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Learning from the Liminal: Fiction as Knowledge

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Journal notes: Seems a staid, quiet city. Hard to imagine riots here, teargas, violence. Yet something is shifting in the world. Fomentation. A time of possibility, chaos, disruption, interesting tensions. Here we will assemble in well-appointed meeting rooms for one of the world's largest research meetings, tidied up, looking proper—to discuss disruptions in our notions of conventional academic discourse. Not exactly life-threatening issues, but life-changing perhaps. An invitation from Rishma Dunlop to participate in a panel on fiction as knowledge: Tom Barone, Anthony Pare, Elliot Eisner, Rishma Dunlop, me.

A longstanding debate this is. Eisner has been arguing for the integration of the arts in education for years, reminding us of the limits of propositional discourse. Rishma's dissertation was a novel, the first to be accepted in a doctoral program in Canada. Tom's doctoral work, like mine, was closer to literary nonfiction than conventional academic discourse (in 1988 my committee included fiction writers and poets who urged me to transgress). Anthony Pare supervises radically alternative dissertations at McGill. The groundswell is growing, led—dare I say this?—by many Canadian-based scholars. The roots of the shift are deep; it was only a matter of time before these discussions moved inside from the margins. I wonder, though, how this panel will go. The debates up to now have been lively, heated.

Ah yes, the debate: rigor or to hell in a handbasket? Criteria: the academy's or the literary world's? Reminds me of the C.P. Snow essay of decades ago on two cultures: science and art, apples and oranges. The issue of accountability: who guards the gates? Can fiction advance knowledge? At last year's conference, Grumet claimed that a story is not enough: stories, fictional or otherwise, are not knowledge. So, then, what is knowledge? And whose? Who sets the criteria? And above all, what is the purpose of our inquiry, what are the arguments for excluding the arts in inquiry when we argue for them in schools as legitimate? Tomorrow the panel.

The room is filling quickly. I greet the other panelists, see several colleagues and graduate students from across Canada, the United States, Australia. There is an air of—what—hope? Contained enthusiasm? We settle in. Now there is only standing room. This is one of several sessions of this nature that are well attended at this conference I have learned. A shift; we are on the threshold. This is liminal space, right here.

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Rishma speaks first, provides a history and context, then reads from her novel Boundary Bay. Now it is Tom, who talks eloquently about the elusiveness of an absolute truth. The audience is still here, attentive. I have a brief moment of doubt that my 10 minutes of text are rhetorically a bit over the top, but I stand up anyway—getting our ideas “out there” is what pushes the boundaries. “Good morning,” I start. We’re already running late. I speak quickly.

Brink. Threshold. Edge. Waystation. You are leaving the country, walking on shifting ground, you are breathing in, or is it out? You are here, not here. There, not there. You are in a place of transition, a place of possibility, openness, ambiguity, heightened awareness, imagination. A place of unsteadiness, a place to let go.

You are an embryo. You are the Samoan fafafine, neither male or female. You are the Aboriginal singing the land, the Peigan drawing narrative on skins, yours among many in this winter count. You are the American in Paris, the Canadian in Seattle, the new kid on the block, the only one not on the dance floor, or the first one. You are the one standing on the verandah after 20 years, opening the door to the family reunion.

You are on the brink. On the threshold. Liminality.

The poet Li Po:

The birds have vanished into the sky,
and now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.
(“The Birds Have Vanished,” Milosz, 1996, p. 277)

Annie Dillard (1999):

To help a living space last while we live on it, we brush or haul away the blown sand and hack or burn the greenery. We are mowing the grass on the cutting edge. (p. 188).

