

**LIVING AND TEACHING IN RURAL SOUTHERN ALBERTA:
CONNECTING CURRICULUM, PLACE, AND IDENTITY**

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B.Ed., University of Lethbridge, 1989

A Project
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
of the University of Lethbridge
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF EDUCATION

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION
LETHBRIDGE ALBERTA**

January 2016

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Dedication

To my husband and my three children
for their encouragement and ongoing support in my academic pursuits

To my parents and grandparents
who had the insight to cross borders in order for their
children and grandchildren to have better lives

Abstract

It is not uncommon to search for one's ancestral roots, to explore the history of those who came before us. By engaging in this process, we also gain insight into our own identity, our shared histories, and our life stories. The graduate project, *Living and Teaching in Rural Southern Alberta: Connecting Curriculum, Place, and Identity*, considers how a specific *topos* (the place) and its *terroir* (the conditions under which food is grown or produced) are significant factors in exploring one's identity and examining one's *currere* (curriculum). This qualitative narrative inquiry focuses on memory work, in the forms of life writing and original autoethnography. The project is multimodal and consists of a variety of texts—personal stories, poems, sounds, and images. The author constructs a *curriculum of place* based upon the challenges outlined by Chambers (1999), as well as the research of Hurren and Hasebe-Ludt (2011) regarding the significance of *terroir* in curriculum studies. Applying Pinar's (1975) method of *currere*, the author returns to her past, re/visiting significant places. This provides opportunities for multi-dimensional reflection, both personal and professional, resulting in a deeper understanding of the author's identity. The author considers the works of various narrative researchers, such as Fowler, Clandinin, and Ellis. The project demonstrates Pinar's reconceptualization of curriculum and makes the case that narrative inquiry is essentially a "complicated conversation" (2004). This includes autobiographical inquiry, understood as both phenomena and method, which can be useful to students, educators, and curriculum scholars.

Acknowledgements

A heartfelt thank you to my advisors, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Leah Fowler, and Cynthia Chambers for your ongoing support and mentorship, and for suspecting long before I did that I would be drawn to this project of connecting curriculum to my rural place and my identity.

I would like to thank the University of Lethbridge Faculty of Education—professors, staff, and colleagues—who encouraged me, inspired me, and supported me in so many ways. Also, a thank you to the members of the MEd Literacy Cohort 2012 for sharing their lives and their stories as we journeyed together in our academic adventure.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the communities of Allerston and Masinasin for providing a warm, caring, stable place to raise my children and make a life. A profound thank you to my lifelong friends, many whom still reside here, in this place; you are a very special part of my life. And finally, to my former Masinasin students and their parents, I feel so blessed to have been a part of your educational journey in the “school in the middle of nowhere.” I could not have asked for a better place to pursue my teaching career.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I am trying to know who I have been so I will know who I am.

I can't fly from what made me.

—Patrick Lane, from *There Is a Season: A Memoir*

Patrick Lane eloquently frames the purpose of my qualitative inquiry. My project is to examine why I am who I am. What factors have contributed to my identity? What makes me “me” and to what extent is this reflected in the analysis of my *currere*, professionally and personally?

Identity is a noun that refers to “sameness or oneness.” It originates from the French word *identité*, from the late Latin, *identitās*, and the Latin word *idem* (Klein, 1966, p. 767). Having lived all my life in one geographical location, my identity does indeed exhibit “sameness or oneness”. In framing *a curriculum of place*, I hope to explore and gain insight into the impact of the *topos* and *terroir* of rural southern Alberta on my identity.

The etymology of curriculum is from the Latin noun *currere* which means “to run” as in a course, or a race (Klein, 1966, p. 387). My *currere* includes the roles of parent-teacher-administrator-community member. *Topos* is derived from the Greek root *topo*, meaning “place” (Klein, 1966, p. 1629). My *topos* is southeastern Alberta, a corner of the Palliser Triangle, close to the American border. *Terroir* is a French word that means “land”. According to the *Oxford Hachette English-French Dictionary*, it is often used as part of the phrase *l'attachement au terroir*, meaning “love of the land” or “*vin du terroir*, meaning the products/wine of the land (Correard, Grundy, Ormal-Grenon & Rollin, 2007, p. 842). Within the context of my inquiry, *terroir* encompasses the growing,

preparing, and serving of food to family and friends. *Terroir* requires learning the literacies and skills of the place and embracing the activities that eventually became integral to my identity.

My qualitative inquiry is comprised of narrative research which focuses on memory work in the form of life writing and original autoethnography. Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) describe life writing as “echolocation—the act of sending out the sound waves of [my] life” and then attending to the “resonances from one embodied and personal location to other embodied and personal locations” (p. 4). With/in my existential data, additional stories and interpretations may be generated as readers connect to their own individual experiences.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2010) define autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*). Autoethnography is both a process and a product” (p. 1). It acknowledges and accommodates the researcher’s subjectivity, personal influences, and emotional attachments to others. The product of this type of research is meant to be evocative, meaningful, and descriptive. Grounded in personal experience, autoethnographic research provides meaningful glimpses into lives and cultures different from our own.

My inquiry is guided by the work of several curriculum scholars. Applying Pinar’s (1975) method of *currere*, my process of inquiry returns to my past, looks forward to my future, both personal and professional, examines these dimensions simultaneously, and in so doing, advances me toward a deeper knowledge and understanding of why I am who I am. Applying Chambers’ (2003) guidelines for a

curriculum of place, my texts include details and aspects of my rural *topos*, factors that influence my understanding of self and others. My project also acknowledges Hurren and Hasebe-Ludt's (2011) concept of *terroir* and its contribution to my identity, my livelihood, my knowledge of food—why we eat what we eat—and the evocative and sensual meanings that I associate with food. My professional narratives are enlightened by Fowler's (2006) research that explores teaching practices and the teaching self within the context of a *curriculum of difficulty*.

Jewitt's (2007) "multimodal perspective offers a 'new' way of conceptualizing texts and contexts" (p. 276). In addition to the traditional print-based text, curriculum should reflect multiple literacies, integrating print, visual, and aural text. The body of my project explores *currere* as a series of inter-connections, mixing and blending genres in a mostly print-based text. Additionally, the accompanying slideshow [[Power Point Project—Connecting Curriculum, Place, and Identity: Living and Teaching in Rural Southern Alberta](#)] weaves together printed texts, images, and sound in an attempt to depict my *currere*, my "running of the course", as multi-dimensional, introspective, and evocative.

The re/visiting and re/writing my *topos* of southern Alberta occurred over the period of a year. Following my initial visit to the places of my childhood and adulthood, I began my first phase of life writing, creating texts and collecting images which were initiated by the sights, sounds, and senses evoked in the special places etched in my memory. This route required travelling Highway 501E, moving ever closer to the Sweetgrass Hills. My first stop returned me to my childhood—my family farm. Continuing eastward on 501, through the Verdegris Coulee, I returned to significant adult

places—the Hierath farm, St. Isidore’s Catholic Church, and Masinasin School. After additional research and writing, the second phase of the project encouraged me to re-experience the pedagogy of my places—to replay the memories, to soak in the sights, sounds, and images of the *topos* and *terroir*. This extended process permitted an in-depth and multi-dimensional examination of my *currere*, as experienced in my past, my present, and my future.

In the following chapters, I will explore these dimensions in depth—the theory and methodological framework of the narrative inquiry, the exploration of my narratives as they pertain to a *curriculum of place*, and the uniqueness of my identity as a rural southern Albertan with American roots.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Methodological Framing

The only thing that keeps us from floating off with the wind is our stories.

They give us a name and put us in a place, allow us to keep on touching.

—Tom Spanbauer, from *The Man Who Fell in Love With the Moon*

Narrative in Qualitative Research

The term *narrative* can be broadly applied to any text or discourse within qualitative research. Narratives represent knowledge and existential data; however, the term also pertains to the experience and patterns of inquiry that are integral elements of its study. Clandinin & Rosiek (2006) describe this as “a way of understanding the experience” (p. 38), a phenomenon under study.

Narrative research consists of a variety of events, experiences, and evocative memories. It is in connecting these diverse narratives that one is able to discern meaning. Creswell (2012) suggests ordering the narratives in some manner, perhaps chronologically or according to life stages, where they can be examined within the relevant social and political context.

In my narrative sojourn of visiting, revisiting, investigating, and life writing, I retraced the roots and routes of my immigrant ancestors knowing that part of my identity was reflective of these family members who re/created and passed on traditions and literacies in this particular *topos* of southern Alberta. I experienced the complexities of being both researcher and subject of the research. Through my retrospective process of life writing and collating texts—written and visual—Bochner (2007) states that my stories contain “knowledge *from* the past [but] not necessarily knowledge *about* the past” (as cited in Trahar, 2009, Section 1, para. 2).

I am aware that my autobiographical memory is selective, and that my stories are what I deem to be appropriate. However, Smith (1991) assures me that life writing is not just a means of discovering “self” but is also meaningful for others, stating that my experiences “arise[s] out the ‘deep sentiment and texture of our collective life’”(as cited in Chambers, 2003, p. 27).

Additionally, Fowler’s (2006) seven orbital spheres for narrative research—naïve storying, psychological de/reconstruction, psychotherapeutic ethics, narrative craft, hermeneutics, curriculum pedagogy, and poetics of the relational teaching self—prove useful in examining my professional narratives, the stories arising from my teaching career within the context of my rural *topos*.

The Method of *Currere*

Pinar’s (1975) reconceptualization of curriculum as *currere* is the foundation of my inquiry method. Pinar regards *currere* as an autobiographical process. His approach focuses on the educational experiences of the individual/educator, and the extent to which the individual makes meaning of these experiences. My narrative inquiry outlines *currere* as I have experienced it—socially, politically, and geographically situated—with/in a variety of contexts— my *topos*, my family, my community, and my profession.

