

Poetic Inquiry as Visiting: *Stories of Men*

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on how stories can come to inhabit a place in a pedagogical way, as Keith Basso notes, “wisdom sits in places” (1996). In this story, I write about my experiences teaching a college preparation English and math class in rural British Columbia. In the short story entitled *Stories of Men*, I describe the act of witnessing the stories of suffering and hope of men who grew up attending local residential schools, alongside the stories of their sons’ coming of age in the contemporary school system.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; narrative inquiry; storytelling; place-based pedagogy



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This poetic inquiry article was written in response to a visit to our education graduate class¹ by Dr. Yvonne Poitras Pratt in the fall of 2013. She came to do some guest teaching about her doctoral work, *New Media as a Tool of Decolonization: Digital Storytelling* (Poitras Pratt, 2011), and spoke of her research conducted in her birthplace, the Fishing Lake Métis settlement, Alberta. I begin with a reflection on the origins of *Stories of Men* (a poetic narrative I wrote in response to Dr. Poitras Pratt's visit, located in the second half of this paper), along with an exploration of the notion of *visiting* as pedagogy. I, then, inquire into *Stories of Men* as a hopeful act of writing in relation with another, not as a "mopping up activity at the end of a research project" (Richardson, 1994, p. 516), but as an exercise in producing meaning, in *creating* social reality (p. 517), with all of its risks and potential for personal and social transformation.

"Wisdom Sits in [Sacred] Places"

During her visit to our graduate class, Dr. Poitras Pratt described the need for a shift in perspective with regards to Indigenous education. She said, "The focus is now on closing the gap in pedagogy, not in achievement" (Poitras Pratt, personal communication, October 22, 2013). Her visit left me pondering the question: How might educators re-visit pedagogy in a way that respects the "principles of relationality and relational accountability" (Wilson, 2008, p. 6)?

Dr. Cynthia Chambers (2006), a curriculum scholar with Narcisse Blood, a storyteller, scholar and Elder of the Kainai First Nation in Southern Alberta, contrasts the notion of touring with that of visiting, applying her understanding with university students whom she takes to visit Chief Mountain, *ninaiistàko*, in the Rockies, to view the buffalo jumps, sites that are thousands of years old (pp. 33-35). The Online etymology dictionary terms for tour and visit are described as follows:

A **tour**, in early 14th century usage, was "a turn, a shift on duty," from the Latin *tornare*, "to polish, round off, fashion, turn on a lathe" (Online etymology dictionary). Contrast this with the word **visit**, meaning, in early 13th century usage, "come to (a person), to comfort or benefit," from the Latin *visitare*, "to go to see, to come inspect" (Online etymology dictionary).

The word tour for me evokes military images, tourists in resorts, the museums of grand narratives, and research that seeks to define the world using the terms of objectification and universality. A visit makes me want to sit awhile, take care of a place, nourish it, and experience it. The Western Apache say, "[w]isdom sits in places" (Basso, 1996, p. 2). What does it mean to visit a place, to sit in a place, to have a responsibility to that place and to those who inhabit it? What does it mean to compose poetry "as a way to connect with others, seeking always a living ecology in the vast mystery of the earth" (Leggo, 2009, p. 150)? Cynthia Chambers (2006) further reflects on this notion of visiting:

In the North, where I grew up, visiting was the primary social activity; and children learned the stories by listening, and they learned the art of telling those stories and the art of conversing from listening (rather than participating). In the communities where I lived, the people visited places as well as people; and the absence of places and their inhabitants were missed like family. (p. 34)

A place story is of the past but it also lives on in us. It treats time in a different manner, whereby we can be of all times at once. “Place stories connect—to other worlds and other places—and yet they are deeply local and embodied, participating in the materiality of local places” (Somerville, 2012, p. 68). Place stories represent a shift from a scientific, objectified external “environment,” to a conception of place as an embodied locale. Place stories “bridge the local and global, the material and symbolic” (Somerville, 2012, p. 69).