Ours is a planet sown in beings. Our generations overlap like shingles. We don’t fall in rows like hay, but we fall. Once we get here, we spend forever on the globe, most of it tucked under. While we breathe, we open time like a path in the grass. We open time as a boat’s stem slits the crest of the present. (p. 203)

Cultural maverick Bruce Mau (1999):

Coffee breaks, cab rides, green rooms. Real growth often happens outside of where we intend it to. In the interstitial spaces—what Dr. Seuss calls the “waiting place.” Hans Ulrich Obrist, an exhibit curator in Paris, once organized a science and art conference with all of the infrastructure of a conference—the parties, chats, lunches, airport arrivals—but no actual conference. Apparently it was hugely successful and spawned many ongoing collaborations. (p. 58)

Economist Jane Jacobs (2000):

Speakers make a language and yet nobody, including its speakers or scholars, can predict its future vocabulary or usages ... language makes itself up as it goes along ... of course languages have rules ... somewhat reliable patterns of pronunciation ... languages aren’t gibberish. Creative self-organization doesn’t imply disorder. (pp. 137-138)

In an ecosystem, plants and animals pursue what amounts to plans for the future ... The ecosystem doesn't and can't impose hierarchical command over the ensemble, which is self-organized, and makes itself up as it goes along. [As for economies] Economic history is stuffed with expensive duds undertaken by people who thought they could predict the future by shaping it. (p. 138)

Buddhist writer Pema Chodron (1997):

We are like children building a sand castle. We embellish it with beautiful shells, bits of driftwood, and pieces of coloured glass. The castle is ours, off-limits to others. We're willing to attack if others threaten to hurt it. Yet despite our attachment, we know the tide will inevitably come in and sweep the sand castle away. The trick is to enjoy it fully but without clinging, and when the time comes, let it dissolve back into the sea. (p. 51)

The audience looks expectant, as though waiting for the other shoe to drop. If we had more time, I'd allow a moment of reflection here, as I intended these quotes to set the stage for liminality, providing ideas from a range of disciplines to remind us of our threshold existence. Perhaps they will have the effect, as they did for me, of the ghazal, the poetic form that presents seemingly random images/thoughts, yet when taken together, result in a "snap" of recognition. Perhaps not. Perhaps I'd better get on with it.

All right, you've been very patient. Here's a thesis statement, or at least a place to land, for now. The shift in educational inquiry marked by alternative forms of representation, including the literary arts is a shift as much ontological as it is epistemological. Fiction is knowledge. Poetry is knowledge. The arts are ways of knowing. The lingering belief that knowledge is and must be proof, proposition, muscle for prediction and control is bound inextricably with our Western belief in the individual as a separate, autonomous being. It is bound inextricably with our need to tame the earth and its creatures, and it is bound inextricably with our fear of the unknown. We have wanted to accumulate knowledge and to use it as foundation, as fact, as colonialist, neocolonialist, and imperialist commodity, as clout, and as cultural capital. But we are fooling ourselves if we think we can trust knowledge more than we trust fiction to guide us, to teach us. Knowledge, like fiction itself, is liminal space. It never arrives. It is always on the brink. It is always a waiting space, a green room, Derrida's *differance*, a journey. What we know in this discipline is that knowledge, like fiction, is contextual, read differently by different people. Knowledge reads, tastes, sounds, dances, informs, speaks in one way from my ideological perspective, another way from yours. Knowledge and knowing are saturated with political purpose, intent, cultural and social values, and vested interests. And knowledge, as we have continued to create it in our discipline, has no greater claim to authenticity, to fidelity, to truth, to validity, or reliability than do the fictions we read, write, or tell ourselves daily in print or in conversations to get on with our lives. We tell ourselves stories in order to live, says Joan Didion. Well, we tell ourselves "truths" and "facts" for that reason as well.

My first point, then, is this: knowing and knowledge are fictions as much as fiction is knowing and knowledge.

Yes, this statement is extreme, but the more I play with it, the more it makes sense. I see heads nodding, one of which belongs to the man I first studied ethnography with 15 years ago, when no one even considered fiction as academic discourse. This feels like

old home week despite the dozens of strangers in the room. Those I know here who are involved in arts-based inquiry, regardless of our differences or perspectives, seem to be more passionate about the worth of the enterprise than claiming territory or being agonistic. Respectful disagreement, healthy differences, but little antagonism about the points that separate us. Why is this?