And so,

...if I chart these choices and circumstances on a time line, and then begin to describe (as I remember it now), the transitions from that situation to the one that followed, I see that there is a coherence. Not necessarily a logical one, but a lived one, a felt one. (Pinar, 1975, p. 1)

Pinar's (1975) method involves four steps: regression (returning to one's past), progression (looking at what is not yet present—the future—personal and professional), analysis (examining the past, the future, and a response to both), and synthesis (examining the present with increased conceptual experience, deeper knowledge and understanding of the self). One's "existential experience" is the source of data (p. 2). Pinar (1975) acknowledges that everyone's past, present, and future exist co-extensively. So, as "I can see more of myself in its multi-dimensional manifestations, I am also able to see more of others" (p. 14).

Other scholarly approaches to narrative inquiry complement Pinar's method of *currere*. Clandinin and Connolly (2000) similarly describe the process of narrative inquiry as a simultaneous experience occurring in a three-dimensional space. In this space, one looks inward, to internal feelings, hopes, and reactions; outward, to environmental conditions; backward and forward, in order to understand that experience exists simultaneously in the time frames of past, present, and future (p. 49). Pertaining to my research, Clandinin and Connolly (2000) add a third dimension of place "which attends to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes" (p. 51).

Topos: Guidelines for Inquiry

Chambers (1999) provides the overarching structural guidelines to focus my inquiry. First, I wrote from my place—rural southern Alberta. Chambers' (2006a) pedagogy of "visiting [as] a way of learning the 'wisdom that sits in places'" resonated for my inquiry process (p. 32). I re/visited my *topos* and my special places, that then became authentic "sites of inquiry and pedagogy" (p. 35). This pedagogical approach

afforded opportunities to contemplate the literacies of my places, present and practiced, through recalling stories, events, people, and my emotional attachment to this place.

Secondly, my stories are told in a language familiar to my place—balancing the personal and the social. According to Dixon and Durrheim (2000), language is an important factor in formation of the collective self and practices that form place-identities and a sense of belonging (p. 32). Reflecting on the language and its use with/in my *topos* required me to exist in Clandinin and Huber's (2002) "metaphorical three-dimensional inquiry space", moving inward and outward, backward and forward (p. 162).

Thirdly, I selected interpretive tools arising from, and fitting for this place, acknowledging the situated nature of texts in places and communities. Pahl and Rowsell (2011) label this as artifactual literacy, an approach that examines mundane objects and the individual's "entanglements with [these] objects—the things they hold near and dear and can narrate in other contexts" (p.133). My writing includes references to, and descriptions of, natural and human-made phenomena present in my particular topography. These included the Sweetgrass Hills, the Verdegris coulee, specific dwellings—both public and private—roads, crops, plants, and food artifacts, and even the commonly shared stories of place. Jewitt's (2007) multimodal perspective supports the organization and design of interpretive textual tools to demonstrate the relationship between pedagogy and curriculum. Some interpretive tools are permanently present in my *topos*, and their meaning is both symbolic and evocative; an example is the Sweetgrass Hills. Some interpretive tools are less permanent. Their meaning is both symbolic and evocative, but may evolve over time; examples are crops, plants and food

artifacts. Some interpretive textual tools are symbolic but abstract and less tangible; an example is the shared stories of place and community (Jewitt, 2007, p. 276).

Fourth, I endeavour to contribute to creating a suitable topography for Canadian curriculum, to examine “how *topos* writes [me] rather than how [I] write it” (Chambers, 1999, p. 148). “According to geographers and environmental psychologists, questions of ‘who we are’ are often intimately related to ‘where we are’” (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000, p. 27). This suggests that an inclusive view of place-identity might well “underwrite personal identities, render actions or activities intelligible, express tastes and preferences and mediate efforts to change environments” (p. 28).

In addition to these four structural guidelines, Chambers (2008) suggests four dimensions as potential starting points for remembering and writing about a *curriculum of place*. *A curriculum of place*:

- acknowledges a different sense of time
- values enskillment (skilled practices or tasks conducted in this place)
- acknowledges an education of attention (listening, watching)
- involves wayfinding.

Terroir: Guidelines for Inquiry

My inquiry further applies Hurren and Hasebe-Ludt’s (2011) “mix[ing] [of] abstract theoretical discussion with concrete, everyday experiences and curricular practices related to food, place, and identity” (p. 17). *Terroir* and the connection to identity is integral to my inquiry because “[e]pistemologically, an attention to food, place, and identity is an acknowledgement of embodied or somatic and visceral knowing

that underscores its importance and possibilities for its use both in and out of curriculum studies” (Hurren & Hasebe-Ludt, 2011, p. 17).

Hurren and Hasebe-Ludt (2011) define *terroir* as the conditions under which food is grown or produced, resulting from unique characteristics of the soil. For my inquiry, my exploration of *terroir* also includes other aspects of nature—the unique physical attributes of the rural landscape, the practices involved in production of food, the processes for preparing and consuming it, as well as the distinctive characteristics of the inhabitants—past and present. My stories use food as a “‘way in’ for studying about place and identity” (Hurren & Hasebe-Ludt, 2011, p. 18). The association between *topos* and *terroir* allows me to explore relational aspects such as human elements, attributes, and sensual qualities as contributors to my identity.

Chapter 3: My Situated Place

The word topography refers to the “description of a place”. It originates from the word *topographia* with origins in Middle English, late Latin, and Greek. It combines the Greek root *topo*, meaning “place” with the Latin word *graphia* meaning “the process of writing, drawing, representing, or describing” (Klein, 1966, p. 677). Situated in, and influenced by the topography of this southern Alberta, I “ran the course”—my *currere* (Klein, 1996, p. 387).

Throughout this qualitative inquiry, I reflected numerous times on Basso’s statement, “[t]he Western Apache say that wisdom sits in places” (as cited in Chambers, 2006a, p. 32). As a wayfarer and sojourner, I retraced familiar routes and roots. Herriott (2014) describes this wayfaring, this journeying, as “a search for the heart, a steadfast spirit, peace of mind, a soul worthy of an altar, or an altar worthy of the soul” (p. 2). I travelled and retravelled these familiar routes. I sat in these significant places. I listened. I searched for their wisdom. I wanted to soak in their knowledge of who I was, who I am now, and who I will be in the future. So, where is this place? How to describe its topography and its significance to my *currere*?

***Topos* Writes Me**

*We need to write in a detailed way the topos—
the particular places and regions where we live and work —
and how these places are inscribed in our theorizing,
as either presence or absence, whether we want them there or not.*

—Cynthia Chambers, from *A Topography for Canadian Curriculum Theory*



Figure 1. Highway 501 East, April 29, 2015.

Travelling east of Milk River, the *topos* on either side of Highway 501 is consistently similar—flat prairie or fields, farmsteads surrounded by shelterbelts, the occasional abandoned granary or barn. Although the First Nations people, particularly the Blackfoot and Cree, migrated in and through this southeast corner of Alberta, one of the first recorded Europeans to explore this area was Captain John Palliser in 1857–1860. As part of a British North American expedition, his task was to assess the 200,000 square kilometers along the 49th parallel. This triangular-shaped territory included portions of southeastern Alberta, southern Saskatchewan, and southwestern Manitoba. Palliser’s assessment of this triangular area of the prairies was less than positive. Wolfe, Hugenholtz, and Lian (2013) state that Palliser described it as

a central desert forming a triangle, having its base the 49th parallel from longitude 100° to 114°W, with its apex reaching to the 52nd parallel of latitude....The large belt of country embraces districts, some of which are valuable for the purposes of the agriculturalist, while others will forever be comparatively useless. To this day, this “central desert” is referred to as Palliser’s Triangle. (p. 699)

Historically, however, Palliser’s predictions have been proven incorrect and this area now known as the Palliser Triangle has become one of Canada’s most productive agricultural areas. But to this day, depending upon the season and the year, a visitor may see evidence of hardship—in the form of drought, grasshoppers, hail—or signs of plenty—verdant prairie grass and abundant crops. Living in this place requires resilience, perseverance, adaptability, and an intrinsic respect for nature. This is the reality, the *currence* of living in the Palliser Triangle, the “central desert,” the area that my ancestors chose to call home.



Figure 2. Highway 501 East. Verdegris Coulee, April 29, 2015.

The prairie is flat until Highway 501 East meets Verdegris Coulee—a name assigned by the French trappers who explored this area. *Verdegris* originates from the old French phrase *vert de Grece*, literally meaning “green of Greece” (Klein, 1967, p. 1700). *Coulee* originates from the past participle of the French verb *couler* which means to “flow,” or from the Latin noun *cōlōre* meaning “strainer, corridor, passage way (Klein, 1967, p. 361).

To those living here, in this southern Alberta *topos*, the word *coulee* holds more meaning than merely a geographical feature; it is part of our rural language; it helps to define one’s identity. The “coulee” is the dividing line that determines the community to

which one belongs; one lives either “east or west of the coulee.” School attendance was determined by whether one lived “east or west of the coulee.” Directions are explained relative to the coulee; for example, “Take the first left turn after you get through the coulee.”



Figure 3. South view at the bottom of Verdegris Coulee, April 29, 2015.



Figure 4. View of Sweetgrass Hills, April 5, 2014.

Sojourning along Highway 501, one cannot help but notice the three blue-tinged hills that rise out of nowhere from the flat prairie. The Blackfoot, the first to inhabit this area of southern Alberta, named these hills *Kato-yi-six*; the Blood named them *Kat-e-is*. Despite the variation, all translate similarly, “Place of the Sweet Pine, Sweet Pines, Sweet Pine Hills” (Dormaar, 2003, p. 9). However, to me, these hills are known as the Sweetgrass Hills. Even though they are geographically part of Montana, wherever I have

lived in Alberta, this landmark signifies I am close to home. I love that I am reminded, looking at these hills, that my *currere* has been influenced because my *topos* is close to the United States border. I am also reminded that my ancestral roots and routes originated in the United States.

