ocean rolling onto a beach, the writer holds a moment, or part of a moment, in order to draw attention to it. In this way the artist and the writer present to us images that are emblematic of the billions of moments that are given little attention. Of course, it is impossible to present every moment of living experience since it takes a long time to represent even a moment. The poet lingers with words; the photographer lingers with light and chemicals and pixels; the artist plans and dreams and seeks the lines and hues. Like the ocean that ebbs and flows, minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, year after year, century after century, millennium after millennium, lived and living experience is a flow, a process, with beginnings long lost and conclusions mysteriously hidden. Life is abundant, and stories and interpretive inquiry are a way of focusing on some particulars of that abundance in order to recognize

some of the possibilities of meaning that lie always in the seemingly tangled messiness of lived experiences.

What writers, story-tellers, and artists of all kinds attempt to do is frame fragments of experience in order to remind us that there is significance in the moment, in the particular, in the mundane. But that significance is expressed in stories that are told and written in engaging and evocative and energetic ways. I am not interested in hearing what a friend ate for breakfast unless the story is told in a way that is full of interest. We all know acquaintances who are boring. Why are they boring? Perhaps because they have told their stories, the same stories in the same ways, many times already, or perhaps because they tell the stories with no interest in hearing others' stories, without any commitment to dialogue and reciprocity, or perhaps because they have no awareness of their audience and tell the stories only because they fear silence. For stories to be creatively effective, they need to be shaped generatively and offered generously. The real purpose of telling our stories is to tell them in ways that open up new possibilities for understanding and wisdom and transformation. So, our stories need to be told in creative ways that hold our attention, that call out to us, that startle us, so we know our stories and the stories of others with renewed attentiveness. This is the heart of story-sharing and interpretive inquiry.

If we think about the prefix *re* in researcher, we understand that our questing and questioning are always a returning, a turning again. This is a ruminative process. In my experience, the research process is an experience of lingering with memory and emotion and heart and story, a process of leaning on language in order to seek understanding and wisdom, a process of attending sensually and sensitively to life. The research process is a verb, a journey, a flow. Like life, like living. But too many researchers are looking for answers, and often researchers shape their research goals in ways that can be answered with a sense of resounding conclusion. I prefer to live in/conclusively. Perhaps the questions frequently asked aren't really worth answering! My main concern is that too many researchers have constructed the world as objective and rational and logical, available for naming and claiming and consuming and controlling. Where is the acknowledgment of mystery, wonder, and spirituality?

The authors of "Hermeneutic Musings on Learning: The Dialogical Nature of Teaching Interpretively" represent compellingly how in writing our stories about experience we can never contain the multiplicity of possible interpretations. Instead, we offer our

representations, and invite readers to make sense out of our stories. Instead of trying to close down understanding, we ought to focus on opening up possibilities for wide-ranging connections, questions, and insights. So, I will begin drawing these ruminations to a penultimate tentative and temporary close with some questions that resonate with the courageous and creative questing of Linda L. Binding, Nancy J. Moules, Dianne M. Tapp, and Lillian Rallison:

1. How do stories relate to the person, the personal, the personality? Who is the person in a personal story?
2. How are stories constructed? constrained? construed? What rhetorical strategies and codes are used? What are the generic conventions of stories? How are stories shaped by convention(s)? How can stories be reconceptualized through contravention(s)?
3. What is the relationship between the private and the public in story? Between the subjective and the objective? Between the personal and the political?
4. Is a story always partial? Always riddled with holes (and hopes) and gaps?
5. How does the educator affirm as well as interrogate the stories of others?
6. What is the relationship between story and experience? Reality? Experienced reality?
7. Is story a process? Method? Product?
8. In story is the emphasis on inner life or external life? What is the difference?
9. In story does the "I" always control? Where does the "I" come from? Who controls the "I"?
10. What is the power of a story to move readers?
11. How fair, just, valuable is it to ask students to write personally? What are the ethical and political ramifications of story?
12. How does a story differ when it is written by a participant or an observer or a researcher? How is a first person story different from a third person story?
13. How does story mythologize, demythologize, and remythologize experiences?
14. How does story relate to desire? How does story relate to the desire for a beginning, a ground, a presence, an ending?