Am I shape-shifting with definition here? Yes, but no. In the current climate all definitions—all foundations and ideas we once thought we could count on—are under revision. East meets West. Hierarchies are becoming webs and networks. The blurring in genres that Clifford Geertz talked about is occurring not only in anthropology, but in all disciplines. And disciplines themselves are blurring. What is happening to foods and bodies and medicine shows us as a species to be closer to those cyborg states Donna Haraway has described. We—our thoughts, emotions, ideas, bodies, sounds, and sense—are all at some level genetically modified. Music is made digitally, and sounds are a pastiche of simulacra. Visual art is no longer only on walls: it is on the streets, on the screen, in the mind. A museum of the Mississippi is in the making, and it will not be located in a building (Mau, 1999). History and future fuse in a palimpsest of revisioning. Goll-ee and Jiminy-cricket, Martha, isn't there anything anymore we can count on?

No, Henry, probably not. Educational inquiry is entering a time of the liminal—a threshold space—a time of abundance, imagination, and possibility. Of course, we can argue it has always been this way. We are always becoming; but perhaps we are a little more willing now than we have been to accept that we walk on shifting ground.

Story, especially fiction, is a liminal space where we are neither here nor there; it is a space where we refuse “grounded theory” in our limited notions of it, and we refuse the nomothetic enterprise. Story and narrative—whether nonfiction or fiction, as if we could locate that border—are liminal spaces that do not call for an answer in the same way our conventional notions of knowledge seek an answer. Fiction asks many things: it challenges, extends, enlightens, and stretches us. It teaches us, guides us. Fiction does not enter into the realm of truth claims or accept burdens of proof in the same way as do our conventionally academic exercises around research.

Author and critic Alberto Manguel (1997) embarked on a project about the history of reading. After writing several essays, he asked himself, “‘What could bring all these bits of lore, however rich and quaint, into any but the most arbitrary coexistence?’ And suddenly it struck me: I was the cognitive link” (p. 16). But still he felt uneasy. Who would care to know what he read as a child, what he thought about this author or that? He says,

I soon understood that the I working through the text was not I, Alberto Manguel, but the author who had collected his wares for public display and was now arguing their worth and relevance. Strictly from the point of view of craft, what mattered was that the I on the page gave the reader a place from which to start, or a chair in which to sit, or (to change metaphors) the I played a B flat to which the readers could tune their instruments.... Brazenly idiosyncratic, I freed the book to be *A History of Reading*, not *The History of Reading*. (p. 16)

This is a key point in our discussion of what knowledge is, how it works (and how we work it) in our world. We are ready to embark on a shift from

knowledge to knowing. A shift from *The* to *A*, from trying to find The Answer and The Way to being open to and hearing many answers, many ways, all in context, all subject to life cycles like everything else on the planet. Arguments that this is the postmodern age, that we deconstruct texts and abandon meta-narratives, that we embrace many truths and many standpoints—all those arguments notwithstanding—I believe deep down that our positivist souls are still attracted to knowledge as answer, as firm ground. We want the score settled. And yet, given what we've been witness to in education in the last 30 years, if we haven't learned yet about the provisional and impermanent nature of what we know, what counts, and who has the power to say, then what have we been doing? If we haven't learned yet that fiction is a knowledge, a place to make meaning to inform and enrich our lives, then why do we read?

We each have our own reasons why we read, to be sure. Nevertheless, I suggest, we read in part because fiction calls to us to enter into worlds we know but don't know. It speaks to the liminal: worlds neither here nor there, worlds of the imagination, the heart, the spirit.

And this is where it gets tricky. I am saying that both fiction and knowledge are liminal spaces. They are impermanent, they are thresholds.