West of the Sweetgrass Hills lies *Aisinai'pi*, the Blackfoot name for Writing-on-Stone Park. *Aisinai'pi* means “it is pictured or written,” aptly named because of the panels of petroglyphs covering the sandstone cliffs. Blackfoot oral tradition tells that these petroglyphs were ways spirits communicated with the living, and according to Klassen (1995), it is known as a place where “the spirits dwell among a landscape of ‘medicine rocks’” (as cited in Oetelaar & Oetelaar, 2006, p. 386). However, to me, this park, the hoodoos, petroglyphs, trails, and campgrounds will always be known as Writing-on-Stone Park.

Masinasin School is located just a few kilometers west of the provincial park. Appropriately, the school’s name is also Blackfoot for “writing on stone.” This school, this place holds memories, stories, and images which define my *currere* as a teacher and administrator.



Figure 5. Masinasin School, April 5, 2014.

My Tensioned *Topos*

Although Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr's (2010) article "Negotiating narrative inquiries: Living in a tension-filled midst" is primarily about tensions in a school environment, similarly, this is applicable to my inquiry. Understanding my *currere* means acknowledging that tensions exist, within and outside of this environment. In my rural *topos*, tension and frictions arise on various fronts: between environmentalists and ranchers/farmers about land use, between companies who want to develop resources on land that is privately owned, between politically conservative rural dwellers and more liberal urban dwellers, between less populated and less-diverse rural communities and more populated, increasingly diverse urban cities, and sometimes even between community and family members.

Tensions are often regarded as negatives, to be smoothed over, silenced, or ignored. Clandinin et al. (2010) state that narrative research is "relational inquiry" and is "the study of people in relation studying the experience of people in relation" (p. 82). Autobiographical narratives are intentionally written as tentative, and open to negotiation by those who read them. Narrative inquiry helps to negotiate tension-filled areas as one "begin[s] to understand tensions in a more relational way, that is, tensions that live between people, events, or things, [and] are a way of creating a between space, a space which can exist in educative ways" (p. 82). According to Chambers (2008), one of the challenges to curriculum scholars is to "find the common ground necessary to survive" (p. 125). Telling our stories, listening to the stories of the "other" opens up a space for such a possibility.

A Real-life Game of Clue

One morning my husband sat down at the kitchen table, with a very confused look on his face.

“ You won’t believe this! All the chickens are gone!”

“What do you mean, all the chickens are gone?”

“There is not one trace of a chicken in the henhouse, not even one feather. The only thing left is a huge pile of dirt in the middle of the floor!”

“That is really strange! The chicken coop door was locked?”

“Yes.”

“Windows all closed?”

“Yes.”



Figure 6. Chicken coop—scene of the disappearing chickens, April 29, 2015.

This conversation began a month-long saga of the mystery of the missing chickens. There were a few clues: a small crack in the cement floor and prior evidence of a raccoon digging and burrowing under other buildings on the farm. Although it seemed impossible, we decided that the only explanation was that a raccoon had somehow discovered the crack in the floor, pulled the chickens through the miniature opening, and killed them all.

After weeks of setting traps and lying in wait for the pesky raccoon to appear, one afternoon the barking of our German shepherd alerted us that something was awry. I peeked out the door and discovered that he had trapped an animal—the raccoon—at the very top of the yard light pole. At last! The culprit had been caught. While the kids and I watched safely from the steps of the house, my husband retrieved his rifle, fired one shot and THUD—one dead raccoon.



Figure 7. Farm yard and yard light pole, April 29, 2015.

I tell this story not because the disappearance of the chickens was so odd—though it was—nor to brag about the marksmanship of my husband—he later confessed he may have just wounded the raccoon and it died from the fall—but because I am reminded of how rural attitudes toward guns vary significantly from my urban counterparts.

Contentious issues such as the political debate over gun registry—and this is just one of many issues—reinforce how my place, my *topos*, plays a significant role in shaping my values and opinions. My narrative reinforces Clandinin et al. (2010) view of narrative as relational inquiry. I am also reminded of Homi Bhabba’s “Third Space” (1990), an idea helpful to understanding other cultures. I concede that my example is different; it does not reflect a need to understand the worldviews of a foreign culture. However, Bhabba’s concept of a “Third Space” may provide insight into understanding differences in rural-ness or urban-ness. In this third hybrid space other positions can exist; the outcome is “neither one culture nor the other culture” (as cited in Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner, 2012, p. 176). It is important to appreciate that even though we are all Albertans, all Canadians, we are unique because of the variations in our *topos*. Often it is too easy to apply the “one size fits all” mentality, instead of searching for that hybrid position that acknowledges diversity within unity.

The *topos* of rural southern Alberta is an example of a hybrid space, first because of the unique geography, and secondly because of its proximity to and influence of the American border. To examine my *currere* in the context of its social, political, and geographic factors, I re/visited a familiar place just across the Canadian border—Sweetgrass, Montana. The following chapter will explore my memories of this small

border town, the experience of my ancestors in crossing borders, and my self-proclaimed identity as a “border person.”

Chapter 4: My Bordered *Topos*

*[H]ome is always a border country,
a place that [both] separates and connects us.*

—J. Edward Chamberlain, from *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?*

Finding Common Ground

I Am a Border Person

Norman Hillmer, Professor of History and International Affairs at Carlton University, claims the border is *integral* to Canadian identity: “We are a border people. The border is our livelihood. The border is our identity” (Chambers, 2006b, p. 7). The most southern part of Alberta—this prairie desert where I reside—has been greatly influenced by our American neighbors, and has resulted in Albertans with strong beliefs in capitalism and the free market. My childhood home is located five miles east of Milk River, a mere 10 miles from the United States border. I am a descendant of those southern Albertans who crossed borders. I am a border person; I, too, cross/ed borders.



Figure 8. Border crossing—Canadian customs, April 29, 2015.

Routes and Roots

My great-grandparents and grandparents crossed borders
 Finally to settle here, in this place
 My paternal ancestors from France to Quebec to North Dakota,
 to settle here in this place
 From Germany to North Dakota to Montana
 to settle here in this place.

My maternal ancestors from Germany, to Minnesota,
 to settle here in this place

My descendants crossed borders from Europe and America
 but they chose Canada.

I celebrate the rhizomatic migration of my ancestors
 their resiliency, determination, and foresight.

My Canadian-ism is not diminished by appreciating my American roots
 I refuse to define myself as *not* American.

I am a Canadian

I am an Albertan—with American roots

I like Americans.

I have a unique perspective.

I am a border person.



Figure 9. Coutts/Sweetgrass port of entry, April 5, 2014.

“Across the Line”

I'm a honky tonk man and I can't seem to stop

I love to give the girls a whirl to the music of an old jukebox

But when my money's all gone I'm on the telephone

Callin' hey hey mama can your daddy come home

—Johnny Horton, from *Honkey Tonk Man*



Figure 10. The former Emil’s Inn, restaurant entrance at the back, April 29, 2015.

“Let’s go across the line for supper.” Sweetgrass is a Montana town located just “across the line,” just past the Canadian-United States customs. Hearing the name of the town—Sweetgrass—evokes memories, images, and sounds—smoke-filled booths, dim lights, tunes by Merle Haggard, Johnny Cash, Mickey Gilley, and Johnny Horton. Until the late 1980s, this border town had a population of about 100, five bars, a gas station, and a confectionary. Oftentimes, on Sunday you could meet one or more Canadian friends at one of the bars, visiting over a few beers, and having supper. In the 1960s, Montana bars were open on Sunday; children could accompany their parents into the bars, both not allowed in Alberta. Adults visited, played slot machines and/or pool, and ordered pizza, hamburgers, or chicken-fried steak—a thin cubed steak that is breaded and crispy fried. To this day, I love the taste of this kind of “bar food.”



Figure 11. Paper Dollar Bar—great pizza! April 29, 2015.

This small, dilapidated town was a necessary destination on my journey of re/visiting because it represents my initial experience of “crossing borders.” On this day, as I drove slowly down the one or two streets, I paused, observed, and reminisced. Although I noticed numerous changes, I noted that I still felt very comfortable here, in this country that is not mine. I lingered with the thought that many fellow Canadians reject my positive worldview of Americans. I reflected on the extent to which my *currere* has been influenced by my ancestors who crossed this border, carved their mark on the *topos*, and became an integral part in creating my hybrid space of rural southern Alberta.

In my experience, Americans, especially here in Montana, demonstrate more similarities with me than differences. Our citizenship is different, but we share a similar *topos/topography*. Our livelihoods are farming and ranching—occupations that require listening to, and learning the literacies of the land. Regardless of the 49th parallel that determines our nationality, I believe we love our respective countries, value friendship, independence, hard work, and freedom. And, no matter how far we venture, the Sweetgrass Hills signify to citizens on both sides of the border that we are “close to home”.



Figure 12. Sweetgrass, 1-15 exit north to Canada. A view of the Sweetgrass Hills in the background, April 29, 2015.

Crossing Borders: Those Who Came Before Me

In 1896, Canada’s minister of immigration, Sir Clifford Sifton, opened the prairies for settlement. Through an effective advertising campaign at home and abroad, more than three million people came to Canada as immigrants between 1896 and 1914 (Canada in the Making, *Pioneers and immigrants, The Last Best West 1896-1914*, n.d.). My ancestors were part of that wave of immigration to southern Alberta, some arriving from Quebec, some from the mid-western United States. Through their rhizomatic migration, they demonstrate what Deleuze and Guattari (2005) describe as “tentacles [which] map migrations, routes travelled elsewhere, as well as returning home and returning to that which is no longer home, rooting into place, growing in new places, and attending to old roots, only to begin again” (as cited in Chambers et al., 2012, pp. 103-104).