The concepts of “decolonization” and “re-inhabitation” are central tenets of a critical place-conscious education (Gruenwald, 2003, p. 9). Decolonization is defined as a process of identifying and deconstructing the stories and practices through which people and places are exploited and destroyed. Re-inhabitation is described as the process of “identifying, affirming, conserving, and creating those forms of cultural knowledge that nurture and protect people and ecosystems” (p. 9). Dr. Poitras Pratt said to us: “I had to decolonize myself before I could continue in my own education. Use storytelling to guide your own path in lifelong learning” (personal communication, October 22, 2013). She spoke of needing to hear the story behind the story. She spoke of the sacred space of stories, and I was reminded of Wendell Berry (2013), in an interview with Bill Moyers when he said that “there are no sacred and unsacred places, there are only sacred and desecrated places.” In engaging poetic inquiry, “a sensuous-intellectual activity—centering, decoding, reframing, discovering and discursing ourselves in ways that shows us something of what we are, literally, as embodied participants and observers” (Brady, 2009, p. xiii), I seek to creatively and reflectively find my proper, sacred place in this story.

“Getting to Know One Another”: Poetic Inquiry in Hopeful Relations

Dr. Dwayne Donald (2014), Papaschase Cree curriculum studies scholar at the University of Alberta, in his witness address at the Kindling Conversations Symposium on weaving Indigenous perspectives into the Werklund School of Education, reminded us that we need to spend time with each other. He said that educational change comes through the stories that emerge in an intergenerational relationship, and that in being patient with ourselves, we may get to know one another again (personal communication, February 28, 2014). How might these conversations emerge differently, if getting to know one another takes precedence over knowing more than one another? *Stories of Men*, as a way of linking theory and practice without prescribing solutions to the problems that teachers face, “is indeed pedagogical rather than prescriptive” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 6). Following Carl Leggo (2009), I am not trying to be “clear, coherent and comprehensible” (p. 163). Rather, in returning to the etymology of the “Latin *convenire*: to call together[,]... [p]oets call to one another, a chorus of voices, calling out, calling together, seeking readers and writers to join in the co-creation of texts that are alive in the world” (Leggo, 2009, p. 163). This work of poetic inquiry invites teachers and students into “complicated conversations” (Pinar, 2012, p. 47), to blur the lines between theory and practice, to try—impossibly—to “say” the unsayable.

When the fields and boundaries of the unsayable open up to the world, the possibilities and risks expand exponentially. This work of poetic inquiry that is conducive to “playing” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 102) in these fields is an exercise in hopeful meaning making; this comes with the uncomfortable and exciting recognition that the meanings can never be complete, whole, or defining. I notice that “this ‘worded world’ never accurately, precisely, completely captures the studied world, yet we persist in trying” (Richardson, 2001, p. 35). Poetry as a form of writing inquiry is “both a style of representation as well as a vehicle through which the

academic/research community can engage in larger questions about the nature of social research, truth, and knowledge” (Leavy, 2009, p. 84). Since “we often do not know how others who read, listen to, and view our braided narratives will respond” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 7), this piece is in many ways an act of faith (Hendry, 2007, p. 492). In opening myself to the potential risks and ethical obligations of inquiring into my own and others’ lives, this poetic inquiry piece may also create openings through which “transformation through education” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 1) is possible. I open up a place for *hope*.

Dr. Poitras Pratt told us of men and women, noting in her community research that Indigenous women, rising out of the roots of a matriarchal society, are moving “forward,” growing stronger, because they have a lot invested in their communities. She said that “the true power lies with the women even as they wear the face of patriarchy. Men are still caught up in the dysfunction” (personal communication, October 22, 2013). I went home that night and I could not sleep. I had visited a place of men that had asked for my (dis)/comfort, my seeing. I recalled my recent work as a teacher at an Indigenous community college. I could not stop thinking about these notions of pedagogy, sacred places, the power over one’s own story, the women and the men. These threads were fraying, tangling, outplaying me (Gadamer, 2004, p. 106). I finally gave up the battle. I wrote some quick, urgent notes, tossed and turned in frustration, and eventually went to sleep.

