

“May We Get Us a Heart of Wisdom”: Life Writing Across Knowledge Traditions

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(Special Issue Editors)

Opening

As educators and researchers in faculties of education at five Canadian universities, we are committed to life writing research that seeks to understand what it means to be human in the contemporary world, to act responsibly and to live dialogically in the world.¹ We are motivated by the belief that “the inner beauty of each and every human being is...at the heart of all true education and at the heart of being human” (Vanier, 1998, p. 23). Drawing from literary, poetic, artistic, Indigenous, feminist spiritual, and other related epistemological and wisdom traditions, we advocate auto/biographical, life writing inquiry as a way to reach into the *heart of wisdom* (Richardson, 1994). We seek to integrate through life writing inner and outer knowledge to cultivate a reciprocal wisdom and worldliness that enables life and the young to go on (Arendt, 1958). Cultivating wisdom expands notions of knowledge beyond instrumental, logo-centric objectifications of such. We write and live towards ontological and epistemological positions of being in the world truthfully, ethically, mindfully, and compassionately (Spretnak, 1991). David G. Smith writes that in the Taoist tradition,

there is indeed a Way of Life that leads to Wisdom. It is very difficult to discern and requires great discipline of heart and mind, or heart-mind....The practice of the Way—and here the key word is practice, as one never quite reaches the goal completely, finally—leads to an awareness of how the smallest details of life play into the largest consequences of effects, and that it is therefore highly important to maintain vigilance over the details of one’s conduct, because how we got to here, today, depends on what happened yesterday.... (Smith, 2008, p. 3)

Life writing, as a practice and “a Way” to pay attention to one’s conduct, attends to the details and moments of lived and local experiences of educators and students; it provides “a means of reflecting with a view towards action” (Tompkins, 1998, p. 129). We agree with Susan Griffin that identity is “less an assertion of independence than an experience of interdependence” (1995, p. 91) and, therefore, “for each of us, as for every community, village, tribe, nation, the story we tell ourselves is crucial to who we are, who we are becoming” (p. 152). As part of interpretive research traditions, life writing and life histories are situated within a hermeneutical circle, opening up “unending dialogues” (Gadamer, 1985) that circulate between the text, author, reader, and the world. In this way, life writing seeks to understand the wisdom that resides in an auto/biographical text. It is suited to the cultivation of what is always and already a “worldly”



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and embodied praxis, situated in specific texts and places—landscapes (urban, rural, and other), classrooms, homes, exiles, etc. When writing our lived and living stories (Kadar, Warley, Perreault, & Egan, 2005), we acknowledge multiple identities and the ways that these identities are constructed and shaped in language, race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, and other social and political descriptors, as well as in old and new knowledge traditions, ideologies, and ontologies (Lionnet, 1989). As Kelly (1997) explains:

A notion of autobiography as readings of selves positioned within a larger textuality insists that this larger textuality be interrogated for ways in which we read and are (culturally) read to, for the ways in which we have learned to look and the ways in which we are looked at. (pp. 65-66)

In our life writing, we are committed to promoting emancipatory projects of learning and teaching by attending to the ways that life writing constantly explores, contests, and negotiates the imaginative possibilities of knowing and being in the world. Life writing is always both personal and public; there is no separating the personal from the public. According to Deleuze & Parnet (1986), the aim of writing is life, and to achieve a non-personal power that moves beyond empowering an individual self. This applies to a concept of wisdom which involves ethical and sound judgement and just actions for the common good based on (life) experiences (Bauman, 1993; Habermas, 1990). Wisdom, particularly in Indigenous epistemologies, has an intimate relationship with place and requires a situated knowledge of one’s surroundings and relationship with them (Basso, 1996; Jardine, 1998; McLeod, 1998). Like Seamus Heaney (1995), “[We] wish...to suggest that images and stories of the kind [we are] invoking here do function as bearers of value” (p. 22) and may indeed get us *a heart of wisdom* and contribute to significant matters of educational quality through mindful curriculum inquiry.

In our collaborative writing and research, we aim to create and model a sense of a commons that is indicative of the kind of literacy and curriculum that we believe teachers and students need to be proficient in so they can live well with each other in the classrooms and the communities they dwell in. This commons is characterized by a sustained loving attention to each others’ stories in relation to the histories and mythologies of the places each of us lives in. We use *métissage* both as a research approach and a literary praxis that invites writers to braid strands of their own writing with that of others. *Métissage*, as we have come to define it in a Canadian context, is a mixing and a *rapprochement* of differences: race, culture, class, gender, geography, and language (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Donald, Hurren, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008). Originally, cultural and literary studies scholars and writers such as Françoise Lionnet (1989) and Édouard Glissant (2007) used the concept in the Caribbean Creole geo-cultural and linguistic context to work with ideas of mixed identities, languages, and notions of space and place. In our own work across Canadian scholarly and literary landscapes, the sign and signifier of Métis are particularly appropriate considering Canada’s historical and colonial context, which involves and indicates the mixing of Indigenous and French or other European racial identities (Saul, 2008).

The word origin of *métissage* comes from the Latin *mixticius*, meaning the weaving of a cloth from different fibres (Mish, 1990). In Greek mythology Metis was an ancient Titaness, the primordial figure of wisdom, descended from Gaia and Uranus. She was eventually married and swallowed by Zeus (Graves, 1955/1980). Metis was also a figure of skill and craft, and of cunning, a trickster with powers of transformation who resisted notions of purity by weaving and blurring textiles (Harper, 2001). *Métissage*, derived from these origins, is thus an artful craft and

practice, an active literary and pedagogical strategy for negotiating conflicting or dichotomous value systems, a political praxis that might also uncover the swallowed wisdom of lost or forgotten origins. It is a way through which researchers and writers can reformulate understandings of self and other in ways that are meaningful and appropriate for our times (Lionnet, 1998; 2001). The method of *métissage*, as appropriated in poststructural/postcolonial and curriculum theory as well as pedagogical contexts, encourages genuine exchange, sustained engagement, and the tracing of “mixed and multiple identities” in the “messy threads of relatedness and belonging” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009).

The essays that follow were originally written for a 2009 AERA conference symposium and performed by the authors as an oral and visual *métissage*, with Janet Miller as respondent.ⁱⁱ The content of the individual strands has been adapted and extended into fuller essays for this special issue of *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry*. Similar to the conference symposium, we have shaped the *métissage* here in textual form by introducing and illuminating the themes that have emerged from our life writing praxis. We perform this writing by juxtaposing our stories and our images, emulating the act of weaving them together to become strands of a braid. The stories and images come from different parts of Canada, east and west, and many points in between. They represent different geographies and ecologies. We invite you to read, listen, and look—to braid the strands in your own mind and heart through an embodied engagement with them—and to let the stories seep into your life, resonate with your own living curriculum, and perhaps inform your writing too; for, as Thomas King reminds us, the truth about stories is that that’s all we are (King, 2003).

Notes

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ⁱⁱ “May We Get Us a Heart of Wisdom”: Life Writing Across Knowledge Traditions. Symposium, Documentary and Biographical Research SIG, *Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association*. April 2009, San Diego, CA.

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