Fiction, I suggest, has much to offer us at this point in our discipline because of the particular nature of its liminality. Fiction allows us to explore the geography, the anthropology, the epistemology of the heart and of the spirit in ways that most other genres (except for poetry) and discourses do not. This is uncharted territory in our field. To date, our conventional notions of knowledge have offered us little about the heart, the imagination, the spirit. We dance around them, nibble in the corners now and then, but for the most part we keep the topics out of our academic conversations and certainly our research efforts. Why? Because these areas are slippery, frightening in their elusiveness, unsettling.

I have just answered my own question here. Funny how we can revise thinking and writing even as we present it. I'd like to start over, rewrite this, but can't. Heart. The difference I am seeing in arts-based researchers is that they are rarely frightened by shifting ground, and they are rarely frightened by the deep resonance to matters of the heart and the spirit in teaching and learning, the so-called personal. As a result, they generally do not seem concerned with being "right," having "the last word." Am I being naïve here? Yes, probably. Worse: self-congratulatory. Push on, you're running out of time.

And this is my second point: We are perhaps wise enough, courageous enough now in our discipline to explore the geography, the anthropology, the epistemology of the heart and of the spirit, the aspects of ourselves that fiction has attended to for generations. But to explore them we must be prepared to stay open, to be flexible, to let go, to know that these sand castles we build will wash away; to accept that we mow the grass on the cutting edge, that we cannot predict the future by shaping it; and to know that everything—even Li Po's mountain eventually—is impermanent. And that finally, that's all right. There is nothing on this earth like this realization to wake us up.

A. Manette Ansay (1998):

It is meaningless to hold the yardstick of fact against the complexities of the human heart. Reality simply isn't large enough to hold us. (*River Angel*)

I agree with Ansay. Reality isn't large enough to hold us. The material world we try to control and to understand is more mysterious and elusive than we want to admit. We want structures, we want rights and wrongs, the theory *du jour*, the bibliographic muscle, a position, a platform, a good academic hand with a lot of trump cards. A good fence around what we know.

This wish for structures of separation, for definition, for boundaries is the mark of the very Cartesian duality we continue to tell ourselves, as researchers, we are disrupting. Our agonistic practices—let's face it: the roots of competition and debate define the territory of knowledge acquisition—in which we turn discussion into debate and colleagues into adversaries allows us to create an Other, a being separate from us. Although we deplore, at least in our publications and at the podium, turning underrepresented groups, research participants, and "subjects" into Other, we do not think twice about objectifying our colleagues' arguments and indeed their very beings. Descartes' legacy remains culturally embedded in our practices (Nielsen, 2000).

The structures of the academy and the practices of research have thrived in these structures of separation. According to Palmer (1998), these structures

promise to protect us against one of the deepest fears at the heart of being human—the fear of having a live encounter with alien "otherness," whether the other is a student, a colleague, or a self-dissenting voice within. We fear encounters in which the other is free to be itself, to speak its own truth, to tell us what we may not wish to hear. We want those encounters to be on our own terms, so that they will not threaten our view of world and self. (p. 37).

We need—desperately in many instances—to have a point of reference, a marker, a whipping post or a life raft; without one we might have to face complexity, contradiction, liminality—not only in the theories, ideas, and methods that we want to give shape to our work and our arguments, but in our relations with people around us, including ourselves. We might also have to face impermanence, of ideas, of theory, of people, indeed of life. And so we seek, often with a ferocity that belies our fear, a place to stand. How can I just be, we think, unless I am against or for?

And with the issue at hand here—which, bluntly put, is about whether we will allow fiction inside the door of this exclusive academic club we call The Knowledge Guild (hmm, this is sounding familiar. Wasn't it only a little over a century ago that it was gender not genre that would have excluded me from the same club?)—I am concerned that part of the fear that grips the academy in these circumstances has much to do with the impulse to separate ourselves from the ordinary, the quotidian, the everyday world where fiction informs, inspires, connects, incites despair, and offers hope. It's what Jane Roland Martin (2000) talks about when she worries about esotericism and aerial distance in scholarship. She is concerned that exclusivity, hierarchical distance, and abstruse theory and language—now as well entrenched in the feminist community as anywhere—keep us away from the problems of the everyday world, that very world for which we claim we are working as activists, as advocates, and supporters of social justice.