...but in my dreams I remembered them, and they wouldn’t let me go.

These men’s sacred place stories called for my retelling. I woke up in the middle of the night and fired up my computer. I was caught up with what I saw in myself, “*in relation to Others*” (Brady, 2009, p. xiv), and their stories demanded a numberless naming, “filled with the rhythms of breathing, the music of life itself, albeit sometimes broken and off-key” (Brady, 2009, p. xv). I started writing, and did not stop. My senses were overwhelmed with their faces, their chortles, their gentle teasing, and their storytellings. Quietly, sidling up to me in the middle of that long, sleepless night, they reminded me that “those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives—the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change—truly are powerless” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 480). The first draft of the piece, *Stories of Men*, was written during that long, sleepless night.

Thomas King (2003) reminds me that, “you can’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (p. 29). We are visitors in each other’s places, times, and lives; I find myself implicated in this research, the stories of curriculum, in the lives of the young, the lives of elders. As a poetic act of catching us “in the act of *being*” (Brady, 2009, p. xv), *Stories of Men* is a visitation that keeps the field open to recursive, creative, and transformative interpretation. Our visitor, Dr. Poitras Pratt, in her musings about storytelling, power, sacred places, and pedagogy, had somehow drawn these stories of men back... to being seen.

Stories of Men

Oh my, these men are raw. Twenty-one of them, eyeing me. Two slight ladies who are sitting, eyes-forward-ridge-backed-tall in their seats. Another woman, she dresses sturdily, and is a helluva second basewoman. She wears a pink ballcap with the word “Bitch” on it. Funny, she ain’t no bitch. That hat scared the heck out of me the first day, but underneath the wisecracking

ballcap, she is more like a gentle, sturdy, chortling young-old mare, just easing her way through life. Yes, I feel it too, ladies, I hear ya. Twenty-one men in a too-small room.

In eight weeks' time, there will be nine left standing. Seven men. Two women.

This community-based English/math crash-course-in-catching-up is for some the only thing standing between them and what they really want to do, which is to work in the mine that is already under construction on their land. The program I am brushing them up for is called "Bridging to Trades," and is sponsored by the local mine trades association. The mine has agreed to hire local band members and to fund courses which will help them qualify for those jobs.

I have been given the challenge of teaching them advanced algebra and essay-writing to prepare them for the plumbing, electrical work, and pipefitting they will be doing next semester.

But guess what people, when you are on an hour and a half drive, when-there's-no-construction from the college, where the grew-up-on-a-rez-down-the-road Director drives up the winding, single-lane gorge-snaking highway from town in his white SUV on the first day, does his rah-rah-go-team! and doesn't glance back on the way out the door back to his Director life (well, don't tell, but), you will never write an essay in an English class for tradespeople. Not even on the final exam. I have other things in mind for you.

I walk by the parked quad—whose is that? *Oh, that's the student who quads it down the mountain from the reserve on the other side of the river, takes the morning ferry across, grinds up from the valley floor, takes about an hour or so, pretty cold trip some days.* I step into the unheated portable. Next week, they say. Funding will get sorted out soon.

Latremouille—what tribe is that? Oh, um, her name was Ma, on my grandfather's side, who was, oh, 1/8th Native, from Little Fort; I don't know if that means much—oh, does it count... I never got my status; I don't look... I don't identify... Nope. Not enough. And the air in the room changes, the gaze shifts warily. I know that will change again. It always does. They don't know me yet. This isn't my first time stumbling through, beyond, the story of who I am not.

This surfer-man loves Tofino. He took a long-ago remember-when trip in a van with some buddies. They surfed all day, smoked a lot of weed—but he shouldn't talk to me about that, should he—oh well man, it was great, right on. He has a baby girl and she is a smart little thing. Already says the alphabet, only two! Her mama, his lady, gives him the gears every night when he gets home, no time for homework, man. He goes to school—works all-night, bleary-eyed exhausted, making-it.