15. How does a story relate to a reader's responses? In other words, how does a story invite or constrain or nurture or construe or construct a reader's responses and counter-stories?
16. How is a story connected to a discourse community?
17. In what ways can stories be subversive, transgressive, critical, radical, deconstructive, anarchic, interruptive, disturbing?
18. What are the generic conventions and expectations and boundaries of the story form?
19. How is the particularity and specificity of a story related to the generalizability and universality and multiplicity of human lived experience?
20. Is my story also your story?
21. How does a story relate to transcendence, immanence, manifestation, revelation, eschatology, contingency, radiance?
22. What is the power, the pull, the magnetism, the dynamism of story?
23. How does story relate to self, self-awareness, self-realization, self-actualization, self-narration, selfishness, self-centeredness, self-understanding, self-knowing, self-knowledge, self-consciousness, self-determination, self-familiarity, self-construction, self-conceptualization, self-contradiction, self-generation, self-representation?
24. How do stories relate to communities, intertextuality, collective experience, social interaction, and intersubjectivity?
26. What are the rhetorical strategies of an effective story?
27. How can stories include and re/present and interrogate the plural and powerful dynamics of social construction like gender, race, class, ethnicity, color, size, age, religion?
29. How does researching stories relate to suppression? oppression? subjugation? Silence?
30. What are the ethics of researching stories?
31. What are the questions that need to be asked about researching stories of teaching and learning?

And now, I draw these reflective ruminations to an ultimate (still temporary and tentative) close with a poem that began in the coulees of the Oldman River in Lethbridge, Alberta, and continued on the shores of the Fraser River flowing into the Pacific Ocean near Steveston, British Columbia, where I live with keen memories of the Humber River flowing into the Humber Arm which connects my home town of Corner Brook,

Newfoundland with the North Atlantic Ocean – everything connected, always, all ways, if only we are brave enough, enthusiastic enough to acknowledge, to know the connections, to learn to celebrate together our togetherness.

COULEES

not much flows in these coulees
except the cool dry wind
persistently claims ownership
refuses an easy hospitality

shrubs cacti grass
cling to the coulees
like a brush cut
that can't hide the scalp

the sky is a concave ocean
pulled toward the centre
of the universe always moving

prairie grass, sage and wild rye:
no sage would try to name
all the things that grow in these coulees

a coyote writes lines in the wind,
reminds me I cannot
both see and write, and still
I write in order to see

like a gopher, a poet digs
an intricate map
of subterranean lines
with holes for popping up

I see the shadows of birds
but I cannot see the birds

the sun soothes with the wind
woos me into sleep
leaves me woozy even

I dwell in the coulee that does not flow,
this dry, arid coulee where cacti flame

I wait for the coyote
I write nothing

perhaps writing will come
in February when I am far away

flowing with the lines of sun
and trails and gopher hollows
and the roots of cacti

succulents can find water
where there is none,
suck the dry earth
like an orange sucks my dry mouth

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Press, Vancouver). A collection of essays titled *Being with A/r/tography* (co-edited with Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, and Peter Gouzouasis) will soon be published by Sense Publishers. Among his current research projects, he is investigating the possibilities of poetry for fostering “poetic living.”

BOOK REVIEWS

Bush, M. (2004). *Breaking the Code of Good Intentions: Everyday Forms of Whiteness*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 302 pp.

Melanie E.L. Bush offers a compelling and controversial picture of student and staff attitudes, perceptions, and misconceptions of race and whiteness in America. At the largest urban university in America with over 200,000 students, Bush engaged over 600 participants in a mixed method study employing survey, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. This book demonstrates the connection between mainstream thoughts/perceptions based on race, structural inequities, and justification for the status quo. According to the author, evidence from this study demonstrates that public discourse and critical discussions of race and race relations improve our understanding and actions toward human rights and equity.