My paternal great-grandparents were born in Quebec but later moved to the United States. My grandfather, one of 11 siblings, was born in North Dakota. In 1909, the family migrated back to Canada to homestead in Lucky Strike, Alberta. In keeping with

French Catholic tradition, all children born into the Collin family were named either Mary or Joseph. Needless to say, nicknames were essential. My grandfather was nicknamed “Blue” because of the colour of his eyes.

My grandfather was a kind, soft-spoken man. I am not surprised to learn that after being conscripted into the army in WW1, he served only a short period of time before deserting. I recall that he chain-smoked and paced the floor when nervous, which was often! Instead of using an ashtray, he rubbed the cigarette ashes into his pant legs. I always thought that very fascinating and wondered if the ashes were ever hot enough to do damage to his trousers.

My paternal grandmother Kate was born in Minnesota, and although some of her family relocated to Alberta, she did not move here until she married my grandfather. My grandmother was a well-dressed lady, complete with stockings and heels; never once did I see her in pants. Perhaps this was because ladies did not wear trousers, or perhaps it was because she was a beautiful seamstress and sewed many of her own clothes. Although she doted on me, being the first granddaughter, even as a young child, I sensed that she displayed a subtle superiority towards my mother’s family—nothing I could put my finger on, just one of those things filed in my emotional memory bank.

My grandmother loved to entertain and host bridge parties. She was a great cook. I loved her tomato jam! It seemed such an odd and unique preserve—jam made from tomatoes, sugar, lemon rind, and oranges. I have tried to replicate this childhood treat, but it just doesn’t taste the same as I remember.

My mother’s family also homesteaded in southern Alberta on land north and east of Milk River. My maternal grandmother was a petite, spry woman with a small,

wrinkled face. Her first language was German, so her English was heavily accented, and peppered with German phrases. I recall the heavy lisp on the “p” in the word “raspberry” and her shortened word for cucumbers—“cukes.” As well, her written language was full of many mechanical errors. My mother’s name was Christine, and my grandmother consistently addressed letters and cards to her as “Dear Christ.” We laughed at her atrocious spelling and teased my mom about being elevated to such an important status. I never thought about how well she was doing to *mostly* master a second language without the advantage of being formally taught.

My maternal grandmother was a conservationist decades before the world realized the need. She believed in and lived the philosophy of “reduce, reuse, recycle” long before elementary students learned its meaning. She was an expert gardener, growing a wide variety of vegetables, raspberries, and strawberries. Although I don’t recall her as a great cook, she did make wonderful homemade cake donuts and rosettes, as well as her family-famous “Million Dollar Relish;” to this day, my children occasionally ask if I am “ever going to make that homemade relish.” She crocheted doilies continually, and I hardly ever saw her idle.

My maternal grandfather died when I was 12, so I did not know him well. To me, he looked like Santa, overweight and white-haired, but missing the warmth and generosity of his look-alike. He spent a lot of time in front of the window, in a rocking chair, smoking his pipe. My grandmother called him “Willie”—a cuddly, endearing shortened form of his name, William. Even as a child, he didn’t seem like a “Willie” to me. I knew that these grandparents were *poor*, even *poorer* than the rest of us—poor enough that my grandmother had to work at a nursing home long after most of her peers

had retired. No one ever talked about why my grandfather did not work and my grandmother worked so hard. Even at a young age I recognized that this was an oddity. All the men I knew worked at jobs, never relied on their wives to support them financially. Today, I would like to ask my grandmother many questions. Was her marriage different from those of her generation? Did she have a choice in leaving her family in Minnesota? How did she feel about settling in rural southern Alberta? Was it difficult to become part of the community when she was obviously poor and not fluent in the English language? This would allow me to write her story with greater authenticity, and to examine the extent of her influence on my *currere*.



Figure 13. Milk River Cemetery, April 29, 2015.

Travelling along Highway 501E on my second visit, I made an unplanned decision to honour my ancestors' lives with a visit to the Milk River Cemetery. I wanted to photograph their resting places to show respect for those who came before me, those who crossed borders and created lives that eventually became the underpinnings of my own. While strolling on the paths this cool spring day, my thoughts returned to each of the days when I said my goodbyes to my loved ones. Reminiscing about each of them, I felt retrospective but not sad, holding on to the realization that to live *not knowing* is also a kind of *knowing*. Rohr (2011) states, "To hold the full mystery of life is always to endure its other half, which is the equal mystery of death and doubt" (p. 112).



Figure 14. Headstone of my paternal grandparents, April 29, 2015.

Chapter 5: Re/visiting my Childhood *Topos* and *Terroir*

The End of the Lane



Figure 15. Re/visiting my childhood *topos*—the lane, April 29, 2015.

Once again, on this second occasion of re/visiting, I got out of my vehicle and walked down the lane, the short quarter mile road that leads to the farmstead where I grew up, the place homesteaded by my paternal grandparents. The word lane has its origin in the Middle English word *lane*, or *lone*, as well as the Dutch word *laan* meaning “an alley, lane or walk” (Skeat, 1962, p. 268). Regardless of its origin, to me this lane symbolizes coming home, leaving home, remembering home.

When I lived here, the lane was bordered on the north by poplar trees and on the south by caragana trees. At its end, it turned left and opened up to the farmyard. This was the only route in and out of our farm. If the lane was *snowed-in*, which was common in the winter, we did not have a way out. If the rains were heavy and the gravel was sparse, the car had to be parked at the top of the lane so we could travel to town, to church, to visit friends, to leave the farm. The lane meant the daily walk to catch the school bus, regardless of weather, ploughing through snow banks and blinding snow, or slipping and

sliding through muck, but most often it was a pleasant stroll or a frantic dash, depending upon the timing of our departure from the house.

Memories and images of my childhood began to emerge. I wondered, *so this place at the end of the lane...what can I say about my parents, who lived here? What are their stories?*

My father was handsome and charming. Being an only son, his mother doted on him. He laughed a lot, loved to socialize, and never worried about the mundane things of life. His door was always open to visitors and I recall his greeting, “Come on in. Can I get you a beer or a coffee?” I remember a particular outing with just my dad and me one late afternoon.

More Than a Boat Ride?

“Dad, can you swim?” I asked him.

“No.” he replied.

“I don't want to have a boat ride anymore.” I timidly responded.

My memories take me back to when I was nine years old, and my dad bought a used motor boat, nothing fancy, just a boat with a small motor for fishing. That summer, I begged him to take me to the nearest lake—actually a slough—named Verdegris Coulee for a ride in the boat. After supper, he loaded the boat into the back of the truck, and he and I drove down the lane the 20 miles where he unloaded the boat and launched it in the water. Suddenly these uneasy feelings of fear overcame me. After all, I could not swim. How deep was the water? How likely was it that the boat would float? The thought of falling in the mucky lake terrified me.

Instead of getting angry with me and being frustrated with my fear, my dad patiently loaded the boat back into the truck and we drove home—no lecture, no anger, just a quiet drive back to the farm and down the lane. I now wish that I had been able to spend more time with him when I was an adult before he died, to appreciate the unnoticed character traits. But, children of divorce do not always have that luxury. (Hierath, 2012b, p. 2)

As I read, re-read, and returned to this story from my childhood, the word *divorce* evoked a feeling of sadness and loss. In the 21st century, the word is almost devoid of emotion; it defines one's marital status on government forms, online dating sites, and Facebook. But in 1960, in rural southern Alberta, divorce was not commonplace. Yamagishi's (2012) narrative provided some insight into what it was like to grow up in this time frame, as well as what it was like to set aside feelings of grief. Her experiences included the death of a loved one, putting her child born out of wedlock up for adoption, and her parents' divorce. As I pondered my own narrative, I realized that like Yamagishi (2012), I can now grieve my experience as a child of divorced parents. I am freed to accept that part of me felt relegated to a shameful place, a sort of limbo, a place shared with few other peers. But at the same time, I have also come to appreciate my resilience in a difficult situation.

My mother was a strong independent woman, a very hard worker, and a wonderful cook. In our rural place, it was expected that if someone showed up at your house at mealtime, they were invited to stay. Hospitality meant offerings of food and beverage. This inconvenience never bothered my mother. I know that inside her head she was saying, "Oh good, I *can* feed them!" not, "Oh no, I *have to* feed them!" Visitors to rural areas "experienced and tasted the ecologies and geographies of our homes and the homes of others" (Hurren & Hasebe-Ludt, 2011, p. 22).

So, whether it was driving across the Rocky Mountains pulling a holiday trailer, or returning to school to be retrained as a Licensed Practical Nurse with three children in tow, my mother approached each task with a true sense of purpose and tenacity. I believe

she was an unusual woman for her generation. I admire her in so many ways, but more importantly, I knew she loved me and was proud of me.

This place at the end of the lane...what can I say about the topos, the significance of terroir? What stories live here?

To say that the house I grew up in was *unassuming* would be an understatement. As most homestead houses, it was a complete hodgepodge. I remember thinking it so curious that the roof of the house resembled a barn, and the roof of the barn resembled a house. Rooms were added on to the original structure, or changed in their function as more children arrived. Access to the basement was from the outside—a trap door with stairs down to a damp, dark dirt basement where I knew I could find lizards, spiders, and mice—all of which scared me. I slept upstairs in one of the two rooms. Neither bedroom had heat; instead one lone register heated—kind of—both rooms. On cold mornings, we rushed to lay our clothes on top of this one register to warm them. I always wondered about the slant of the walls in the bedrooms. Likely it was related to the style of the roof, but even as a child I could not stand up straight beside two of them. And certainly, I could never hang any pictures!

Uninvited Guests

My family was Catholic and on Sundays we always attended St. Peter's Church in Milk River. After mass, it was a common hospitality to invite another family for breakfast. As the oldest daughter, I often helped prepare meals. On one of these Sunday visits, I was given the job of making the toast. I took the toaster out of the corner cupboard, plugged it into the wall socket, placed two slices of bread into the slots, and pushed down the lever. The element heated up, and I waited to grab the pieces of bread. To my astonishment, instead of two slices of bread, out popped a mouse! Scared and slightly singed, the nimble rodent scampered across the cupboard, along the baseboards searching for a mouse hole, its safe hiding place. Horrified, I let out a squeal and looked at my mom. I knew

she would be horrified, embarrassed, and disgusted too; we were both very familiar with the “mouse problem” that seemed impossible to solve.

Her response was expected. “Good God! I hate those mice. It’s impossible to keep them out of this old house!” We exchanged knowing glances and then carried on making breakfast even though we were embarrassed in front of our company. But the reality of living in an “old, old” house is that sometimes you share it with uninvited guests as well as invited ones!

As a child, I was fortunate not to experience what Smith (2012) describes as

[becoming] subjugated and dominated by nonsensical phantasms perpetuated by intense and powerful media; when education reigns as a project of human engineering to serve only the material prospects of the market; when we invite violence into our minds and imaginations as a form of entertainment—in short when distraction rules. (Chambers, et al., 2012, p. xiv)

Childhood in the 1950s was pretty simple—no videos, computer games, or Internet. Instead, there was Barbie dolls, Eaton’s catalogues to peruse and dream of what to buy, monopoly, outdoor activities such as building forts, softball games, and lots of time to pretend and imagine. I am not surprised that I chose to write about visiting places, because early in life I learned the value of this activity.

At least once a month, my parents would “go visit” a neighbourhood family. I loved this outing. Without fail, the visit involved food. It may have consisted of a snack—pop, popcorn, chips—or most likely a heartier lunch served close to home time. My very favourite was sandwiches made from Prem (a processed canned meat) with pickles tucked inside the two pieces of white bread. Then, the tip of the sandwich was dipped in ketchup as it was eaten, bite-by-bite. Vileisis reminds me when I eat this comfort food today that “food isn’t solely the means to a meal; it also provides a

fundamental means for making sense of our place in the world. The stories we associate with food and foodways become food narratives that inform culture, rather than just reflect it” (as cited in Wessell, 2010, p. 12).

As I re/visited my childhood farm, I wanted to probe my past, to discover more about its relevance to my present identity. Pinar’s (1975) method of *currere*, applies this strategy—to relive experiences in order to achieve a deeper awareness. Through this process of disclosure, we expand the understanding of *currere* and learn more about ourselves and others.



Figure 16. A grassy place where the large white granary once was, April 29, 2015.

As I walked slowly around the farmyard, I searched for the large white circular granary that used to be situated north of the machine shop. On my first visit a year previously, I could not recall whether it still remained. Sadly, I discovered that where the building had once stood, there was only a vacant spot, overgrown with weeds and prairie grass.

Help! I Can’t Get Down!

Every year my first cousin, Colin, spent his summers on the farm. He and I were the same age, but he was a city kid, from Calgary. He loved what rural life had to offer—unfettered spaces, freedom to explore, driving the garden tractor, and shooting gophers. One summer day he had the bright idea that we should

climb the “big round bin,” as we called it. This would give us a great view of the farmyard. Having already climbed the structure once, he assured me that it was easy. Not wanting to appear to be a sissy farm girl, I agreed, and slowly, slowly climbed the attached vertical ladder to the top of the granary, about fifteen feet. At the top of the ladder, I carefully turned around and sat on the green-shingled roof, trying to enjoy the view. Instead, I found myself terrified at the height—I was too frightened to look. It was a *long* way down.

At first my cousin continued to chat, and move around on the roof, unaware of the terror I was experiencing. Finally, I managed to voice my anxiety, “I have to get down from here. I don’t like it.” But then the thought occurred to me, “How in the world will I get back down that awful steep ladder?” And to my horror, I found that I could not make myself move at all. My fear had immobilized me. I was a catatonic eight-year-old girl on top of a tall granary from which there was no escape.

My cousin finally recognized my situation, climbed down the ladder to fetch my dad who was working in the shop. My dad’s first attempt to talk me down fell on deaf ears. “Dad, *please* come up and get me. I can’t get down.” Realizing that I was not able to do this on my own, and knowing that I couldn’t sit on the edge of the roof for much longer, he climbed the ladder, grabbed my hand, helped me to turn around, and we backed down the ladder.

Only later did I learn that he did not much like heights either, but when your child is in distress, a parent overcomes their own fears and phobias. Perhaps I recall this story because I have a fear of heights. But more likely I remember this story because it highlights my warm memories of growing up, knowing that I had parents who loved, protected, and cared for me.

On this second trip, as I investigated the garden space behind the house, I experienced the “phenomenology of the landscape and the pedagogy of visiting” (Chambers, 2008, p. 114). I searched for the original crab apple tree that was firmly etched in my childhood memory. I was pleased to discover that it had survived all these years! Unfortunately, even this late in April, the tree had not yet flowered. I recalled this special tree as being much more grandiose and bursting with pink blooms. Reflecting on this resilient artifact, I was struck with the thought that even though so many aspects of my *topos* have altered, or exist only in my memory, this tree—a source of food and

beauty—remains, a symbol of my *terroir*. The phenomenology of the landscape exists far beyond our personal space and time.

The Crabapple Tree

behind the homestead house
 through the caragana hedge
 walking through tilled soil, the humus of life
 a treasure almost hidden from view
 beautiful in early summer
 covered with pink blossoms, scent-full, sensuous
 through a child's eyes
 established, lofty, fruit-heavy branches
 yellow-round spheres, pink cheeks, green stems
 bounty, nourishment
 thick cinnamon apple butter,
 sweet crabapple fruit, spicy crabapple pickles
 the original "giving tree"
 alive still
 standing close to her daughter
 honouring my *topos*, my *terroir*.



Figure 17. Crabapple tree and its offspring, April 29, 2015.

Chapter 6: Re/visiting My Adulthood *Topos* and *Terroir*

Making a Life

The stories we associate with food and foodways become food narratives that inform culture, rather than just reflect it.

— Adele Wessell, from *We Are What We Grow*

Chambers (2008) reminds me “[a] curriculum of place calls for a different sense of time” (p. 115). It is not surprising that the First Nations people regarded the settlers to this area as “just arrived”. But even though I had lived all of my life 20 kilometers “on the other side of the coulee”, in this small rural community, I was also regarded as someone who “just arrived” (Chambers, 2008, p. 116). Part of my *currere* was to know and to understand that what occurred in this place before my time—the traditions, social structure, relationships, and community expectations—were still relevant. Recognizing and understanding their significance meant I could eventually “belong” to this place.



Figure 18. Highway sign on Highway 501 East.

Allerston—an interesting name for a place; the place I moved to after marrying, the place where my husband and I raised three children, the place that eventually became

part of my identity. The majority of the families who settled and farmed in this area were Catholics of German descent. Allerston was named after the Allers family who settled closest to this location. Today this place consists of only a church and a hall surrounded by farmed land. The church was appropriately named after St. Isidore, “a simple, uneducated peasant, a man of the earth whose life was rooted in the ordinary” (Ball, 2003, Introduction, para. 2).



Figure 19. Allerston mass times, April 29, 2015.



Figure 20. St. Isidore's Catholic Church, April 29, 2015.

When I moved to the community, I learned that many families were related to each other. Even though the Hierath brothers had farmed here for five decades, my husband's family was not related to any of the original families, and this fact also made them sort-of *outsiders*. It took time to fit in. I had to learn about family histories and to understand and assimilate the everyday practices of this tightly knit community. It took time to become part of the “shared stories . . . the neighbourly talk—the living memory that is the ‘stuff and soil’ of [every] local culture” (Prakash, 2009, Section 3, para. 11).

Early on, I noticed a few things. First, every family occupied the same pews at Sunday mass, so it was immediately evident who was absent on a particular Sunday. Secondly, I knew to be prepared to spend time *visiting* outside the church after mass, unless the weather was extremely inclement. Members of the congregation could spend up to an hour standing and chatting with each other. Thirdly, being small in members, every individual in the community was encouraged, perhaps obliged, to contribute their time and talent. Finally, in this rural community, hospitality was expected and this involved food and beverage, so in other words, I learned to cook!

Re/visiting Allerston Church on my second visit, I unlatched the iron gate, greeted by the sound of mooing cows. Taken aback, I remembered that, yes, of course, there were corrals just beyond the caragana hedge. Up the steps, through the wooden swinging doors, I entered the main part of the church. I immediately recognized the sweet, musty smell, and noted that this silent sacred spot was virtually unchanged.

I climbed the steep narrow steps up to the choir loft. In these quiet, reverent moments, I thought about being a member of this parish for 30 years—years that helped mould my identity, my “container” (Rohr, 2011, p. xii). I reflected on Rohr's (2011)

statement, "... you can only see and understand the earlier stages from the wider perspective of the later stages" (p. 9). I mused about the simplicity, certitudes, and constancies in this, the first half of my life. With a slightly heavy heart, I thought about how uncomplicated life seemed here, in this place. In this *topos* of rural southern Alberta, you were either Catholic or non-Catholic, you either made a living farming or ranching, and you either married or lived as a bachelor. Now I understand that life is not so much *either-or* but mostly *both-and*.



Figure 21. Interior of St. Isidore's Catholic Church, April 29, 2015.

This *either-or* perspective was enhanced by the lack of culturally and religious diversity in the rural communities of Allerston and Masinasin. The majority of the community is white, Catholic, with English as their first language. Since most of the farms and ranches are passed from generation to generation, the demographics of Masinasin School also reflected this lack of diversity. Eventually I was identified as one of the "insiders," but my inquiry discloses, and as Dixon and Durrheim (2000) suggest, there is a "link between constructions of place-identity and relations of power" (p. 33). The following example illustrates this.

For many years at Masinasin School, Catholic parents taught catechism classes during school hours. Even though the majority of the students were Catholic, any and all students were welcome to attend, and many did! Teachers had no objections to the arrangement, as it was an opportunity in this sparsely staffed school for some well-needed prep time. However in 1985, the parents were directed by the school district to discontinue the classes. Although I don't recall the specific reason, I suspect it was the perception that allowing this school time instruction to continue might promote discrimination, exclusion, or even indoctrination on the part of a specific religious group. Reflecting on the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity in public schools in the 21st century, I cannot envision a scenario where this practice would not be challenged. But at the time, in *this* rural place, it seemed appropriate and acceptable—a long-standing tradition. Few considered this an imbalance of power, including myself. I now recognize that my opinion had been influenced because I was now one of the “insiders.”

As one of the “insiders”, making a life in this *topos* revolved around the church, the tightly-knit school, and the importance of, and attention to growing, preparing, and sharing food. Therefore, food became a large part of my identity and was integrally connected to my place, evoking memories of growing food, preparing food, or sharing food. These memories are “embodied or somatic and visceral knowing” (Hurren & Hasebe-Ludt, 2011, p. 17) about my lived curriculum, my *currere*.

According to Wessell (2010), the food we eat, and why we eat food the way we do, form a gastronomic text that shapes a landscape. Reading the landscape as a gastronomic text “provide[s] a layered, textured historical record of cultural change inscribed with meanings that can be harvested in the making of cultural histories” (p. 1).

Although we all have individual tastes in food, tastes are affected by historical factors. In turn, we alter our environments to produce the food that we want to eat, as well as food that we can sell (Wessell, 2010, p. 3). A “tastescape” links production and consumption in a recursive manner, with food as the connecting link between economy, society, appetite, and pleasure. Trubek (2005) states that when we eat, we biologically consume food—we bring nature into our bodies—but this process also imposes the human domain on the natural world (as cited in Wessell, 2010, p. 3).

An examination of food and its relationship to the environment has typically been concerned with the factors of soil, agricultural practices, and technologies. However, those who purchase and consume the food, often miles from its point of production, also are part of the landscape. A closer examination of a specific place or *topos* demonstrates this linkage between producers and consumers, the cultural evolution of food, and how it is “used and constructed to organize people’s lives” (Wessell, 2010, p. 4).

Individual stories about food contain within them relationships with regard to our personal lives, our environment, as well as practices in production and consumption of food. Such stories are embedded in the landscapes of rural areas, revealed and remembered by fragments of remaining buildings, fences, foundations. An example of a place that embodies this building-event relationship is the Allerston Hall, site of the Allerston Chicken Supper.



Figure 22. Allerston Hall, April 5, 2014.

The Allerston Bazaar or “Bizarre”?

Shortly after we moved to the farm, a member of the Catholic Women’s League asked my mother-in-law, “What can your daughter-in-law prepare for the Allerston Church Supper?”

My mother-in-law replied, “Oh, she can cook anything!”

My, my! Some years I wished she had not provided such a ringing endorsement of my culinary skills. Living on a farm and raising a family was a very busy time, cooking for farm hands, processing produce from the garden, and raising my children. I used to look forward to fall when things would slow down and the harvest was complete. Well, not quite! Every year in October, I faced the dreaded Allerston Chicken Dinner and Bazaar.

This event was one of the highlights for the surrounding rural communities, and according to the Masinasin Historical Society’s (n.d.) publication, *From Sandstone to Settlers*, this annual fall event had been in existence since 1915 (p. 165). Between 200-300 people from other towns faithfully attended, many to savour the homemade sauerkraut, a fitting German dish, one that distinguished this supper from other fall suppers. The menu remained unchanged, as had the activities associated with the event—bingo, bake table, and fishpond. Throughout the years, the only change was to eliminate the evening dance that wrapped up the evening.

I will never forget the first list I was given. I nearly fainted with fright! I had to cut up and fry six chickens, bake five lemon pies, prepare items for the bake and craft tables, and purchase and wrap 10 fishpond articles. That did not include

setting up and peeling vegetables the night before the supper, working all day as a table waitress, and cleaning up after over 200 guests had dined, visited, and visited, and visited. Being 24 years old with a young child at home, I was convinced I would never survive that marathon. I quickly developed a new respect for those women who, prior to my arrival, had obviously mastered the *art of the church supper*—and they seemed to enjoy it!

But survive I did, and I continued to pull my weight in this endeavour until moving away from the community 30 years later. Although it was a lot of hard work, it was truly an amazing community builder, with all ages and genders working together for a common cause. (Hierath, 2012a, p. 3)

As I reflect on the story of the Allerston Church Supper, I appreciate the fact that the soil, the fruit of the earth, the food prepared and consumed, *is* part of my identity and *is* significant to my *place*. Chambers (2005) agrees that there is indeed a pedagogical relationship between humans, their food, and the land and places they inhabit (as cited in Hurren & Hasebe-Ludt, p. 20).

Making a Living

*“[F]ood isn’t solely the means to a meal;
it also provides a fundamental means for
making sense of our place in the world”*

—Ann Vileisis, from *Kitchen Literacy: How We Lost Knowledge of
Where Food Comes From and Why We Need to Get it Back*



Figure 23. The remnants of the hog barn—an empty pit, a few mounds of dirt—
April 29, 2015.

On this second trip, a year later, I re/visited the Hierath farm, the place where my husband and I resided for over 30 years, raised our children, and made a living off the land. I reflected on how the *terroir* contributed to my identity, as a partner in the farm company, a wife, and a mother. My first stop was the site of the hog barn, a structure that represented so many hours of labour for my husband and me. Although the building has since been demolished, a large grassy pit and a few mounds of dirt remain as a “fragment of traces of [its] past” (Wessell, 2010, p. 10). Embedded in the landscape, this place is a source of stories and memories, as well as a reminder of its initial purpose—to diversify economic production on the farm for less dependency on grain production—winter wheat, durum, mustard, and canola.

They Ate the *Whole* Thing!

“How many for dinner today?” I asked my husband. It was mid-winter and we were in the middle of constructing a large hog barn. An intensive amount of labour was required for the project—pouring cement, lifting and moving the dried cement floor slats, reconstructing the forms to begin the whole process again. Whenever possible, my husband recruited as many young men as available from the community who wanted to work for a day or a week.

Needless to say, feeding dinner—not lunch—to seven or eight young men demanded hours of preparation for me. I became exhausted by the task of running a “restaurant” each day, so one day I decided to simplify and cook enough food for leftovers the next day. I decided to prepare Turkey Ketchagon, a recipe from my mother-in-law. The ingredients included a 15-pound turkey, cut up, cooked in a sauce. With the usual potatoes, vegetable, salad, and dessert, that should be enough food for a few days, I thought.

Dinner hour arrived; the young men washed up, sat down, and started to eat. Very soon I realized that all of the food was being devoured too quickly. I thought, “They are eating the whole turkey! There goes tomorrow’s day off!”

Would I have been satisfied if my food was not eaten? No. Did I know that through their voracious consumption the young diners were actually complimenting my culinary skills? Yes. Did I appreciate that the food was

physically and aesthetically rejuvenating for them? Yes. Did I find fulfillment as a cook and dishwasher? No. Did I accept my role as a partner in helping to make a living on the farm? Yes, as did all other farm wives in my rural community. The story is paradoxical; it reminds me of how menial, yet how important my responsibility was to prepare and serve nutritious food. At the same time, part of me rebelled at the lack of intellectual stimulation in this environment and reinforced an intrinsic desire to choose my own career. (Hierath, 2014, p.8)



Figure 24. A view of the garden space surrounded by caragana trees, the dugout to the left, April 29, 2015.

Interestingly, food has been at the centre of social and political trends such as vegetarianism, veganism, and the “organic” movement. Consumer movements support eating “locally;” however, this is not a new movement or lifestyle because rural families have always grown what they ate, raised and slaughtered their own livestock for the table (Wessell, 2010). For those who dwell in a rural *topos*, this is a simple reality. With a certain degree of smugness, I contemplated the irony of the fact that my rural lifestyle precluded the organic craze, the search for naturally grown produce, the “eating clean” diet gurus. Berry (1991) states,

The real work of planet-saving will be small, humble, and humbling, and (insofar as it involves love) pleasing and rewarding. Its jobs will be too many to count, too

many to report, too many to be publicly noticed or rewarded, too small to make anyone rich or famous (p. 63).

I reflected upon Berry's (1991) affirmation as I walked around the farmyard and recalled the significance of *terroir* in this rural *topos*. My attention was drawn to the garden space, a large plot of land bordered on three sides by trees. It was close to the dugout—a necessary source of water. Each year, this plot of land would hopefully produce enough vegetables to feed our family for a year. This involved a lot of work, and each family member contributed. My husband planted, watered, roto-tilled, weeded, and helped harvest the produce. Our children participated in age-appropriate tasks—sometimes in the planting and harvesting, sometimes in the preparation for freezing or canning.



Figure 25. The dugout—a source of water for the garden and yard, April 29, 2015.

My children laugh when they recall my “summer sweatshop.” The four of us relocated to the basement where it was cooler. Sitting in comfy chairs, we arranged our workstations—bowls for finished products to the side, cutting boards and paring knives on laps, recently picked green beans in pails on the floor. As we watched soap operas or movies on television, we cut the “heads and tails” off the beans, cut them diagonally into

pieces ready for blanching and freezing. I confess, their help was appreciated but perhaps not acknowledged, in their opinion.

Our garden existed partly out of economic necessity, but mostly because the produce tasted so much better than any we could buy. But just as importantly, Herriot (2014) reminds me that eating what a garden produces, and minding what nature has to offer is what kept us “connected, grounded to our home landscapes, heal[s] our communities, bond[s] us to one another and to the land” (p. 28).