Let's talk about language and community, I say. What are some languages we are a part of? Excluded from? What does a quadratic equation say? What does a story say? What does LMFAO say?

Watch what ya say, teacher-lady, or we will howl-roar you off the rez right back to where you came from, not-here town. We like to drop the f-bomb here. The LMFAO-bomb.

Allrighty, then, gentlemen. We are going to read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2009). And yes, we are going to laugh our fucking asses off. Get this, move in close, I whisper: he says boner. And I will say boner. "Boner!" More than once. In a classroom! And I am going to make you read it right out loud in front of the teacher-lady.

That is, unless you say, “pass.” Because here, well, everyone has the right to “pass.”

Not today, thank you very much. Because I am not feelin' it today. Because guess-what-I-can't-read, and everyone-knows and will ignore me, it, for me. But Mr. Smart-Ass over here will do more than his share of the talking, don't you worry, and don't we just bug the hell out of him about that.

Until teacher-lady shuts that down, right quick. We are allowed to be smart here. Nerds, Geeks, Suck-ups. Packing-briefcase, opening-doors Teacher's pets. Can't-read-Geniuses.

This survivor-man remembers. Face-scarred-burned, broken-teeth survivor. *Seven years old in the Kamloops residential school. We worked hard. We toed the line, sat up straight, ah, worked real hard. And if we didn't...* He looks skyward and his eyes flutter closed as if his eyelids cannot bear the weight of this memory. *I was a basketball player. Real good. Short and skinny, just like the kid in the story. I'm getting ready to tell my story at a hearing. Ah, that's gonna be real hard.*

A coupla young boy-men. A coupla gangstas. Fresh out of high school. *Make that grade eight,* says the black-hoodie-slouched-down-hunched-over-tough-not-tough guy. I want to tie him down in that chair, tell him, this is not that; you are free! Yes, I would. Tie him down to tell him he is free.

You are here. You choose to be.
So please, please, please, choose to be here.
Be present. That is all I ask.

No.

Your deep, smouldering eyes and bulky black headphones answer in advance.
But I still treat you as if I don't already know that.

I beam at you when you arrive two hours late, sulk in and flop down, glossy-eyed,
book closed in front of you,
no pencil,
no homework,
no lunch.

I push, keep pushing, nudging, teasing, smiling, reprimanding. You are welcome here. But we don't do that here. Yes, the two can co-exist. But we can't just co-exist.

I won't chase you when you storm out.
You are an adult, you know. Don't you know?

Blinded by your angry, alienated, schooled, confused discontent.
We have fucked you over.
Eight weeks of more school will not pull apart the dis-from the course-content.

I celebrate your ass in this seat.
I celebrate your homemade, fuzzy, lean-back, basement-hollow angry rap.
I ask to hear more, and you hand over your headphones.
I listen,

in the middle of a mathematics lesson.
You watch me,
waiting for the familiar scowl and faint smell of something sour.
But I don't do that here.

I glimpse the child
in your watching.

I see the man you will be in thirty years
when you realize that you should have stayed here, now.

It's not enough this time.

Maybe we will meet again, but not this time.
You think I still think you are trouble.

You are here but you don't yet know why.
But I think you still think I am the enemy.

And so, not this time.

The women come to me after class. Pull me aside. Skin and bones. Confide, whisper, cry. *Oh, it was bad. It's still bad.* Maybe we can find you a counsellor. Maybe a program. Just listen. It's not enough. They go back, turn their backs, mostly. But we are women, and we sway onwards, bumping up against our own choices, our dishonoured strengths and stolen joys. I get it. Confidential.

The men sit and wait for me to come to them, or they sidle up while I am erasing the whiteboard after class, in the between-times.

I was in the residential school just down the road, ya know.