In my view, this book is an important read for any public servant, but especially those in education, law enforcement, health care, and government. While the text clearly engages those interested in equity, social justice, and race relations, it is also an example of a well crafted mixed methodological study and can be helpful to graduate students and others interested in research design and methodology.

Throughout a series of chapters exploring the status quo, racial classification, Americanism and patriotism, poverty, discrimination, and privilege, readers gain a clear picture of the current attitudes and understandings of race at the Brooklyn College CUNY campus, but also across America. Bush frequently supports her finding with similar race-based research conducted by other noted scholars in the field, the *Washington Post*, and the *National Opinion Research Centre*, thereby enhancing the validity and broadening the scope of her findings.

Several clear findings emerge from this research. First, whites frequently believe that equality has been achieved or that opportunities are so extensive that grievances about racism are now unjustified (p. 236). Second, whites can find discussing racism and whiteness uncomfortable, dangerous, or somewhat unnecessary, but when engaged in this research they felt appreciative of the learning experience, and wanted a place where they would not be attacked for their ignorance or beliefs (p. 242). Finally, education and critical discussions of race play an

important role in exposing race mythologies and fostering an equitable multicultural and multi-racial society.

The focus groups and interviews also revealed some eye-opening experiences for whites especially when the participants identified contradictions in pan-ethnicity, meritocracies, color-blindness, and explanations for the status quo. Bush refers to these opportunities and noted incongruence between theory and reality as "*cracks in the wall of whiteness*" – an opportunity for education to shift dominant narratives and corresponding imagery (p. 220). This is perhaps the book's greatest contribution to the field, namely, the demonstrated opportunities for powerful cognitive development and enabling a sense of social responsibility and agency.

Bush exposes several race mythologies and engages the reader with frightening statistics of racist attitudes, which serves to educate both the reader and participants, and also illuminates the necessity of doing so. However, as in most statistical research, she runs the risk of over-emphasizing the generalizability of findings and, in this particular study, she also comes dangerously close to stereotyping culture, language, ethnicity, and gender within the categories of race she defines, including the following: United States born white, foreign born white, United States born black, foreign born black, Asian, and Latino. Inevitably, greater emphasis is placed on white identity as it is the dominant paradigm and is placed under the microscope for this study. Another limitation of her research is in her sole analysis of the American context. It would be useful to extend her study into other national settings for some comparative global data; as an example, Canadian statistics and research on whiteness, racism, and multiculturalism corroborates much of Bush's key findings and can be explored through the works of Carr and Lund (in press) and Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, and Campbell (2005).

Bush's work is timely and relevant as racism in the 21st century has taken on more subtle social and institutional manifestations. As an educator, Bush takes the tone of an informant, creates a safe place for discussion, and demonstrates the success and importance of reshaping public discourse for improved human rights and ethnic relations. On the whole, I would highly recommend this text for any student, scholar, or community activist with an interest in the salient issues of race, whiteness, and social justice.

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McWalters, G. & Sheldon, W. (2005). *The Canadian Student Financial Survival Guide: A Comprehensive Handbook on Financing Your Education, Managing Your Expenses, and Planning for a Debt-Free Future*. Toronto: Insomniac Press.

This is a fully comprehensive book aimed at high school students who are planning for post-secondary education. It is written to be widely accessible and is organized around relevant chapters that include planning, budgeting, paying for education, accommodation, day-to-day choices, credit, getting a job, and financial planning. The appendices and figures also contain useful information.

The title is catchy and draws the student reader to pick up the book. Inside, there is good common sense information on accommodation, making lifestyle choices, budgeting, and credit. It includes an entire chapter on student loans, but very little information concerning specific scholarship sources or other sources of educational funding which is disappointing. Registered Education Savings Plans, loans, and the option of part-time work are mentioned and discussed with enough detail to help students weigh their alternatives.

Even for the high school audience, the book strikes one as common sense, particularly when it comes to the life skills advice it offers. The financial information is readable, thorough, and useful for students embarking on their post-secondary preparations. Readers will not likely find fascinating new revelations, but it is a readable, practical introductory financial guide.

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