Susan Griffin (1992) comments:

It is perhaps a choice each of us makes over and over, even many times throughout one day, whether to use knowledge as power or intimacy. (p. 295)

I opt for intimacy, for connection. What do we have to lose? Learning from the liminal means that we do the following:

- Stop taking ourselves so seriously. Bluntly put, we need to get over ourselves, to lighten up. Certainly educational research means to effect change, to work for social justice, to expand horizons. These goals are achievable as much by embracing imagination, humor, generosity, camaraderie, creative risk-taking as they are by our continued grasping for *gravitas*. Our conventional notions of knowledge are bound up in connotations of weight, authority, dignity, sobriety, a seriousness of conduct. Gravity. Knowledge. Posturing borne of fear, I say. Imagination, creativity, the arts, humor, playfulness, levity, things that rise, the ephemeral, the elusive: these are considered lightweight, not serious. Air-head scholarship, we think. We instead adhere to a classical sobriety, or *gravitas*, especially in education, because education—okay, this is our worst fear—isn't a real discipline. And if we get over ourselves and embrace the imagination, the liminal, it is my hope that we don't grasp for *gravitas* here as well. I can see it happening: we come to accept the imagination—fiction is our example here—but only on certain terms. Dignified, serious, weighty terms in which fiction must be contained only in forms of high art, inaccessible, self-referential, exclusive. My sincere wish is that we do not trade one cage, one limited view, for another. Obviously in arts-informed work, virtuosity and artfulness are values we subscribe to. Fiction is serious business, and it can handle deeply personal terrain, tragedy, and despair. But fiction as research need not be a sober enterprise. There is a difference, as the British Columbian essayist Jean McKay (2001) says rather bluntly.

Research, re-creation, it's all vexed and interesting, two poles of the territory represented on the one side by the Purists, and on the other by Who Gives a Shit? And somewhere in the middle, is Of Course it Matters, but Not with A Pickle up your Butt. A cooler and wiser head. (p. 3)

Whew. I managed to read that startling quote without laughing. Someone in the back just guffawed though, a loud hardee-har-har projectile over the light laughter in the room. It feels good to feel this kind of energy: feels open, relaxed.

- Embrace what I call scholartistry emerging in our field. "Artists perceive patterns in new ways, find sensuous openings into new understandings, fresh concepts, wild possibilities. Artists help us subvert the ordinary and see the extraordinary" (Neilsen, 1998, p. 274). Scholartists bring to inquiry an understanding and sedimented knowing of schooling, education, and learning. They bring to inquiry the artistry of their imaginative powers in the literary and visual arts. These combine to become the skills and insight that unleash the spirit into new territory. Arts-informed work, as Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles (Neilsen, Cole, & Knowles, 2001) have reminded us, is not merely founded on the arts; the arts are integral to the conception and realization of the work.

I hope that this point is taken up. To write fiction one must know story, technique, craft, know the expectations and the demands of audience. To write poetry, also a liminal space where words can take us, one must see, hear, read such that the poetic sensibility is infused in the enterprise. We can't take research findings and then dress them up

afterward in literary clothing. This is related to a point that needs more discussion elsewhere, as I'm running out of time.