Stare at me, dare me to wince, to turn a cheek. To break the spell. I never do. I am held hostage. Rooted, silent, frozen, a silent covered-up gasp. This is not my first time. I know the way through. I breathe deep, centre, and prepare to let him wash over me. Sometimes the tears slide off my chin, and I let them do what they will. The men never stop talking when the tears come. But we find a way through.

And thank goodness we can laugh. This uncle-man leans back in his chair, his unruly, wiry moustache-stubble hanging on his every word.

I am a healer, eh. I have visions. I come from a long line of shamans, and when I hear the ancestors sing to me, I open my mouth and it comes out, ya know. I am just learning how to handle my powers. I am just a young man, now, just learning about the elder I am to be. I share my wisdom-stories.

I have a dream, he says. I want to have my own flagging company. Yup, the first First-Nations flagging company in the province. I just gotta get some start-up funds and some education. That's why I am here. Not easy, being back in school, eh.

After he tells me this, I do my next daily drive past the construction crews and my imagination goes to our uncle-man, the drive-by shaman, leaning on his slow-stop sign. Nodding, blessing, silently-wisely waving them through, the highway pilgrims. Oh my, we laugh.

We read the play, *Where the Blood Mixes* (Loring, 2009). It is about the Kumsheen, this very real place very near here, where the rivers meet and the salmon story us. “The place inside our hearts where the blood mixes” (back cover). *Oh yah, Kevin, I met him a coupla times, he had dinner with us at my aunt’s; they are friends, eh.*

For the first time in our class a guy says, reads, the word ‘fucked,’ and they don’t laugh.

“He beat me... Fucked me.” He chokes, pauses, softens on the words.

We had to cajole and tease this young-gentle-silent-brilliant man, jokingly nicknamed “Mr. Loudmouth,” into reading the part of the main character. I knew what was coming before he started. Who the hell do I think I am, talking about this, asking them to read this?

But we are more than this. All of us. We know it. And he continues reading, the moment noted, survived.

There is a new-father-man who sits in the back row, a round-faced, squatting bullfrog peering at me over his glasses. He has five grown kids.

I was in the residential school just down the road, ya know.

Boarded, empty,
a silent, hollow moan.
Burn it down, plant a garden, let it rot.
We walk on by,
tense up imperceptibly,
just enough to feel the scars on our backs itching.
Our History is written on our spines
and on the skeleton buildings,
reclaimed, denied, destroyed.

I wasn’t there for my boys. They don’t listen to me. But look at me now; I am here in this class with them. I was a drinker, eh, didn’t see them much growing up. Their mom, she left me, and I don’t blame her, ya know. My daughter, she is our tutor, real smart. My one son, he went to high school in the Kamloops high school, got good grades, knows more math than you, I bet, teacher-lady. He has big dreams. My other boy, he is ruining his life, wasting his chance. Won’t get nowhere without an education. I don’t want them to be my age doing what I am doing. Starting over. So here I am.

I know they have told me of rape. They have told me about beatings given and received. They have told me about the nights they don’t remember. And perhaps I wanted to forget. I don’t know. But I have forgotten their memories. Only the whispers remain. Sometimes it washes over me in a rush. Circles, returns, never reminisces. There is no nostalgia in this place. Sometimes it drips down on me from out of nowhere, like those clear days, when you hold out your hand, wondering, look up and see only sunshine.

I tease out from the tangled imagined threads their young-elder, scarred, smooth,

crinkled man Faces.

I hear their soft, gravelly Voices.

Their mourning, teasing, thriving, gruff Laughter.

Feel the clamp that locks down on my heart and squeezes, squeezes,
pushing blood up into my neck with a whoosh and a tingling ringing between my ears.

Crystallizing in a pure, clear Moment.

Nod.

Breathe. Breathe it in.

Witness. Face.

Alrighty, see you tomorrow—say, we got any math homework, my teacher lady?

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Endnotes

¹ This class, entitled “Storytelling in the Ecological Heart of Curriculum, was part of a year-long graduate certificate, taught by Drs. David Jardine and Jackie Seidel, Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary.