Performing an Archive of Resistance: Challenging Normative Life Narratives through Literary Reading and Memoir Writing Research

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Abstract

This research explores the ways in which normative structures organize experiences and representations of identities. It reports on two groups, one in which the members identified as rural and heterosexual and the other as urban and lesbian. Both participated in literary reading and response practices organized by a literary anthropological research methodology (Iser, 1993; Luce-Kapler, 2004). Informed by research in literary theory and consciousness studies, the paper suggests that fictional

identifications influence the development of human consciousness and the narration of stories, and that "close reading" (Gallop, 2000) and effortful practice (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008) help us to reconsider "normative" identity narratives through identifications with literary characters and through writing practices that require us to shift our perspectives.

Introduction

"Reasonable modesty has hitherto set the limits of female talent…none have ever trampled upon all prudence in the attempt to emerge beyond the given world" (de Beauvoir, 1961, p. 667)

De Beauvoir neatly describes the way in which women have conspired in the construction of the very cultural narratives that have constrained them; at the same time, she gestures toward the possibility, at least, of agency in the deconstruction of these narratives – a project undertaken through the imprudent (and impudent) acts of feminism that followed her pioneering work. Working with Foucault, McLaren (2002, p. 146) has identified two "technologies of the self" that women have used in these endeavors: consciousness raising groups and self-writing. Here, we examine research that engaged two groups of women in similar processes, in order that they might reconsider their experiences of cultural identity.

One group was composed of heterosexual women from rural Alberta, all of whom were married or widowed. The other was a group of urban lesbian women from the east side of Vancouver. Though the women's worldviews, situations, and experiences were in some ways quite different (both between and within the groups), their discussions and literary productions share important commonalities. In this paper, we consider one such commonality – the use of reading and writing practices by the women to consider the domestic structures they inhabited (and may still inhabit).

Research Questions

The reported research was guided by three questions:

1) How do identifications with literary and other fictions influence the personal and cultural stories people remember and report about their experiences of consciousness?
2) What happens to personal remembered experiences when normalized stories of personal and cultural identity are re-presented through literary fictional forms?
3) Can changing one's fictional identifications change one's remembered history and, if so, how do these changes influence one's sense of presently-lived identity?

Theoretical Framework

Considerable work in the area of reader response theory has been conducted in the field of literacy education. Principally inspired by Rosenblatt's (1938, 1978) theorizing of the importance of the relationship between reader and text, reader response researchers have endeavored to study the *experience* of reading, rather than focusing only on the qualities of texts, the conditions of reading, or the biographies of writers and/or readers. Work in this area has included phenomenological (Luce-Kapler, 2004; Luce-Kapler, Catlin, & Kocher, 2008; Sumara, 2002), psychoanalytic (Salvio, 2007), social constructionist (Beach & Myers, 2001), and critical studies (Lewis, 2000). While these studies differ in emphases, they share an interest in learning about the complex relations of reader/text/context, particularly experiences identified as "literary" or "imaginative" or "fictional." Absent from most accounts of reader response, however, is an explicit examination of the role that human consciousness plays in all acts of perception and learning. In most of the published research in reader-response theory, 'consciousness' appears as the assumed backdrop of theoretical approaches to reading. Only in psychoanalytic approaches is there any mention of consciousness, and then usually only in the Freudian theories of the relationship between interpretation and the unconscious.

When it comes to writing, there is a large body of commentary on the act and purpose of composition, conducted in the field by practicing writers (Dillard, 1990; Shields, 2002; Winterson, 1995) who suggest, among other things, that as we write, we can both experience and communicate some of the subtleties of our own experiences and the experiences of others. Curriculum theorists (Butt, 1983; Davies & Gannon, 2006; Grumet, 1988; Miller, 2005; Pinar, 2004) and philosophers (Denzin, 1994, 2000; Gadamer, 1989; Merleau-Ponty, 2007) have also investigated autobiographical methods such as narrative inquiry, phenomenological representations, and collective biography, considering them as tools in the understanding of self and culture, even in poststructural times. However, this work has focused mainly upon scholarly and academic writing rather than fiction and creative nonfiction. It has thus overlooked the role of devices such as form and genre, analogous processes such as imagery, and those other aids and obstacles to the act of composition that are generally held to be the province of the field of creative writing. Here again, a close examination of these matters in terms of their relationship to learning takes us into the study of consciousness (Juarrero, 1999; Lakoff, 1989; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Zunshine, 2006), memory (Baxter, 2004; Felman & Laub, 1992; Freeman, 2003) and psychoanalytic theory, with its rich material on association, interpretation, and resistance (Britzman, 2006; Freud, 1999, 2006; Pitt & Britzman, 2003).

In earlier work, we drew on research from neuroscience (Donald, 2001; Johnson, 2004) in which it is argued that the mind is not, as commonly believed, organized only by the individual human brain, but rather that it is a hybrid byproduct of the complex interweaving of the biological brain with the largely invisible cultural symbolic web. This ongoing adaptive

relationship between the biological brain and the various technologies and systems of culture create what Donald calls a "distributed cognitive network" (2001, p. 154). From this perspective, the mind is not so much located in the brain but exists more fluidly and ambiguously in the complex relations of the human biological body and the human-built and more-than-human world (Abram, 1996).

This understanding of what constitutes "mind" implies a theory of consciousness that does not conflate it with perception, knowledge, or experiences of self-identity. Instead, consciousness is conceptualized as what Cohen and Stewart (1997, p. 63) describe as phenomena that arise "when two or more complex systems interact in a kind of mutual feedback that changes them both, leading to behavior that is not present in either system on its own." This theory not only explains the biological manifestation of conscious experience, but also the human desire to understand why consciousness 'feels' the way that it does and how these feelings are both individual and social/cultural phenomena. From this perspective, consciousness can be understood as an experience that is embodied at various levels, including the human physiological, the socio/cultural, and the environmental. Consciousness then is not pre-given, nor is it biologically or culturally determined, but instead is an ongoing emergent property of the relations of all of these.

These new theoretical perspectives of consciousness have implications for the field of literary theory, specifically for the field of autobiographical methods in the curriculum, and for the fields of literacy education and curriculum studies more generally. Rather than assuming consciousness as correspondent with the human brain/mind, consciousness is understood as both participating in acts of reading, writing, and response and, at the same time, as being altered/transformed by them (Lewis, 2000). It can thus be argued that acts of literary engagement or fictionalizing influence the ongoing development of human consciousness and subjectivity.

The researchers specifically chose to work with senior women as participants because they have a long life history. Their significant experience with acts of fictionalizing widened the potential for richer phenomenological data in our investigation of the relationship between consciousness and such fictionalizing. Furthermore, they are women who have lived through challenging historical events (including World War II, the rise of feminism, and the advancement of gay and lesbian issues) where notions of " women," "sexuality," and "subjectivity" have been extensively challenged, debated and interpreted (Stein, 1997). Through literary anthropological work (Sumara, 2003) and through reading and writing practices (Robson, 2010; Sumara, 2002; Sumara, Davis, Filax, & Walsh, 2006), this study explored the role of literary engagement in understanding human consciousness.

Methodology

Adapted by Sumara from Iser's (1993) phenomenological studies of literary engagement, literary anthropology aims to use literary identifications and interpretations as sites to collect and subject to critical analysis the emergence of personal and public experiences and expressions of identity. In this study, literary identifications were mediated by critical readings of and oral and written responses to contemporary fiction and memoir. The texts studied included *Unless* (Shields, 2002) and *Vertigo* (DeSalvo, 1996), which were read and extensively discussed by both groups. As the work progressed, each group branched out to include other works. The women in Alberta studied, among other things, poetry by Lorna Crozier, *Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence (2004), and artifacts such as photographic representations of women in various situations The women in Vancouver studied some additional texts written by and about gays and lesbians (Brown, 1977; Hall, 1928; White, 2000), as well as essays and articles on the topic of home and exile (Aciman, 1999; Bryson, 2006). Individual and collective responses were then reformulated into memoir, epistolary, and creative fiction forms. Through the development of specific reading and writing practices, participants generated data that represent the complex ways that different "bodies of knowledge" can co-exist to produce the ongoing experience of remembered, currently lived, and projected consciousness. Here we present two short examples to represent some of our findings.

Edith: "I'm Going to Be a God Damn Woman!"

Edith was one of the quieter members of the Alberta group. Though the transcripts are punctuated by her brief, supportive comments on what others had to say (remarks such as "Is that right?" or "You don't say!"), she was the most reserved member of the group as far as lengthier comments and analyses were concerned. However, we did locate one thread of conversation that generated some quite visceral responses from Edith. It was that very issue raised by De Beauvoir in the opening quotation – the limits of female talent as they have been defined in the 'known world', and as Edith has experienced them.

Edith raised this issue early in the group's work together and in response to a poem by Lorna Crozier (2005). The poem is a feminist revision of the creation myth and comprises a dramatic monologue from 'The First Woman' or Lilith, Eve's twin (and predecessor by a narrow margin). Demonic and difficult, Lilith immediately begins to argue with God about the subservient role he has assigned her. Crozier (2005) recreates the consequences:

> …I wouldn't lie placid
> as a hooked and fatty fish under Adam,
> my wings pinned back. For punishment
> God banished me and turned my sister into bone,
> honed away everything she'd been
> when we lay together among stars.

