The Case of the Disappearing/Appearing Slow Learner: An Interpretive Mystery

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Abstract

This interpretive essay attempts to demonstrate the potential good that might come from approaching a hermeneutic phenomenological study as a hard-boiled detective story in the tradition of Raymond Chandler. The authors attempt to explain the hermeneutic warrants for such an adventure—that is, for how and why a topic like the categorization and treatment of students in the public education system as "slow learners" might be approached as a detective story. The parallels between detective fiction, Chandler's work as a noir novelist, and hermeneutics are drawn out. Attention is drawn to the ground of our interpretive relationship with the world in Heidegger's notion of the "as structure" of interpretation. A case is made for seeing the hard-boiled detective story as a hermeneutic venue for shaking up commonsense understandings of how we have come to see and do education with those students designated as slow in their learning.

Keywords

fiction, hermeneutics, mystery

Stylistically, one of the many interesting and "novel" things about applied hermeneutic research is how it can challenge the boundaries of what might be loosely called "formal academic writing." Hermeneutic work, because it is committed to the notion of truth as "the radiance of the beautiful" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 479), and the appreciation of the poetic nature of truth (Heidegger, 1962), often spills over into the more aesthetic side of writing. Hermeneutic research is highly personal (Moules, 2002), in the sense that with each hermeneutic encounter researchers become more

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attuned to the possibilities inherent in their future encounters. Researchers become, to paraphrase Gadamer (2004), better able to have experiences and learn from them. The transformation and reorganization of experience is at the heart of hermeneutic work, and one of the senses of application that Gadamer (2004) described. In this way, the personal in hermeneutics boldly and baldly asserts the value of the authors' experiences, not as hermetic traps sealing the researchers up inside the "circuits of historical life" as Gadamer (2004, p. 278) has so elegantly stated, but as a way to cultivate the very opposite: the competency to have an encounter with the truth of a living topic located in that vast and fluid landscape known as the human condition. Just as the art of the visual or the literary addresses its themes obliquely in their complexity, hermeneutic research rarely offers straightforward solutions to the issues it discusses, at times openly opposing the very idea of straightforward solutions to complex human dilemmas. Its application comes to fruition when it is able to "restore life to its original difficulty" (Caputo, 1987, p.1), that is, when it helps us see life as such - - difficult, tragic, but not impossible as Caputo (1987) has said, but instead full of possibility. This is often accomplished through writing that is lyrical, metaphoric, playful and, above all, evocative. As Jardine (2012) both claimed and continues to demonstrate:

> Hermeneutic work treats its topics like works of art that gather up our festive returns, topics that, in return for our attention and devotion, begin to glow in response to the attention we have bestowed upon them. (p. 3)

The quote may seem to make hermeneutics an approach steeped in romanticism. It certainly has been criticized on these grounds. Habermas (in Bernstein, 2002, p. 273) has accused Gadamer of "engaging in a sentimental nostalgia for past traditions and epochs" in, and Derrida (in Bernstein, 2002, p. 273) has claimed Gadamer was naive in his belief that dialogue can yield unity, coherence, and structure, and as such "gloss over the hetereogeneities and abysses that confront us". It would be un-hermeneutic to deny these risks, however, we continue to assert the opportunity for the unflinching and compassionate honesty that hermeneutic work offers. It can be about the sharpest pain we can experience as humans: the loss of something or someone that makes getting on with one's life, for the moment anyways, unimaginable (Moules, 2009). For all its reliance on metaphor and joy, hermeneutics begins with the assumption that peoples' suffering is real (Davey, 2006). So we offer another bold claim that comes perhaps too early to be believed: When it works, hermeneutics is, in all its instances, *applied*, and its application occurs at a precise moment. According to Risser (1997), "Application is not a simple matter of following a procedure as one follows a recipe, but a matter of perceiving what is at stake in a situation" (p.107). It is here that life returns in all its difficulty because seeing what is at stake is not a given; blindness is the more likely outcome, especially without the help of the other.

The topic of this paper, borne out of 15 years of one of the authors working as a teacher with struggling students and students with diagnosed disabilities, could broadly be construed as an investigation into the phenomenon of slow learners, viewed as mysteries to be lived with rather than problems to be solved, as they are so often construed in educational discourse. This, however, says too much and too little, as formal explanations are want to do with mysteries, because there are missing people involved here that we are determined to "find" so to speak. Let us try to recover them briefly and at the same time to speak to their disappearance.

The Language of Seeing Learners as Slow

"Slow learner" is an educational label that describes a psycho-educational category of students testing in the low-average range of intellectual functioning (King, 2006). Predicted to struggle in school due to having intellectual functioning one category below the average range, slow learners are nevertheless categorically excluded from special education supports and services. While learners categorized as special needs when engaged in regular curriculum are eligible for enhanced tracking, supportive programming and academic accommodation (Alberta Education, 2004), the only programming alternative for slow learners, who are unable to keep up with regular curriculum, that is offered is a set of vocational electives called Knowledge and Employability (K & E) classes. These classes culminate in a different credential than the higher status and better-known Alberta high school diploma (Alberta Education, 2008). Such disparity might simply be addressed as an apparent gap in educational services, but what is also at stake here is the taken for granted-ness of educational categories such as "slow learner" and "learning disabled." In education, they exist as empirical givens. What is forgotten here is that categories like this are socially constructed, and exist as historically-affected institutional practices (Danforth, 2006). Even if these categories also signify measurable learning deficits, as educators we tend to forget that there is no pedagogy attached to them. Who these people are has not been revealed through a label, and the mystery of what to do for them has not been solved. A disability studies perspective serves to remind us that, while an individual may have a distinct physical or intellectual impairment, disability itself is, partially at least, a function of the barriers that are created by institutional responses or lack thereof to the individual's particular impairment (Dunn, 2010). Life itself does not come with a label; it presents challenges to us all that *sometimes* we can overcome, but that often "disable" even the most capable of us. Therefore we ask: Who among us can ever claim that they are always able, never "slow" or "impaired" in life?

Moreover, the use of these kinds of labels in education, because of their implied permanence, that is, because they assume that someone is always and everywhere disabled, or slow if labeled as such, has been critiqued because it can create negative stereotypes, which result in many cases to self-fulfilling prophesies (Danforth, 2006). The situation is both more complicated and simple than this—these students, left on their own in a system infamous for its inflexibility and lack of accommodation for individual differences of all types, are likely to struggle and fail in regular classes (Couture, 2012). This means that the kind of educational support they need requires funding, and garnering funds requires that these students be categorized and labeled (Gilham & Williamson, 2013). Here is the dilemma: If we label these students, making them "appear" as it were, we may be doing them harm, and if we do not, and we allow them to simply "disappear," we may be doing them harm. We are confronted with the possibility of propagating evil, both as "suffering" and "wrong-doing" (Kearney, 2003, p. 84), on either path. It appears to be "a devil's bargain from the start" (Robbins, 2007, p. 6), one that escapes our ability to make sense of it because

> It is the thing (no thing) we cannot get around, both in the sense of something we cannot avoid running into somewhere along the way and in the sense of something we cannot surround, circumscribe, or encompass with our concepts. It is what is left over, the radical hermeneutic residuum which conceptual thinking and planning can never exhaust, include, and assimilate. It is the moment of withdrawal (*Ent-zug*), which inhabits every-

thing that is "given," the absence (*Abwesen, ab-esse*) in everything which we try to summon into presence (*Anwesen, prae-esse*) (Caputo, 1987, p. 270).

Yet, in a taken for granted kind of way, it does make sense, in that we regularly proceed in schools as if everything was right and just, as if the absence /presence, thing/nothing of slow learners did not call for careful investigation in each and every case. It appears to be, as Caputo (1987) claimed, a mystery, one that claims us, one that requires that we be open to both its presence and absence, or more essentially to "the unsettling fluctuation between the two" (p. 270). All well and good, we might say, at the level of ought and should, but how are we supposed to accomplish this-- how are we to understand this mystery, or at the least, where might we turn for help in making our way through?

Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer's (2004) response to this question was to turn to metaphor, or more accurately perhaps, to acknowledge that our language and thus our relationship to the world and to understanding is deeply metaphorical. All understanding, Heidegger (1962) boldly asserted in *Being and Time*, "has the structure of something-as-something," that is, it is *meaningful already*. Weinsheimer (1985) put it beautifully:

> we do not hear pure sounds, but a car in the street, a baby crying; we do not see pure colors or shapes, but always a face, a knife, a wreath of smoke. … Perception understands, and understanding involves the construal of something *as* something. (p. 94)

If understanding is metaphorical, it is also playful, as Gadamer (2004) reminded us, but not playful *as* the uncommitted toying of an individual subject with an object (Vilhauer, 2011). In line with Gadamer's thinking, we are not proposing here simply to *play with* the topic, like a cat does with a mouse, but also to *be played by it* like someone caught up in an event, in what Vilhauer (2011) called "a dance of mutual responsiveness" (p. 33).

This dance is as Schwandt (2007) reminded us is

> a dialectic of transcendence and appropriation. On the one hand, as one gives oneself to the play, one becomes fascinated with the world and loses oneself in the game or play. The play takes over, determining possibilities and moving the player into the unknown. On the other hand, play affects a kind of self-discovery; it reveals possibilities to the player and thus is a kind of self-transformation. Being at play or the event of play is like being in a genuine conversation or dialogue with a text or another person. Play is thus an analogy for the event of understanding. (p. 228)

We hope that through this play, the meaning of the topic (*die Sache*), or better perhaps, the *topic in play*, might emerge more fully. It is this hermeneutic offering, of the possibility of understanding something differently, that we wish to take up in addressing the topic of slow learners through the medium of a fictionalized, stylized narrative in the tradition of hard-boiled detective fiction. It is provisionally titled *"The case of the appearing/disappearing slow learners: An interpretive mystery."*

Though seeing the phenomenon of slow learners as a stylized mystery may seem risky or excessively speculative (and yet Caputo [1987] made the case that avoiding speculation is nothing short of being cowardly and irresponsible), we offer this as an alternative to the way special education/diverse learner discourse sees slow learners, a way that many have accused of being extremely limited, hubristic, and pernicious in that there is a tacit acceptance of the way things are (Couture, 2012; Danforth, 2006; Dunn, 2010, Graham & Slee, 2008). Specifically from a disability studies perspective, these approaches seem to operate on the principle of metonymy, or the substitution of one characteristic, perhaps a student's discreet impairment or some proposed intervention, for the complex whole of their being. The substitution conceals the problematic nature of the operation. Through our alternate "seeing as," we hope to explore this phenomenon metaphorically in an attempt to cast a different light, to broaden and deepen the educational conversation about slow learners. Similarly, we offer the extended metaphor of the hard-boiled detective story as one unsettling way of interpreting the phenomenon of slow learners and broader process of educational classification in Alberta's schools. We hope to find our own forms of renewal in this meaning-making, to inspire and be enriched by other speculative interpretations, and to occasion renewing conversations about how, as educators, we can live more justly with students who appear to us as different in their learning, who appear as *others*, outside but inside educational discourse.

Our claim to the need for an alternate "seeing as" regarding this topic may seem more obvious than our claim to the hermeneutic potential of this particular genre. Why hard-boiled detective writing? Despite the worn cliché of the trench-coated, wise cracking private eye, hard-boiled writing, when it is done right, is powerfully unsettling. It asks uncomfortable questions. It goes to dark places. It has little regard for privilege or authority, particularly when these forms of power are wielded oppressively. Hard-boiled detective writing is an ideal tool to agitate and then, ungently, break away the time-thickened sediment of institutional discourse and practice and reveal the often troubling assumptions beneath. We will explain how this genre came to acquire its vigilant character, and elaborate on its value as a form of applied hermeneutics, but first we offer this demonstration of hard-boiled writing applied to our topic of educational classification.

Samples of the Work in Progress

What follows below are two anecdotes from the lead author's experiences as a teacher working with slow learners, both told as parts of a hard-boiled detective story. John Williamson is a fictionalized version of the author. Max Hunter is a fictional private detective hired to investigate the symbolic and actual disappearance of slow learners in Alberta's schools. Max is characterized as a jaded, detective, someone who does not live easily in the world, a "misfit" in modernity's program so to speak, much like slow learners in the education system. Like them, Max appears and disappears at inexplicable times. He does not comport himself in the same way that these students do however, because he does not suffer fools gladly, he cannot abide "departmental regulations," nor flaccid explanations of "that's just the way things are done." He becomes insufferable, in fact dysfunctional, in the face of them. Max is not there "to serve and protect" but rather, like Dorothy's dog, in the *Wizard of Oz*, there to pull back the curtain (or more in character, perhaps, to tear it to pieces) to reveal the caprice and fakery of the apparatus that propagates the myths and injustices of society. Max loves the horror of the effect, revels in pulling people up short with the "awful truth." Max's investigations lead, as Caputo (2007) wrote,

"not to comfort but to thunderstorms" (p. 214), and he is present as an unwelcome reminder that it is not just nice guys that tell the truth. Max does not always believe that the "other might be right," as does Gadamer, nor is he always Gadamer's ideal conversational partner, the friendly interlocutor engaged in the art of strengthening. We cannot listen to Max because we like him; he is easily dismissed on that account, as was Heidegger for his association with the National Socialist Party or his infamous *das Speigel* interview. Rather we have to listen to Max, in spite of his sordid lifestyle, even when he does not respect us, even when he would rather kick our favorite dog than pet him, because he is capable of dragging us, kicking and screaming, to the truth. In this way, he is an important (radical) foil to Williamson, bonhomie Gadamerian through and through.

In both anecdotes, Max Hunter is the narrator. The first sample demonstrates Max's hard-boiled incredulity in discovering, from primary sources, educational psychology's categorical depictions of slow learners and learning of the apparent lack of effectiveness in current forms of programming for them in Alberta. The next section demonstrates the hermeneutic potential of the fictional detective as means of interrogating Williamson's real unease with the negative assumptions that often haunt slow learners in the educational institutions. The first excerpt from the story begins on a winter's day in Calgary, Alberta…

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The Library

Sitting in the Buick, windshield wipers fending off a slow but insistent snowfall, I realized I had no idea where to start. I had to do something though. A paying case is always good but I didn't want to be stuck in this cold city any longer than I had to and this unnaturally early meeting with Williamson had left me with a lot of day to work with. More often than not I like to work by stirring things up instead of piecing things together[1], waiting to see what comes to the surface, but I didn't even really know where to stir.

Williamson had lent me his public library and university library cards and I had a roughly similar general appearance, aside from being fitter and better dressed, I thought maybe a warm library might be a good place to check up on some of the facts of Williamson's story. I still didn't entirely trust this strange, earnest client. He seemed, at times a moralizing boy scout, at other times a delusional fool. What kind of man hires a detective to look for an educational category? I drove to the downtown public library, and then away from the library when I saw all the nearby lots were full. I parked at an expensive pay lot making sure I got a receipt so I could pass the pain on to my client and walked several chilly blocks. Reaching my destination I passed through a metal detector overseen by an ancient sentry. I'd guessed there might be such security and begrudgingly left Candace[2] locked and lonely in the trunk of the Buick.

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[1] References and commentary will be made through footnotes in the novel so as not to interrupt the narrative. This note acknowledges that Hamilton (1987) makes this point about hard – boiled detectives.

[2] Max Hunter's affectionate nick-name for his revolver. Idea was from Spillane (1947).

I walked past the checkout desk and some shelves of books and sat myself down in a little patch of heaven, a cubicle with chipped particle board, a hard plastic chair, graffiti and a desktop computer with greasy keys and a smudged screen. I logged myself in as Williamson and began to look up subjects. I thought maybe I'd verify what Williamson had begun to tell me about slow learners in our first meeting. It was weird; as soon as I'd entered the phrase "slow learner" a couple of times into library catalogue, the computer I was using seemed to slow down for a minute too. Despite this I managed to locate a recent book on the topic in their holdings. It was called Slow Learners: Their Psychology and Instruction[3], and a copy was available at this branch. I left my trench coat on the chair to mark my place and walked up the stairs, retrieved the book from one of the shelves and returned to my station.

I noticed that while I was upstairs I had acquired a neighbor in cubicle beside me. He didn't seem particularly sociable or even conscious. A head of matted hair rested, facing away from me, on a huge fleshy forearm. A formless grey overcoat concealed the rest of my companion's appearance but I could detect the sickly sweet smell of rot. Classy joint.

The cover of the book I selected depicted child of twelve or thirteen sitting backwards on a chair, maybe to emphasize his perceived backwardness as a slow learner. He was staring out at me with a look that was both forlorn and somewhat vacant. Reading the introduction I noticed that the authors authoritatively stated the I.Q. levels Williamson had only mentioned approximately. I also observed that they seemed to think he had pretty much everything else figured out about slow learners too.

> The experience of educators confirms that there are many children who are so backward in basic subjects that they need special help. These pupils have limited scope for achievement. They have intelligence quotients between 76 and 89 and they constitute about 18 percent of the total school population. These students do not stand out as very different from their classmates except that they are always a little slow on the uptake and are often teased by the other students because of their slowness. They are quite well built physically but rather clumsy and uncoordinated in movement. They are no trouble in school. Although much of the work is difficult for them, they are patient and cooperative…They need help in the form of special class [sic] in ordinary school. Most slow learners struggle along in ordinary classes failing to have the special attention which they need.[4]

*"Wow," I thought, "could it be true that almost a fifth of the students in any given school are **just like this**?" That smelled funny so I checked out another source on the computer, this time an article written by an American psychologist, answering a series of "FAQs" or "frequently asked questions" about slow learners on the website "schoolpsychogistfiles.com".[5]*

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[3] Reddy, Ramar, & Kusama (2006).

[4] Reddy, Ramar, & Kusama (2006).

[5] King (2006).

A "slow learner" is not a diagnostic category, it is a term people use to describe a student who has the ability to learn necessary academic skills, but at rate and depth below average same age peers. In order to grasp new concepts, a slow learner needs more time, more repetition, and often more resources from teachers to be successful. Reasoning skills are typically delayed, which makes new concepts difficult to learn.

At this point the website quoted the same IQ numbers that Williamson and the previous book mentioned. But then the writer made and interesting clarification.

Those who fall two standard deviations below the mean are often identified as having an Intellectual Disability (IQ below 70). A slow learner does not meet criteria for an Intellectual Disability (also called mental retardation) [sic]. However, she learns slower than average students and will need additional help to succeed.

All this sorting into cozy little boxes was making me miss my tiny warm hotel room, not to mention the greasy buffet table at the hotel restaurant. I was tired and hungry. I noticed my companion in the next cubicle had disappeared; I chided myself for missing this when it happened. Still he'd seemed harmless. I gave myself a couple of quick slaps to the face and concentrated on my research again.

I was looking for a different perspective on this classification process and found a study in an on-line journal that offered just that.[6] This article was pretty technical. Still I was able to piece together that these authors didn't like how psychologists and educators, in the authors' opinions, often overused the idea of "low average" in describing the traits and needs of students. "Low average" described the very same IQ range as slow learners were said to have. They said "low average" carries the risk of being a self-fulfilling prophecy for children without the benefit of being a label that leads to additional services. In addition to this, the authors did an interesting experiment. They found one hundred and ninety six archived I.Q. tests from a private clinic in an urban centre in Alberta and rescored these tests using a different scoring system that was also considered acceptable in the field[7]. They found that a full eighteen percent of the classifications changed by one category, from low average to average for example. No wonder these slow learners were disappearing. You could make them come and go by how you scored the test.

The authors who did the rescoring experiment were pretty critical about the practice of denying struggling students special education services on the basis of their low average IQ tests. I wondered why this would even happen. I found an answer to this, though not a very satisfying one, on the previous psychologist's website. It was in her answer to another F.A.Q[8]. "If these students struggle so much, why do are they often not eligible for Special Education?"

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[6] Claypool, Murusiak, & Janzen (2008).

[7] The rescoring involved replacing the "symbol search" subtest instead of the "coding" subtest as one of the measures in determining full scale I.Q.

[8] King (2006).

Special Education services are provided for students who have a disability. Slow learners typically do not have a disability, even though they need extra support. Cognitive abilities are too high for these learners to be considered for an Intellectual Disability. However, the abilities are usually too low to be considered for a Learning Disability.

I was still suspicious of the claims these sources were making about this group of students, but now something new was bugging me too. If I had it right, it seemed strange to me that in many jurisdictions a special education system had evolved such that it routinely excluded from special services a whole group of learners that the intelligence tests the system seemed to value so highly predicted would struggle at school. "Where have the slow learners gone?" indeed. Maybe my foolish client was on to something after all. A little thrill of danger ran down my spine.

I did know, from my conversation with Williamson, a place where some of the slow learners in Alberta had gone. It was an instructional tier offered to struggling high school students in some schools. Williamson seemed to have mixed feeling about it; then again I didn't know that that meant either - - Williamson seemed to have mixed feelings about everything. I typed in "Knowledge and Employability (K & E) classes." I got several hits. I selected the third item down called "Accountability Pillar Results for Annual Education Results Report"[9] because I wanted to know who was accountable for these classes. I always wanted to know who was accountable. I was rewarded with a complex document showing various statistics about student achievement and about parent and student perceptions about the general quality of education in the province. "Dead end," I thought. It wasn't telling me anything about K & E or slow learners. I was about to close the site when I saw the phrase "high school completion rate." This seemed important, but why? I remembered Williamson griping that the students who took this level of classes left school with a credential called the K & E certificate, a credential widely seen as less valuable than the Alberta High School Diploma. Surely if there were even half as many slow learners around as the previous data claimed and they really did have as tough of a time in school as the information about the categories suggested, these K & E classes would be an inevitable path for many of them. The completion results would surely show a significant minority of Alberta's students earning the K & E certificate instead of the High School diploma. I started to look at the stats on this. Now that I was in the right section they were easy to find, but not so easy to believe. In 2009, 30,689 students completed high school in three years having earned a high school diploma; 305 completed earning a K & E certificate of achievement. In 2008, 30,500 students completed high school with the diploma, 266 completed with the certificate in the same year. In 2007, 30,105 diplomas, 255 certificates. I rubbed my eyes and looked again, I thought maybe I'd missed a zero. If up to eighteen percent of students were slow learners why were less than one percent of students completing high school with the credential intended for slow learners? "Maybe the high school diploma route isn't so bad for them" I thought, "maybe most of the slow learners manage to scrape through at the higher instructional level." But what if they didn't? I looked at the drop our rates for the same five years. For several years running a quarter of the year's cohort of potential graduates had not completed high school within the three expected years,[10] it rose a little to eighty percent when another two years

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[9] Alberta Education (2008, 2009, 2010).

[10] Alberta Education (2008, 2009, 2010).

beyond the expected three were added. I wondered how many of the drop-outs were slow learn-ers? "How do students get lost?" I pondered for a second. I realized one of the main ways was by not completing school. The mystery was coming into focus for me. I felt all tingly; the hairs on the back of my neck were standing at attention.

Suddenly there was an arm around my throat. So eager had I been to begin my investigation, put this case to bed nice and early, I hadn't really taken a good look at my foul neighbor at the next computer station. Now he was choking me from behind. The full force of the rotting smell hit me with the last breath I was able to take before he cinched my throat shut. As massive, fleshy arms tightened around me I brought my feet up to my desk and pushed backwards with all my strength. The desk thudded against the wall, giving me what I thought was good leverage for dislodging my assailant but he easily absorbed the force and the chokehold just got tighter. My peripheral vision beheld a profile of a part of a pallid face and a bulging eye, black as an eight ball. I wrenched to one side, the hold just got tighter. I looked to the entrance of the library; the old guard was sleeping in his chair. For some reason, my eyes fixed for a second on the computer I was operating. The escape key was missing. Someone didn't appreciate me poking around this category, I realized. My indignation at the story arriving at this point was short-lived as every-thing went black.

Later in the story…

The Entrance Exam

The sun threw little daggers at me through the gaps in the dirty curtains, interrupting what felt like the first moments of sound sleep I had experienced since awakening from a strange dream. During the night I'd dreamt I was at the dinner table, a shrill voice was telling me "don't let your meat touch your potatoes, don't let your potatoes touch your peas" over and over again. I looked down, fork in hand, to try to follow the instructions, make sure my portions were orderly. My plate was filled with hundreds of tiny children, dressed in white, brown and green, skittering across the plate with the unsettling speed of fleeing mice.

I rolled over and looked at the clock. It was quarter to eleven. My head hurt, it was still throb-bing from the beating I took at the library and the bourbon I took late last night to nurse my wounds. I sat up. I felt sick but not as sick as I ought to, not as sick as I would feel if I had a salaried job[11]. I tripped over to the window on legs as stiff as stilts. As I looked through the dirty glass with its breathtaking view of a trash bin and narrow industrial road leading out to the ugly main drag, I realized I couldn't take any more of this on an empty stomach. I spied the adjacent neon sign of a breakfast joint, its glow dulled by the winter daylight. I called Williamson and asked if we could meet for breakfast, told him I had some questions. He said his lunch break was at 11:05 so he could meet me then. I made some acrid coffee in the machine provided and changed from the suit I'd slept in to the only other one I'd brought along. I exited the hotel through the main lobby, scraped out a sightline the size of my head on the windshield of the

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[11] line penned by Chandler (1992, p. 44).

Buick, started it up and carefully drove the fifty feet to the restaurant. The cook, the waitress and I made three, a crowd. I sat down and the waitress rambled over with a menu. I ordered black coffee, bacon, toast and a four-egg omelet with extra peppers to kill anything untoward that might be lurking in the grease. I snatched an abandoned section of a newspaper from the table next to me. I read

"Alberta's minister of education refers to self as slow learner."[12]

Apparently while being grilled in the legislature by opposition member, Harry Chase, about the use of the multiple choice format for provincial standardized exams, Hancock, the minister, had referred to himself as a slow learner. I guess he was using some sarcasm of his own to suggest his opponent's questions were obscure. That was interesting. Williamson had said "slow learner" was hidden. In this case, it seemed right out in the open, more available, in fact than other things he might have called himself to make the same point. I'm not the most politically correct guy around but even I realized that, for a variety of reasons, no sensible politician would have chosen to call himself "retarded" even if it was to insult his opponent.

Williamson showed up looking disheveled already. A lock of his hair was sticking straight up and he'd gotten off track buttoning his shirt. He was off by one and the unsettled fabric stuck out like a fat finger in the middle of his chest. He said he'd been up late again looking for slow learners in his computer. He ordered some sort of fruit cocktail and toast, the cheapest thing on the menu.

I asked him the question I'd been wondering about for a while. Did any of these slow learners he said had disappeared end up reappearing after high school?

Instead of answering my question, Williamson starting griping, again about the Certificate of Achievement many of his slow learners end up graduating with instead of the high school diploma, saying how unfair it was that his kids worked so hard but only got a token sort of high school completion credential, one that wouldn't get them very far after high school.

So I challenged him, "So what if some of your K & E students, slow learners… whatever… graduate with a different credential, get credits in different sorts of courses, what's the big deal? If they can't handle the normal program isn't that what should happen? Besides, I thought you told me if they did well at this level they could always move back up to the regular program?" I

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[12] Event was actually described on Alberta Teachers Association website (2009)

Harry Chase (LIB—Calgary-Varsity): "Because of my inability to interpret educational bafflegab, I have prepared a translation test to help the Minister of Education qualify and quantify his responses from yesterday, upon which he will be graded, with his results published by the Fraser Institute. HB pencil ready, Mr. Minister. Multiple-choice tests (a) assume that there's only one correct response, (b) emphasize the final product over process, (c) are easy and inexpensive to mark, (d) any or all of the above. Letter only, please."
Minister of Education Dave Hancock: "Mr. Speaker, being a **slow learner**, I missed the first part of the question, so I can't answer the (a), (b), (c), or (d) part."
Mr. Chase: "Grade 12 students don't have those options. (emphasis added)

was already beginning to have my own feelings about this but I wanted to hear what he had to say.

Williamson looked to be mustering his forces for another of his moralizing salvos, but possibly remembering how I'd reacted last time he tried this, he regrouped and asked a question instead. "You remember how I told you I used to do a lot of work with the high school registered apprenticeship programs[13]?"

I nodded. Where was he going with this?

"Well, one time I was at the Apprenticeship and Industry Training office. I needed some more apprenticeship applications for my students and with the office being so close to my school I found it easier to go there than just asking them to mail them out. There was a kid in front of me in line with his mom, a young man I mean. Not a young man like a kid, a young man like eighteen or nineteen."

I loved it when Williamson lost control of his labels. He spent so long looking for the right one I was amazed he ever got anything done. He took a breath and continued.

"Anyhow, I'd overheard as I was waiting behind them that the ...son had just graduated from high school, one of the vocational schools where they have K & E, the lower tier only of regular education classes and shop[14] classes. During high school he had been indentured as an apprentice mechanic and worked a thousand hours in the trade. He was registering for his first eight weeks of technical, you know, college training, to complete the first year of his apprenticeship. I could hear from the conversation that he started in K & E classes but that he had upgraded during high school and by the time he'd left high school he'd completed the regular high school diploma. His transcript showed he'd enrolled in and passed the right level of math to be automatically accepted, providing that he had been apprenticed, into the college part of his trades training."

*"So what was the problem?" I asked, still stymied as to the relevance of any of this. "Well the guy at the desk said with K & E courses on his transcript and considering where he went to school he should really write the entrance exam, you know the exam that apprentices who **don't** have the pre-requisite courses have to write."*

"What? Hadn't he already passed the required math course?" I was confused.

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[13] A provincial program that enables high school students to begin to earn required hours on the job towards trades certification while also receiving high school course credits for the time they put in Alberta Learning. Alberta Learning (2003).

[14] Alberta's program of studies gives students the option of more difficult and less difficult classes in all the core areas, English, Math, Social Studies and Science. Both streams are considered regular education. The lower tier is one level above K & E. Alberta Education (2013).

"This was the same question the…apprentice asked. Yeah, but the guy at the counter said K & Es have a tough time with mechanics training and before wasting a bunch of time and money in the program he should just write the exam to see."

"To see what?"

"To see if he could handle the coursework for the program he was enrolling in, I guess."

"So, what happened?"

"The apprentice and his mom kept asking if he really had to write the exam of if he could just register. After listening for a while I poked my nose in and, as quietly as I could because I still needed my forms, told the apprentice and his mom that I was sure he had all the prerequisites based on what I'd heard and that they should insist on going ahead and enrolling in the college program, without writing the entrance exam"

"Did the guy at the counter give in?"

"Apparently it was getting close to his break time or something and this other worker told the guy she'd take over and processed the application. He kind of shrugged and went on break. After they were done, she handled my request too and when I couldn't help but comment on the situation that just played out in front of me she told me that her co-worker wasn't wrong. Students from K & E, in their experience, do have a rough time she said."

"Is that true?"

"It could be. I've heard trade school programs are much harder than people think. Lots of people probably flunk out. Maybe this one would have had trouble too, but he had the pre-requisite."

"Would you have done more if the guy at the counter dug his heels in?"

"I don't know. I needed the help of the Apprenticeship board for a lot of things at the time. I had a lot of students in the apprenticeship program."

The waitress came by to refill our coffee. Williamson held out his fruit bowl instead of his cup. He really was a mess.

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Max provides a way to ask an important question: What is the appropriate interpretive response to the procrustean excesses of educational classification these anecdotes describe? The measurement and sorting of students is a serious business, and the rightful critique of the negative consequences and methodological arrogance of these sorting practices can, at times, at least seem to take on a grave character (Ervin, n.d.). Attempting to have a "serious" conversation about this topic, however, at least if serious is misunderstood as polite, rule-abiding and theoretical, may

well mean surrendering the hermeneutic vantage point from which the specific, bloody, gro-tesque truths of educational classification might be revealed. In a strategy that we argue is more effective, disability rights scholars and advocates, particularly those with disabilities, have often taken to playing with disability categorization in satirical artistic representations. Phil Smith's (2006) free-verse experimental poem "Split-------ting the ROCK of {speci[ES]al} e.ducat.tion: FLOWers of lang[ue]age in >DIS<ability studies" [sic] used found poetry from psychology texts, "mash-up" words, popular culture references, profanity, and puns to disrupt the orderly narra-tives of educational classification. Another example is the work of Mike Ervin, an increasingly popular blogger, physically disabled with muscular dystrophy, who calls himself "smart ass cripple." A side panel on Ervin's blog quotes Bertrand Russell "those who are solemn and pontifical are not to be successfully fought by being even more solemn and even more pontifical" (n.d.), and his work embodies this theory. Writing, as he often does, of his demeaning experienc-es in the residential school for children with disabilities where he received his education, the Sam Houston Institute of Technology, Ervin (2012, 2013) has never missed the opportunity to con-cisely state his opinion of the school by referring to its title in acronym form (SHIT). Remarking on the implications of increasingly sophisticated technologies to detect birth defects pre-natally, and thereby offer the option of terminating the pregnancies that would otherwise lead to the birth of children with disabilities, Ervin (2012) wrote "I've always been tempted to form an exclusive cripple fraternity called "Coulda Beena Borted" (para. 1).

The "play" of these authors with controversial topics that they continue to take very seriously, honors the topics in their "original difficulty," and promotes the free play of dialogue and the opportunities for understanding more easily than less playful communications about the same topic. We think, through hard-boiled detective fiction, we may be able to invite this sort of play with reference to this topic as well. We hope to use the convention of the genre to break through abstraction, bedevil predictability, and keep the work playfully unsettling.

Speculation/Making up Truth

Even as we defend our choice to a certain hermeneutic leeway with the tone of the piece, why do we find it necessary to explain the appearance/disappearance of slow learners as a work of fiction? Why make things up? The following example from a hard-boiled detective novel may begin to explain. In Raymond Chandler's (1942) *The High Window*, detective Phillip Marlow discovers a body in the process of investigating the case of a stolen rare coin. When two police-men come to question him, they demand his cooperation by threatening him with various charges, even as they refuse to tell him any information about the case. In response, he tells them a story of another case, the deaths of a wealthy heir and his secretary in a murder-suicide. The investi-gating police, to prevent scandal, chose to ignore crucial evidence and reverse the roles in their final report of the case, depicting the heir as the victim and his secretary as the killer. Marlowe tells his interrogators "until you guys own your own souls you don't own mine" (p. 15). The two police men Marlow is speaking to, recognizing what his story suggests about the moral culpabil-ity of a police force that often engages in such practices, become less threatening and more forthcoming with him and the three begin to have a more open conversation about the present case. Later, when the younger officer remarks he would like to read up on the case Marlowe was describing, Marlowe admits that he made it all up. In a way, it does not matter. It could easily have been true and there was still enough mutually understood truth, the sort of truth that hurts,

in Marlowe's story to chasten his interrogators and enable a different kind of conversation to evolve, one that brought a different understanding of the case.

Kearney (2002) has written extensively of the power, for better or worse, of story. He has suggested that despite rumors of the third millennium death of story in our post-modern culture of "parody and pastiche" (p. 11) and "talk shows" (p. 10) (and, we would add, reality television), that story remains central to the human experience. It is, in this way, alive and well. Kearney makes his case with the help of Aristotelian poetics, organizing the ancient and continuing societal need for stories into categories of plot/mythos, recreation/mimesis, release/catharsis, wisdom/phronesis, and ethics/ethos, each with its own ancient and continuing connection to the human need for story. This is, in many ways, a hermeneutic phenomenological celebration of story, "fictional" or "real," and one that would certainly support its use in any applied hermeneutic project where the ongoing, sensitive refinement of one's understanding of self and others is essential in living ethically. Kearney has also, however, sometimes distinguished between fact and fiction, and drawn attention to the unique powers of fiction to explore possibilities, ignite imagination and promote understanding. He has pointed out that while narrative as a form of academic history, works via evidence, fiction "discloses possible worlds" (p. 135). As we have indicated, our particular speculation is something like this: What would happen if we perceived and treated mysterious gaps in programming for students the same way we treat hard-boiled mysteries involving crimes such as homicide, or in this particular case, missing persons? What understandings might this occasion?

Hard-boiled Detective Fiction is Hermeneutic

> The job of the writer is to take a close and uncomfortable look at the world they [characters in detective fiction] inhabit, the world we all inhabit, and the job of the novel is to make the corpse stink. (Walter Mosley, 2005, p. 2)

We wish to further discuss some of the features critics and writers have proposed as defining characteristics of our medium of presentation, the genre of hard-boiled mystery writing, and to draw out its deeply hermeneutic sensibilities. We would suggest that hard-boiled detective writing represents a hermeneutic turn in the field of mystery writing.

Detective Mysteries: A Brief History

Though mysteries, both supernatural and those we now call crimes against persons and crimes against property, have obviously been a theme of storytelling since antiquity (Cain and Abel for example), the modern detective story had its roots in four short stories by Edgar Allen Poe. All of these stories featured an amateur aristocratic detective by the name of C. Auguste Dupin who assists slower-witted Parisian professional police officers in the solving of frightfully befuddling crimes (Van Leer, 2003). Accompanied by his friend, a less intelligent un-named narrator, who serves the role of conversational sounding board for the protagonist's brilliant reasoning, Dupin, an otherwise solitary figure who seems to eschew all other human relations as beneath a man of his intelligence, solves crimes through the application of rules, logic, and observation. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle obviously followed, perhaps even perfected this formula in his creation of the iconic detective Sherlock Holmes and his companion and biographer Watson. These very

popular late 19th and early 20th century works led to the emergence, from the 1920s to the 1940s, of a genre of mystery writing, called the golden age of detective fiction. While these works displayed significant variety in characterization, plot and setting, they all celebrated the same sort of process for solving crime. The Holmes "method" involved, in part, the intellectual separation of the reasoning detective from the outer world that he, in turn, investigates, a methodological approach that loudly echoes the influential work of Descartes in the philosophical tradition (Jardine, 1998). More specifically, while the investigation was initiated by a bodily and perhaps even bloody crime in the outer world, the solution to golden age mysteries typically involved the successful application of a process of abstract, bloodless, almost disembodied reasoning, undertaken by a privileged amateur detective at a venue far from where the crime occurred (Chandler, 1950).

In a narrative move that likely conflated social class with intellectual fitness in the social Darwinist sense (Gould, 1981), the detective's status as an amateur, who solved crimes as a benevolent form of recreation, reinforced his superiority to, and separation from, the paid police detectives he (or she, in the case of the few female detectives created during this era) assisted. The resolution of the crimes led to the reinforcement of a social order that was never questioned in the larger narratives, or put in any serious danger by the crimes. The orderliness of these narratives was further honored, though often somewhat in jest, by the publication of various sets of rules of fair play governing the author–reader puzzle-games of solving the mysteries by popular authors in the genre (Dewan, 2010). The conservative, escapist tendencies that characterized this genre may go a long way in explaining their popularity as a distraction from the many economic and political anxieties Britons experienced in the interwar years. As Rzepka (2005) has noted

> With its reliable evocation of order out of disorder, its respect for the rule of law in defense of life and property, and its faith that a rational intention informs even the most baffling acts of violence, the new genre of detection seemed tailor-made to allay the anxieties that lingered below the superficial complacency of British middle-class life. (p. 153)

Strangely enough, the same charge might be leveled against positivist research in the present era. Hard-boiled detective writing was a reaction against golden age detective fiction that was pioneered in America in the 1930s by writers such as Dashielle Hammet and Raymond Chandler. It sought to infuse a gritty, albeit stylized, realism into a genre of writing that had, until this point, been characterized by a paradoxical (considering that it dealt with murder) gentility (Willet, 1992). The genre of golden age detective fiction that preceded hard-boiled had, according to Raymond Chandler (1950), depicted a style of investigating murders that bore little resemblance to how detectives really worked, and sanitized the corrupt, sleazy, and dangerous environments in which most violent crimes occurred.