- Know, finally, that our truths, our facts, our ethical stances, our positions may be helpful and instructive—even useful and for the better good—but only for now. Contexts change, we change. Just as we learn from the stories that rest on our bedside table or live in our communities, we learn from all the truths we try to capture and all the perspectives we entertain. Recognizing impermanence does not mean abandoning our conviction, our wisdom, or knowledge about what to do in the here and now. Meaning is intransitive and unreadable, as Fred Wah (2000) argues, meant only to be made. And once we name it, it dissipates. “Meaning generates and amplifies itself, beyond itself, but never forgets” (p. 241).
- Explore the territories of the heart and spirit in courageous and honest ways. Fearless ways. We are untrained in the academy to do this. We flinch, wince, squirm in our seats, develop facial tics and palpitations at the mention of the heart and the spirit. We think: an afternoon with Oprah, or stuck on the country music station, or trapped in a mall the day before Valentine’s day with no access to black clothes or irony. But many of us have explored the uncharted territories and, I am certain, have been enriched by the journey. These liminal spaces—these thresholds—are not controllable, they are intense, they are demanding, surprising, novel, often confusing, and disorienting. And they connect us in embodied, inspirited ways. Had we space here and time, we could regale each other with stories of how the landscape of the human heart and the nether regions of the spirit have been—in more cases than we admit—responsible for what saves us all in research and in life.

Our theistic adherence to borders and boundaries, to distinctions between science and art, fiction and fact gives rise to opportunities for discussions such as those here today. If we do not presume to settle the issue here, but instead remain open on this threshold and listen, we might be able to hear—in millions of rooms across the globe, on street corners and in cafes, around kitchen tables, in shelters, in cars, inside classrooms, behind marketplace stalls, on the beach, in your own bedroom—the sound of pages turning, of voices sharing stories that change lives, educating imagination, turning lives, the sound of whisperings, louder and louder, a roar so intense it could shake the ivy off these old walls.

Ah, yes, now I can sit. Generous applause, as there has been throughout this session and throughout any session at this conference that has embraced alternative conceptions of inquiry. Does a full room and generous applause mean that we all agree? Is this desirable? My head is buzzing. I take my seat, find my notebook, listen to Elliot’s comments.

What about classrooms and children, he is asking. Why are we not addressing their concerns? As the scholar who introduced and has championed the cause of the arts in learning, he has a point. Here we are discussing whether fiction is a legitimate genre in inquiry. To have this conversation we must examine the nature of inquiry and liminality, the questions about what knowledge is and what it’s for. Elliot makes several points. I note in particular his concern about generalizability: how can a fictional piece be generalizable, he asks? Why should it be? I wonder. Do we have criteria for the

educational novel as research? A welcome challenge. A story isn't enough, he is saying. And how, then, can a researcher who writes fiction demonstrate her familiarity with theoretical and conceptual issues in the field? We must remember our goal is to improve educational conditions for the students we teach. I jot down his comments, sense that many questions will be directed to him, worry that my notes have abbreviated his ideas so much so that I have in some way fictionalized them. How ironic. So what is trustworthy after all? These are huge, impossible questions critical to our enterprise. An hour-long session at a conference only scratches the surface, lifts the lid off the boiling pot.

Now Anthony is closing. Physics envy, he reminds us. Lewis Thomas, the essayist, has said that the social sciences suffer from it. What isn't research, Anthony asks? And what is the argument of art? Good questions. The room is still full; no one appears to be packing up. Many are sitting forward in their seats, looking as if they wish to speak. A woman near the front who began to frown earlier is looking to catch the eye of the moderator.

Anthony sits down, more applause, and we look at our watches. We have only a few minutes for discussion. Several hands are up. The excitement in this room is electric, but it is by no means the smug excitement of consensus. It is the excitement that erupts when possibilities and problems collide. With shifting ground comes the necessity—no, the responsibility—of looking at all angles, breaking up the conventional ways of seeing and path-making, disrupting foundations. I flip back through my journal: Something is shifting in the world. Fomentation. A time of possibility, chaos, disruption, interesting tensions. More hands are up now, and people are standing, heading for the microphone. I take a long, deep breath.

We have jumped off the page. This is liminal space.

"Yes," says the moderator. "First question?"

Note

The paper that forms the main part of this manuscript was presented at the 2001 Annual Meeting in Seattle of the American Educational Research Association. Any misrepresentation (which may or may not be construed as fictionalizing) of the panelists' remarks is unintentional and entirely my responsibility.

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