Luce-Kapler (who was co-facilitating the group with Sumara) read the poem without preamble, comment or exegesis and invited the group to share their immediate responses. Somewhat unusually, Edith was the first to speak (October 30, 2007, Transcripts, p. 2).

Edith:	I liked how she put this here, "the hooked and fatty fish under Adam".
Rebecca:	What do you like about it Edith?
Edith:	…I don't think a woman is really that curvy, maybe … or can be fitted under a man…maybe I'm more rebel too, my wings pinned back. I think you should be given your freedom… I think if you're married or you're a partner or whatever, I think when they try to take away your freedom - I don't think it's fair!

Edith identified immediately with Eve's sister's refusal to conform to societal standards such as those around physical appearance ("I don't think a woman is really that curvy") and gender expectations ("or can be fitted under a man"). Her succinct interpretation goes to the heart of the poem and mirrors the responses of many feminists who have adopted Lilith as a symbol of female insurrection ("Lilith," 2010).

In later discussions, Edith expanded upon these initial insights and began to relate them more closely to her own life and experiences. Again, the discussion was prompted by the readings conducted in the group and organized by structured exercises. In October 2008, the women were asked to choose passages from Louise DeSalvo's (1996) autobiographical novel *Vertigo* that had particularly caught their attention. Edith chose to return to the issue of women surviving difficult and unfair situations, citing DeSalvo's (p. 165) description of her embattled mother, who worried constantly and felt "homeless all her life." Later in the discussion (Edith, October 30, 2008, Transcripts, p. 19) the women are invited to share anything the chosen passages reminded them of about their own life journeys. Edith used this opportunity to explore the domestic structures she had inhabited as a girl:

Edith: My mom … had the two kids at home that were crippled, and …it was diapers until they died, and she'd carry them to the table and feed them at the table…[and] she used to take all her anger out on me. I knew what was going on because I was the oldest …I said, "Okay mom. I'll take it because you are so imprisoned, so jailed with these two kids that I will take your rash - whatever you're going to give me.

Bernice: Well Edith, I think you had a lot of insight for a young woman to understand that and to compensate for your mother.

Anna: You were thinking about how can I read and get the hell out of here!

Edith: No I couldn't. I understood her, you know, but sometimes it took a lot to love her for the things she'd say to you. It was just she was tired. Like I said, you had to pack water to wash clothes, you know, and that was all there too. Every day.

Here, Edith communicated her understanding of a complex situation, juxtaposing her compassion for her mother's lot (described unequivocally as "jailed and imprisoned") and her conviction that as oldest daughter, it was her duty to share her mother's burden and become the passive recipient of her rage. In an act of quiet resignation, Edith accepts her mother's "rash" – described here so strikingly as ugly, painful, contagious, and in Edith's case, enduring. As she tells it, even when Edith left her demanding family home to marry at 17, she encountered onerous responsibilities (including the counseling and care of her husband's siblings), worked hard, and made compromises that included "pulling men out of mud holes…and patting them on the back" (Edith, May 30, 2007, Transcripts, p. 13).

Edith used both the texts and the group as a commonplace to recall the situations she inhabited as a child and young bride. As she considered the stories of the women represented, she began to remember more and more of her own life stories and described them in ways that become increasingly literary. In his essay on screen memories, Freud (2006, pp. 541-560) describes such memories as "isolated recollections, often of questionable or perplexing significance" and has much to say (p. 545) about the psychic potential of the images they generate, in which "inessential components of an experience stand in for the essential, or the replacement of what is repressed by something in its (spatial or temporal) vicinity". In one meeting, Edith struggled to find the metaphor that would describe her situation most exactly, and was helped out by the group:

Edith:	…when you do marry like I found …I had to learn a whole new way of living…and you lose yourself…You take on a lot of their customs and [you say] "Well where did mine go?" It's…one of these fellas that go along and change [their] colours as [they] go around … what is it?
Bernice:	Chameleon?
Edith:	Chameleon!

In October 2009, Robson and Luce-Kapler visited the group as they met for the final time, in order to celebrate their work together and to record any final insights they might wish to share. Edith (October, 2009, Transcripts, p. 3) immediately brought the conversation back to the topic of female insurrection by referencing the dramatic monologues they had written about their own anger and rage in imitation of Lilith's rant. "We had a unity just by being females," she began. "I remember the crazy pieces we wrote about ranting [that] brought the nature of the beast out of all of us." Robson followed up on this line of thought by sharing the Vancouver group's anger at the ending of *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall, 1928), in which the self-sacrificing lesbian protagonist deliberately drives her lover into the arms of a man who she believes can offer a better life:

Claire:	You get to the end and you're like, 'I'm damned!' You know? "'I'm screwed! What a disappointment!' You know? 'I'm never going to find happiness!'"
Edith:	'Is that all there is?'
Claire:	'Is that all there is?' Is the noble thing just to pretend that you're not gay and get over it?
Edith:	Oh my goodness. I remember when I was 13 and I went down into the sheep pasture and climbed up into this old favorite tree of mine. And I was thinking 'I'm going to be 13, and I've got to grow up and be a stupid woman and wear a dress'.
Claire:	Really?
Edith:	Yeah.
Claire:	Well 13 is when it hits you isn't it really?
Edith:	'I've got to be this stupid woman!'
	A lengthy discussion followed, and at the end of it, Edith and Anna quietly summed things up between them:
Edith:	I was very depressed.
Anna:	'I'm going to be a god damned woman!'

This incident provides a useful instance of a screen memory, one of those isolated memories that is trivial on the face of things (a girl climbs a tree), but which stands in for something psychically significant. In this case, at least in our interpretation, it represents Edith's reluctance as an adolescent, to embrace her role as a woman. Its significance is heightened, in our opinion, by the fact that Edith offers it as a culminating comment on the work she completed in the group. Had the group continued its work together, it would have been interesting to reread Crozier (2005), to see what the women made of *The Well of Loneliness*, to write more 'rants'- perhaps fictionalized ones from other points of view (say Edith's mother). The moment in the tree that Edith identifies as a moment of insight would provide an excellent starting point for her to begin writing her own memoir. It is to these writing processes that we turn next.

Both groups used literary practices to identify stories or memories that helped them to perceive and examine the family structures and normative gender narratives they inhabited. The Vancouver group, working on a regular basis with Robson, a writing coach, used the processes of writing and revising to explore some of these stories further. Three main strategies were used.

Firstly, we invited the women to pay close attention to any imagery that emerged from their writing. As many commentators, particularly Freud (1999, 2006), have suggested, such images are generated by unconscious associative processes that may elude our attempts to repress them. Secondly, we attempted to constantly unsettle fixed positions and assumptions by a variety of methods, including moving between activities (such as reading the texts and writing responses to them), writing within enabling constraints (Davis et al., 2008) such as form and genre, and writing about transitional objects, such as artifacts, settings, and landscapes, instead of addressing emotional issues head on. One of the most successful strategies we found in the second category was to encourage the women to shift points of view. Thirdly, we constantly used the texts as models and exemplars of this work, pointing out the techniques professional writers employ. Again, we have chosen to represent this part of our research through the work of one woman.

Chris: "The Last One Standing"

Unlike Edith, who lived in one place for most of her life, Chris became nomadic in her late teens, migrating from England to Vancouver via a number of different homes and locations. Instead of living within the structure of a stable marriage and family (again unlike Edith), she divorced her husband early in life to become a lesbian, and has had a number of relationships since. Despite these differences, Chris shares some important commonalities with Edith. She is also one of the quieter

members of her group, and she too felt imprisoned at an early age, both by her mother's oppressive rules and by societal expectations based on her gender.

Like Edith, Chris used the texts available to her group to explore these childhood experiences of family restraints and gender constructs. She (September 14, 2007, Transcripts, p. 6) told the group at their first meeting that reading had been crucial to constructing and sustaining a sense of identity since childhood: "It was my survival when I was a kid. If you don't have other kids to play with, or you want to escape your parents, it's this secret place." Like Edith, Chris (ibid) made use of *Vertigo* (DeSalvo, 1996, p. 6) to better understand her own relationship with her parents, especially her mother, identifying the following passage as one which prompted insight

> Talking about books verifies, for me, that the feelings I have struggled with alone in the solitary space of my private suffering are shared by other people, and that I am powerful enough and resilient enough to withstand hardship, and hardy enough to endure and prevail. That I have already endured, already prevailed.

Here is Chris's (ibid) analysis of the text, and the connection she is able to make with her own childhood:

> Chris: I'm looking at page 6 of *Vertigo* and Louise is talking of this strong sense of survival, and that's the reason I read when I was a kid - because I was a victim of the same thing - that I think they call emotional abuse.

Many of the life stories Chris wrote early in the next two years reinforced this original perception of herself as victim of abuse, concentrating on times that she had felt under attack, neglected, and rendered powerless. As the work progressed, however, Chris began to write stories that suggested moments of agency, however fleeting – walking down the village street in a cowboy suit, visiting a kindly aunt, or listening to Dvorak for the first time. Like Edith, Chris enjoyed expressing the anger she felt about the unfairness of the female role, but she also began to see her story differently:

> It feels like I have changed a bit and changed my story. I had thought that my childhood was a long continuum of impositions that I had to tolerate. I now see my childhood in terms of a struggle and eventual emergence from an oppressive household. (Chris, November 14th, 2008, Transcripts, p. 40)

Chris remained extremely angry with her mother as an adult and wrote a number of difficult and bitter stories about her in her time in the group. On a number of occasions, Robson, thinking with Zunshine (2006) that fictional representations offer us the opportunity to 'read the minds' of others, suggested that she adopt her mother's perspective, just to see what would happen if she tried to recreate her point of view. She also suggested that it would be difficult, but perhaps informative, to

describe herself (Chris) as she thought her mother might have seen her. Chris was quite resistant to the notion for a long time, saying that she wanted to try the exercise but was not yet ready. She completed it quite suddenly, in the final stages of the project:

> I don't know why people never listen to me. I tell them all about my pain and illness and it seems to put people off. I have no close friends. Esther was my great friend. We worked together in the war but she died a little while ago very suddenly – a brain aneurysm. Chris isn't what I hoped for. I thought we'd be great friends, but we don't get on. That kid has fought me every day of her life it seems. She's got an insolent look. I can read the feelings on her face, but it doesn't give me any comfort (April 17, 2009, Transcripts pp. 27-28).

In the discussion that followed the reading of this piece, Chris homed in on her mother's relationship with Esther, realizing the extent of her mother's grief at the loss of her friend and the way in which it changed her life. When Esther died, "the stuffing went out of my mother," Chris (ibid) told the group – "she went downhill further faster" and she (Chris) "bore all the pain and frustration of what she was suffering." Like Edith, she 'took her mother's rash'.

She picks up on this insight in a later piece of writing about her mother's death and burial, exploring a recurring image in her work – money – in this case the bags of coins she had been counting when she heard that her mother had died:

> I hadn't felt any remorse until I saw the coffin, and suddenly my eyes were full of tears. "What a total waste," I thought. But of what? Of time, or effort, or of strong feeling? Like anger? Later, standing in the bitter wind and snow, watching the coffin go into the ground, I thought, "Thank god that's over! I can get on with the rest of my life!"
>
> I considered the significance of the bags of coin. Were they the weight of my conscience?
>
> No. They were the weight of my un-forgiveness, and it took another thirty years to let them go.

Both Edith and Chris commented upon the ways in which the processes of reading and writing helped them to move 'beyond' painful memories. Chris (May 6, 2009, Transcripts, p. 3) references the usefulness of DeSalvo as a model in this regard:

> [Reading DeSalvo] showed me a way to write about that kind of experience. And as I'm tackling all the pieces around my memoir, I'm writing about very emotional stuff. And I'm connected to it, but I now somehow feel that I can see a way forward through it. I'm not going to be entrapped in it anymore…it's not going to be sticking to me.

Two of the women in the Albertan group (Marion & Elsie, January 22, 2008, p. 36) identified the same central paradox – the memories can be at once released and retained in the act of recalling them:

> Marion: But in the letting go …
> Elsie: The pain is gone.
> Marion: But you still have the memories.
> *Edith (ibid) joins their conversation with a perfect 'bon mot'*:
> Edith: Oh yes the memories are still there but they're not tied up in knots.

Conclusion

Identification practices and narrative representations make evident the intersections between various nested bodies (bodies of knowledge, practices, individuals, literary collectives, social and cultural histories). As work in complexity science (Cilliers, 1998; Davis & Sumara, 2006; Sumara et al., 2006) has shown, these various "bodies" are engaged in ongoing recursive processes of transformation. This study has the potential to show how everyday practices of fictionalizing and narrating influence the trajectory of self and cultural learning. As well, the study will make more evident how seemingly fixed remembered identity narratives can be transformed through close reading, responding, and activities of transposing genre. While it is too early in the study to provide more definitive statements, it seems likely that results from this research will be useful to those literacy educators who are interested in learning more about how everyday fictional practices can enhance learning opportunities in planned pedagogical settings. Questions that might guide some practical applications of this research include the following: If we consider the embodied self a situation (de Beauvoir, 1961), how do we change it? And when? How can curriculum encourage effortful literary practices that create opportunities to alter personal, social, and cultural bodies of knowledge?

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