Despite his grudging admiration of a few golden age writers, Chandler (1950) found the genre stilted and inartistic. In his essay *The Simple Art of Murder*, a manifesto of sorts for hard-boiled detective fiction, he (returning again to our parallels between Golden Age detectives and Cartesian reasoning methods) speculated of many golden age authors that

> The coolheaded constructionist does not also come across with lively characters, sharp dialogue, a sense of pace, and an acute use of observed detail. The grim logician has as

much atmosphere as a drawing board. The scientific sleuth has a nice new shiny laboratory, but I'm sorry I can't remember the face. (p. 12)

Hard-boiled writing, on the other hand, Chandler claimed, "took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley" (p. 14). He proposed that the true literary potential of the mystery genre could only be reached through work that acknowledged the tragic pervasiveness of corruption and that celebrated in all their complexity the grimly wise-cracking, sacrificial heroes who deigned to wade through these cesspools of inequity in order to find some small measure of justice or redemption for their clients. Though alert and observant, the hard-boiled heroes realize that abstract reasoning is not sufficient. If they want to solve the mysteries, they will have to get their hands dirty. The stories, albeit stylized, attempt to portray a narrative connectivity to a "life world" as opposed to the sterile, detached sensibilities of the golden age genre.

The vision that Chandler expressed and that, in our experience, hard-boiled detective writers try to follow glows with hermeneutic possibility. Despite the loneliness and distance hard-boiled detectives keep from others and from institutions, the knowledge and wisdom they possess comes as a result of engagement with the world. This world is messy and complicated, and will remain so even after the reader is provided with the small dose of redemption the narratives allow. Good writing does not sugar-coat or oversimplify this reality; indeed in something of Britzman's (1998) spirit of the inconsolable, and Caputo's (1987) "undecidable," it celebrates it.

It is true that in hard-boiled detective fiction, the ostensive crimes (not in the sense that the crimes are not real but in the sense that crime is everywhere) that initiate the narratives are often ostensibly solved. Deeper mysteries, however, always remain. There are, as well, mysteries common to many of the stories, though this commonality does not suggest they are easily solved. For example, even after the killer's motives are revealed near the end of the stories, these seem insufficient as explanations for the departures from human decency that the crimes entail. As Chandler (1992) put it, writing of a murderess, "it was a cool day and very clear. You could see a long way--but not as far as Velma had gone" (p. 292). Then, there is the ongoing existential mystery of why and how the heroes, despite their cultural competency, choose to adopt identities that separate them from all that might be comfortable, good and enduring in the world of human relations. Why would they allow themselves to be used by clients who lie to them, who put them at risk and who are usually only marginally less corrupt than the villains? What is the personal cost of giving up so much to eke out such a small measure of justice, and why would anyone do it? This inexplicable departure from humanity has significant existential consequences, as suggested in the following passage

> I put the duster away folded with the dust in it, leaned back and just sat, not smoking, not even thinking. I was a blank man. I had no face, no meaning, no personality, hardly a name. I didn't want to eat. I didn't even want a drink. I was the page from yesterday's calendar crumpled at the bottom of the waste basket. (Chandler, 1949, p. 179)

Hermeneutics is Hard-Boiled

"He felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him see the works."
— *Dashiell Hammett, 1930, p. 63*

If good hard-boiled detective writing can be said to be hermeneutic, it might also be said that all good hermeneutic writing is, at least latently, hard-boiled detective writing. We say this because of the converging ways these genres honor the concept of mystery in its deepest sense. Etymologically "mystery" has meant and, many philosophers of language would argue (e.g., Derrida, 1988; Gadamer, 2004), continues to carry resonances of all of the following meanings: "religious truth via divine revelation, hidden spiritual significance, mystical truth, secret rites, secret worship, to close or shut, a trade or craft, a secret or hidden thing, and most recently, a detective story" (Mystery, n.d.). Hermeneutic phenomenology fully devotes its time to the investigation of various kinds of existential, phenomenological, and linguistic mysteries, with deep ontological and epistemological implications. Like hard-boiled detectives investigating their own set of mysteries, hermeneutic philosophers have often, through a combination of deep reflection and worldly engagement, achieved the hermeneutic equivalent to "solving" or, better yet, naming some phenomenological aspect of being. Even in their novelty, and "solvency," these knowledge claims often resonate with us in terrifying familiarity[15]. The trouble is that for every phenomenon named or understanding suggested, a new set of mysteries and complications emerge. Often these involve the ongoing mysteries of how it might appear to us, and how we might live authentically with what appears (Heidegger, 1962).

Mysteries of Truth: Concealment and Unconcealment

Waves can wash away the most stubborn stains, and the stars do not care one way or another.
John D. MacDonald, 1987, p. 51

Though Heidegger (1962) did not name this phenomenon as a mystery, we might note that an essential mystery of being involves the process by which, as soon as we understand something a certain way*, as something*, other possibilities become hidden or effaced. As Heidegger described in *Being and* Time, in a "clearing" (p. 133), a thing may well be unconcealed or revealed to us, but it still appears in a certain way that conceals other ways it may appear. This is a temporal and historical process, one where we tend to forget previous modes of being, thereby, preventing the entire range of possibilities of being from ever being revealed to us. Unconcealment/concealment implies a serious interpretive mystery of what potential alternate understandings are being concealed by what we currently understand as the truth about the people, places, things, relationships, and experiences. The narrative samples' depictions of our desperate quest to understand

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[15] From broadcaster Robert Harrison's (2005) reflection below on Heidegger's statement "The growing and unacknowledged anxiety in the face of thinking no longer allows insight into the oblivion of being which determines the age." (Harrison, 2005).

If only Heidegger was with us today. What would he say? Would he be speechless? Would he say "I saw it all coming"? "I told you what the oblivion of being leads to. The unearthing of the earth. The un-worlding of the world. The devastation of the bonds between people. The setting in place of an absolutely technical state or better a bio technical state, which orders and enframes all things, all available energies and resources. Putting them on standing reserve for general distribution and human consumption. I told you that when beings are abandoned by being they lose their density, their power of resistance. Their very thingness and fall prey to objectification, exploitation and manipulation. When being withdraws from the world the world becomes an unworld, no longer hospitable to human habitation." (audio podcast).

and to do right by these students, and the despairing passages from Chandler suggest that the implications of living in this state of ongoing contingency are hard-boiled indeed.

Mysteries of the Unsaid

Related to this, another mystery addressed in hermeneutic phenomenology is the mystery of the unsaid, particularly the truth of the unsaid, which Gadamer (2004) equated with language's speculative structure. In a sentiment that sounds almost post-modern, Gadamer noted that every word, though seeming to appear in the world in its individuality actually causes the "whole of language…to resonate and the whole world view it carries to appear" (p. 454). Every word, on occasion of its use, he noted, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by "responding and summoning" (p. 454). In Gadamer's (2004) opinion, the presence/absence of what is unsaid, instead of virally deconstructing meaning (Derrida, 1994), instead brings it into play.