Figure 26. The farmyard and a distant view of the Sweetgrass Hills, April 29, 2015.

Living on a farm means learning the literacies practiced on the land—literacies necessary to survive here. This literacy is multiple and multi-faceted (Chambers, 2008, p. 122). Literacy involves language of the place but it also includes other ways of knowing. “A *curriculum of place* is [also] a wayfinding” (Chambers, 2008, p. 122). Ingold (2000) states that in order to learn about a place, one must *be in* and *travel in* that place (as cited in Chambers, 2008, p. 123).

“After supper, I want you to pick me up at McMaster’s because I have to move the drill.” A simple request ... if you know the literacies—present and practiced.

“McMaster’s”—this is not a reference to the prestigious university in Ontario; it is a

piece of land previously owned and farmed by a person with a last name of McMaster. “Drill”—this is not the small hand utensil used to attach screws; it is a large piece of machinery that plants seed, usually wheat, in the ground. It needed to be put into transit position and moved from field to field with a tractor.

To live and to find my way in this place, I needed to learn the names and locations of the fields, which prairie trail to follow to get to wherever I was going, and to utilize significant landmarks—rock piles, sloughs, and granaries. Each piece of land was named after previous owners—Pop’s, Louie’s, McMasters, Fats, and Pete’s, and there was a story behind each moniker. Fat’s was a nickname; interestingly, the previous owner was not fat at all, but actually quite thin. Pop’s was the original homestead quarter that bordered the coulee; even his grandchildren called him “Pop.” The stories and the places existed long before I arrived. Learning the names, the stories and experiences surrounding these pieces of land re/created and solidified them as part of our home, family, livelihood, and community.

Aoki points out, our human identities are closely “related to and shaped by the soil of the earth we dwell in” (as cited in Hurren & Hasebe-Ludt, 2011, p. 18). Prakash (2009) reiterates this sentiment stating that she no longer feels the need “to liberate the 98 percent who toil on the soil” but instead seeks to learn from them, and with them, “enjoying the contagious wisdom they gain through toil in soil” (Section 5, para. 2). To know a place, to dwell in a place, requires watching, listening, feeling, and tapping into senses attending to the clues embedded in the *topos*. To “farm” means to pay attention to the soil, the crops, the weather, the seasons, knowing the wisdom with/in the *topos*. To “farm” means to know the land, each slough, each alkali patch, each rockpile. Berry

(1991) states “[i]f you want to see where you are, you will have to get...out of your car, off your horse, and walk over the ground” (Section 1, para. II). Chambers (2008) cites Ingold (2000) in calling this “an education of attention” (p. 120).

Checking Crops

Do you want to ride along?

Look at the crops after supper?

Yes,

I remember ...

Fields of black-bearded durum wheat,

Checking degrees of ripeness,

Counting rows of kernels on an average head to approximate yield,

Gauging necessary granary space.

Were the stalks of grain taller than we remembered?

Last year “up to our waist”?

Tall enough for the kids to pretend to be lost?

Yes,

I remember ...

The soft swaying sound of the bearded grain,

Rustling in the wind,

Golden ripeness of the stalks,

Sweet smell means approaching harvest.

Yes,

I remember.

Learning to live or dwell in a place also requires learning the necessary skills and practices. Chambers (2008) calls this “enskillment” (p. 116). Some of the skills are not acquired immediately; they require ongoing practice and refinement; the skills are often passed on by mentors and learned in specific contexts. Enskillment is linked to one’s identity because “in a curriculum of place knowledge is both *social* and *technical*. The knowledge is *social* because it is learned through the social relations of being educated; it is *technical* because it requires enskillment” (Chambers, 2008, p. 120).

Lois' Green Apple Pies

Everyone, and I mean everyone, knew about Aunt Lois' green-apple pies. The crust was beyond flaky, the apple filling not too sweet and not too tart. This is not to say that this is all she could cook. Everything she made was delicious—she could make canned salmon and Jello taste scrumptious.

I knew there was only one way to learn how to make Aunt Lois' apple pie—that was to have her show me. She was more than happy to pass on her culinary skills, and she came to my house with utensils and ingredients in tow.

I learned to slice each apple diagonally, with the core intact. The slices had to be just thin enough to cook down in the filling, but not too thin to turn into applesauce. The amount of added sugar had to be determined by tasting the apples and judging their tartness. That afternoon, I learned that the very best pie apples were green transparent apples—not readily available in southern Alberta, but if you had space for a tree, certain varieties grew quite well in our climate. Making the flaky, yet roll-able piecrust was a finicky task. The lard—yes lard, no synthetic shortening—had to be firm, but not hard, not soft. Working the flour and lard together to a “crumbly” state was judged by how it “looked.” Adding the right amount of cold water and egg—these details required careful attention to the consistency and the feel of the crust. Rolling out the dough to just the correct thickness, without overworking and too much additional flour. And then of course, the final touches of cinnamon and sugar sprinkled on top before baking just the right amount of time at just the correct temperature. Wow! I thought. It will take me a lifetime of making apple pies to be a good as Aunt Lois.

Although I practiced for many years, rehearsing her careful directions, I am not sure that my dessert would ever rival hers. What I learned after an afternoon of watching, listening, and “feeling” with my hands, was that no written recipe could ever capture her method, care, or preciseness necessary to re/create this dessert. Trubek (2008) sums it up well: “[T]he human attributes we bring to ‘nature’ are cultural and sensual rather than objective and scientific” (as cited in & Hasebe-Ludt, 2011, p. 18).

Years later, after Aunt Lois died, we were cleaning out her freezer and found a number of apple pies, carefully double-wrapped in aluminum foil and dated 10 years previous to her death.

“These can't be still worth eating,” my husband said. “I am going to throw them out.” But for some reason, he decided to save two and brought them home. That evening, I baked one. To our immense surprise, the pie was just as fresh and delicious as if Aunt Lois had baked it yesterday.

As we re/tell that story, we laugh, but we always add how sad we are that many of those delicious pies were sent to the dump. And we remember Aunt Lois and her excellent food. Aunt Lois' culinary skills demonstrated that a *curriculum of place* requires enskillment and an education of attention, but most importantly, I remembered and appreciate the connection between the food she prepared and the people she shared it with.



Figure 27. Farm house and yard—under new ownership, April 29, 2015.

April 29, 2015

Dear K & D Farms,

Most of the time when I am in the area, my time is limited and I just drive past you as I travel Highway 501. But today I stopped by to spend time with you, re/visit the garden, the yard, the house. I need to tell you that I am working on a project, a quest if you wish, to see how my topos (where I lived) has affected who I am and who I am becoming.

We spent a lot of time together over the last 30 years, and we got to know each other very well. But our relationship became distant when I moved to the city. After our absence of 10 years, I still recall many of the things that I loved about living with you. It was a quiet, safe place for our three children to grow up, go to school, and make our livelihood. I remember how peaceful it was to sit on my deck in the early morning with a clear view of the Sweetgrass Hill, coffee in

hand, listening in the stillness to the twitter of birds in the nearby evergreens. In many ways, life was very appealing.

However, some years, I developed a distinct dislike for you. You were so expensive and it took a whole lifetime of work to pay for you. The burden of debt was sometimes overwhelming. Some years you did not do your part. You produced sparse yields of grain and if our granaries were empty, it was stressful and discouraging. I also did not like that it took many hands to keep you productive. That meant that much of my time was spent cooking meals, cleaning up after hired men, with little time to pursue my own interests.

In retrospect, however, as I weigh the good and the bad, I believe that overall, you served me well. Although I have since moved a short distance to a larger city, some days I do miss my life with you. I miss my neighbours, community events, and the relationships I formed over the years. I also miss the scents and fragrances—the dandelions in bloom, the earthiness of the newly-tilled soil, the fragrance of the poplar trees in bud, the ripening grain. I also miss the peacefulness—being able to hear the soothing sound of the crickets chirping, the frogs croaking in the evening, the owls hooting in the evergreens near the house.

So much for reminiscing...I took advantage of this visit to re-take some photos of the farm and then back to Highway 501 to visit Masinasin School.

Sincerely,
Sharon.

A School in the “Middle of Nowhere”



Figure 28. Highway 501 road sign, April 5, 2014.

Topos writes a school. Travelling 32 kilometers east on Highway 501, the Sweetgrass Hills now appear as distinct hills. A small, green highway sign directs travellers to turn right to Masinasin School. At the end of the half-mile gravel road, a white stucco building, bordered by caragana trees, is the most visible structure. It announces itself in the midst of flat furrowed fields—an epitome of rural-ness.

I am reminded once more of Chambers' (2008) statement, "A curriculum of place calls for a different sense of time" (p. 115). Although the structure that remains today was built in 1950, Masinasin School as an educational entity existed long before this building, long before my children attended, long before I taught here. The school began as a collection of one-room school buildings that were relocated to the present location and consolidated into one newly constructed school (Masinasin Historical Society, n.d., pp. 89-90).



Figure 29. Masinasin School with a view of Sweetgrass Hills in the distance, April 5, 2015.

Re/visiting this place brings back an image of the school before its closure. A perimeter of caragana bushes bordered the school and the yard. There was a small playground, a baseball diamond and backstop, two sand pits for track-meet practice, a duplex to house teachers. The prairie grass was mowed occasionally, but mostly left in its

natural state. I wanted to walk through rooms, recall feelings of belonging and teaching in this place. Since the facility now belongs to the Masinasin community, on this visit, I was able to gain access to all parts of the school and take photographs.