> The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 454)

For Gadamer, this is true in everyday communication, where one's communicative act involves both what one says and what one leaves unsaid, and it is particularly evident in the wilful use of tact where both parties, for the sake of decorum, maneuver around what is often a keen mutual awareness of what needs to be left unsaid (Gadamer, 2004). In addition to acknowledging the words that are immediately available, the communicative "unsaid" involves a further act of speculation on the part of the participants that Gadamer claims is common in conversation. This is also true, argued Gadamer, when one records another's statement, perhaps in an interview or legal interrogation. The necessary speculation distorts the statement even when the recorder makes no wilful attempt at distortion. Even as the recorder speculatively distorts to some degree, the artifact, the legalistic recorded statement often preserves little of the speaker's meaning.

> Anyone who has experienced an interrogation—even if only as a witness—knows what it is to make a statement and how little it is a statement of what one means. In a statement the horizon of meaning of what is to be said is concealed by methodical exactness; what remains is the "pure" sense of the statements. That is what goes on record. But meaning thus reduced to what is stated is always distorted meaning. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 464)

When we move from the methodological reductiveness of producing transcripts to the interpretively rich exercise of producing poetry, quite an opposite effect occurs. Gadamer claimed that, in a (presumably well written) poetic construction of a conversation, even as the immediate opinion or experience of the author may be distorted, the speculative richness of the poem remains intact, preserving not just the content of the captured conversation, as might be shown in a transcript of a conversation, but the totality of the said and unsaid and the speculative address of the poem to its mode of being.

> If poetry shows people in conversation, then what is given in the poetic statement is not the statement that a written report would contain, but in a mysterious way the whole of the conversation is as if present. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 465)

We have all had the experience of being haunted by a piece of art, a poem, an evocatively written prose passage, or a picture, even as we are unsure about exactly what it has to say. This is the mystery of the unsaid as truth, not distortion. We find this in hermeneutic scholarship, particularly some of Jardine's (2000) essays on the most boldly hopeful and simultaneously mysterious philosophy of education possible, that of the "bringing forth of human life" (p. 121). We find it, as well, in hard-boiled detective writing, particularly the work of Chandler (1992, 1950) who, as we have tried to show in the few passages we have sampled, used metaphor, hyperbole, and understatement naturally and beautifully. In recalling the not fully speakable complexity of human experience, this sort of writing can help to humanize us, can help to remind us of our follies and fallacies, and in doing so, offer a interpretive foil to the technical forms of distortion that surround us in contemporary life. Hermeneutic writing is hard-boiled in its attention to the "original difficulty," the truth of the unsaid, a truth that cannot be reduced, in the words of Sergeant Joe Friday from the iconic television series *Dragnet,* to "just the facts, ma'am."

Mysteries of Suffering

While hermeneutic openness requires a measure of goodwill, Max, the more radical hermeneut of this investigation would point out, sometimes good will is not enough. Our examples begin to show how, despite any good intentions to target specific needs and organize supports, the slow learner label can be harmful. While a disability studies perspective would rightly criticize the portrayal of a students as tragically suffering *from* the differences in their learning styles, abilities, or levels of achievement that result, in part, in their educational labelling (Titchkosky, 2001), many labelled students suffer profoundly from their school experiences (Couture, 2012). While many citizens at large often enjoy the freedom to seek out vocations and recreational activities that they enjoy and have some aptitude for, students who struggle academically, at least in the limited range of academic activities schools often impose, endure days of compulsory public display of their weakest skills. In order to qualify for help, support, and accommodation, they are required to endure the further humiliation of a process that labels their particular ways of learning and being as defective. Though impairment may well be a natural part of the human experience, the institutional suffering of these students is not a natural disaster; human (in) agency plays a part in this tragedy and the quiet violence of the sorting the "not normal" from the "normal" needs to be contested from the perspective of social justice as Foucault (1997) has so often reminded us.

There is, however, a mystery even deeper and more complex than this "whodunit" of social inequity. Flowing from the awesome responsibility of being an educator, it relates to how to best hear the ethical call the other, particularly the other who suffers, makes to us and how best to address this suffering. It involves, as Caputo (1987) wrote, a controversy over the naturalness of suffering itself. From a religious perspective, he has argued, suffering does not belong in the world.

> If there is something inviolable about the other, something that demands that we treat him or her with dignity, suffering is more like a wanton marauder that violates at will. Suffering is violence, human violence when it comes to the suffering which human beings in-

flict on one another, the violence of the cosmos itself when suffering is inflicted by a natural disaster or a disease without warning. (Caputo, 1987, p. 279)

From this perspective, God expresses his solidarity with humans, and we with each other, in the context of the scandal of human suffering, "the genealogy of religion in suffering means that the affirmation of God is implicated in the affirmation of life and the protest against suffering" (Caputo, 1987, p. 281). Caputo, with reference to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and "Dyonasaic exuberance" (p. 285) contrasted this perspective with "tragic hermeneutics," the affirmation of the totality of fate, including "the pain as well as the pleasure" (p. 285). This affirmation extends beyond enduring fate, it involves finding the courage to laugh at one's place in the flux. As Nietzsche (in Caputo, 1987) wrote, "the most suffering animal on the earth invented for itself – laughter" (p. 285). It is Caputo's contention that the project of radical hermeneutics lies in the tension between these two perspectives: laughing away suffering with no attempted resistance seems almost craven; fighting suffering with excessive stoicism seems a hubristic form of activism that imposes its own oppressive suffering. How radical the hermeneutics of this mystery story will be is another mystery to be worked out, between Max Hunter and John Williamson over the course of the novel, but it bears mentioning how closely Caputo's guiding, dual (and duelling) perspectives on suffering are reflected in the hard-boiled genre. Whether religious in the strict sense or not, the detective hero "speaks in the name of life against suffering" (Caputo, 1987, p. 281). He has "character" and "honour" and is the "best man in his world and a good enough man in any world" (Chandler, 1950, p. 6). He expresses his empathy for the underdogs, the exploited, in muscular acts of redemption and sacrifices himself to protect those in his care. At the same time, he is never too serious. He is possessed of a "rude wit" and a "lively sense of the grotesque" (Chandler, 1950, p. 5) and, even as the narrative places him in constant mortal danger, he seems to experience his adventures with some ironic amusement. Our story too relies on this tension. There is the earnest, disability studies-informed need to describe the educational experiences of slow learners and to open up different possibilities for seeing and working with struggling students. The hermeneutic, hard-boiled work also, however, works through acknowledgement of the flux, the impossibility of knowing with certainty exactly how to understand and what to do, the willingness to shake up the well-intentioned but overly certain understandings of these students and their needs. It is in this acknowledgement that the sometimes sardonic, always hard-boiled breath of laughter helps keep our understandings open and inclusive.

Bios

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