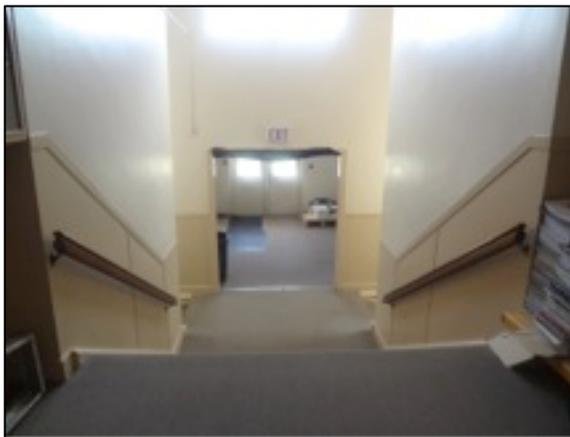


Figure 30. A view of the boot room and stairs going up to classrooms left and right to boys' and girls' cloakrooms and bathrooms, April 29, 2015.

The large entrance doubled as the boot room. From this entry, two options were available—up or down. The upward flight of stairs led to a landing, with four classrooms at each corner, a small principal's office, and a tiny staff room. The stairs going down led to the coatrooms and bathrooms, left for the boys, right for the girls.



Figure 31. The “boys” side with boot shelf and coat racks, April 29, 2015.

There was a small kitchen, sometimes known as the home-economic room, and as another classroom used for Kindergarten, if there was sufficient enrolment. A small gymnasium, about the size a large living room, completed the lower level.



Figure 32. The gymnasium, the size of a large living room, April 29, 2015.

Masinasin School has been a significant part of the *topos*—a landmark, a symbol of rural education, a reminder of community. This place is profoundly responsible for who I am as an educator. It was here, in this small rural school where I taught for 10 years until the school closed for lack of enrolment.



Figure 33. Masinasin School, April 5, 2014.



Figure 34. Photos of Masinasin alumni, April 29, 2015.



Figure 35. Trophies and memorabilia still remain at Masinasin School, April 29, 2015

Currere: Multi-grading as enskillment. Although originally a K-12 school, over the years the number of grades continued to decline. Although multi-grading is not common today, it has a long history in rural communities. Other than math and language arts, all subjects were cycled on a three-year rotation. Some years, unequal grade enrolment required re-configuration of the grades in unique ways—Grades 1, 4, and 5 in one classroom and Grades 3 and 6 in another—resulting in an even wider spread in age groups and learning styles.

When I was hired as the primary teacher, the school consisted of 1.5 Full-time teachers, responsible for Grades 1 to 6. I was pleased that my primary-class enrolment

was less than 15 students, but I was terrified when I realized that a third of my class could not read, and another third of my class was just learning to read.

Once more I am reminded of Chambers' (2008) statement that "a curriculum of place is enskillment" (p. 116). With no prior experience teaching in a multi-graded classroom, I quickly learned firsthand of "enskillment." Having a great mentor and colleague, eventually I was able to cultivate the pedagogical and management skills needed to teach in this rural multi-graded context. The "enskillment," the refinement of my teaching skills, my love of students, my passion for this profession, all became realities because I lived in, and was part of, this place.

For many years, I was not able to articulate why I believed multi-grading was beneficial for students. Today, I know multi-grading aligns with sound socio-cultural and historical theories of literacy. Larson and Marsh (2011) cite the research of scholars such as Vygotsky and the theory of the *zone of proximal development* to posit that students develop tools for thinking, as well as literacy skills, through interaction with more skilled partners.

Currere: Shaped through story. As an educator and researcher, my narratives connect my life experiences to my educational experiences. Although my narratives often link theory and practice, they offer no solutions to the problems that teachers face and therefore are "pedagogical rather than prescriptive" (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 6). However, they do provide a context for analyzing my identity as a teacher, to evaluate my ability to see students as individuals, and to contemplate the complexity of scenarios encountered in schools.

Narrative inquiry is a valuable tool for the study of educational experience as well as for the examination of teachers' knowledge of classrooms. Although it is important to examine teachers' skills, attitudes, beliefs, and content knowledge, Clandinin and Connelly (1988) reiterate:

[t]he sources of evidence for understanding knowledge, and the places knowledge may be said to reside, exist not only in the mind but in the narratives of personal experience, which are studied biographically and in the details and forms of classroom practice (p. 269).

Sometimes the stories that influence us as teachers occur long before we begin our professional experience, perhaps as early as Grade 1. An exploration of my *currere* encouraged me to investigate why the following story has lived in my memory for so many years.

Health Lesson: 1954

The teacher placed a stool in front of the rows of desks and announced, "Today our health lesson is about cleanliness."

She instructed one of my classmates to sit on the stool. The chosen student was Andy, a quiet farm boy, who arrived at school every day, dishevelled and unkempt.

"Why is it that you come to school with unclean hands, your hair not combed, your clothes not clean?"

Andy mumbled something about having to do chores in the morning and not having time to wash up before the bus arrived. So, in front of the whole class, the teacher demonstrated how to "wash up." Using a wet rag and a bar of soap, she scrubbed Andy's arms, face, and hair. He sat, motionless and silent.

To this day, recalling the incident brings tears to my eyes, thinking of the embarrassment and humiliation suffered by that six-year old. And I wonder: Where is Andy now? How would he tell this story? Why did the teacher think this was acceptable conduct? Why did no one come to his defense? (Hierath, 2012a, p. 2)

Fowler's (2006) fifth orbital, *hermeneutic philosophy*, encouraged me to engage in "careful interpretive exploration of what is 'uncovering' and 'revealing'" in this story (p. 30). What does this narrative disclose about me, someone who has chosen teaching as a profession? I am still distressed that, at the time, I don't remember this bothering me. I don't recall telling my parents about it or feeling sorry for the young boy who was humiliated. However, years later, I know that it did have a significant impact on my teaching philosophy because as I replay that "movie" in my mind, I do feel shame for myself, the young boy, and the teacher who should have known better. Witnessing this event has increased my compassion and empathy for the all students who have passed through my classroom doors, and especially those who are made to stand out and suffer.

Currere: Literacy lived, labeled, and learned. A few years into my primary-teaching assignment, my principal asked me to attend a parent council meeting to explain changes to the reading program. Literacy theory had shifted significantly with the advent of the whole-language concept and it required a reassessment of my traditional sound-symbol approach to teaching reading. Pahl and Rowsell (2012) acknowledge this shift. Previously, literacy was something associated with books and writing. Literacy was perceived as a set of skills, which were taught in schools. In the mid-1980s, literacy was recognized as a social practice, something that people do in everyday life, in their homes, at work, and at school (p. 7).

The Upside-Down Pyramid

My room was the venue for the meeting, so I arrived early to be certain that all was in order. I tacked up my diagram of the inverted pyramid, symbolic of the whole-language concept. Panning the room, I imagined it through the eyes of a parent. What could they infer about my teaching from this "place," this room that housed their children for six hours each day? I hoped they would appreciate the varying sizes of desks, a concrete symbol of the range of ages in the class. I hoped

they would note the progress their child was making along “The Reading Road,” the bulletin board display that tracked independent reading. I hoped they would examine the folders containing collections of their child’s writing activities. I hoped they would stop to read the class-constructed wall charts of rhymes and skipping songs, examples of text that their child may have learned at home.

Partway through my presentation to the parents, using the upside-down pyramid to illustrate the whole language concept, a parent interrupted, “Why change the way reading is taught? My daughter learned to read using phonics. Doesn’t that work just fine?” His blunt question took me back, and I tried to maintain my composure. I fear that I stumbled in my explanation, but it brought to the forefront that, as a teacher, I needed to defend my practice and also understand the theory behind why I was doing what I was doing (Giroux, 2005). And, in reflection, the question demonstrated that parents wanted to be informed participants in how and what I was teaching. Today, I would have responded differently. I would have made better use of the inverted-pyramid visual to explain the whole language approach. I would have emphasized that literacy is multi-faceted and multi-modal. I would have explained the advantages of being in a multi-graded classroom. As part of my professional *currere*, this narrative still resonates with me. It was the first time I was asked to publicly articulate my literacy theory and defend my pedagogy. I learned a lot from this experience. As a teacher, I need to be challenged, especially by parents. How can I expect parents to trust me with their children’s future if I cannot defend why I do what I do? (Hierath, 2013, p. 5).



Figure 36. Pictured is my Grade 1, 2, 3 classroom—the room described in literacy narrative—April 29, 2015.

Currere: Curriculum-as-lived.

Sh*t Happens

The father's response at a meeting to discuss the behaviour of his sixth-grade son: "Sh*t happens." That took me back! I don't recall my response to his off-the-cuff, not-too-worried comment. Likely I ended the conversation with a suggestion for better behaviour and attitude from his son going forward.

The next day, I received a phone call from the principal of the elementary school in the nearest town. "I'm getting one of your students tomorrow. What can you tell me about him?"

*So, that was the "sh*t that was going to happen," I thought. The parents are moving their son to another school.*

To be completely honest, I felt mixed emotions about his relocation to another school—relief because the student had ADHD and was on a daily medication. If he forgot to take the meds, the day's events were very unpredictable. I felt surprise, because I had no foreshadowing of the parents' actions; and I felt disappointment in myself, because of my inability as a teacher to recognize and meet the needs of a student that I had taught for many years.

A few years later, the young man, now in Grade 12, was assigned to my middle-school gym class as a "work-experience student." This assignment was a great opportunity for me to observe and communicate with him in a different venue. Fortunately, he related well to me and to my students. He showed up on time to assist the class, and overall was delightful to work with!

Fowler's (2006) narrative research on a *curriculum of difficulty* clarifies how stories that "trouble[d]" us, can actually reconstruct or advance our "teaching, understanding, learning, and professional growth" (p. 7). Although this narrative ended positively, there are numerous aspects about my behaviour that "trouble" me. This sixth grader had been my student since Grade 1. I had plenty of time to form a stronger relationship, understand his underlying behaviour issues, listen to his stories, and communicate with his parents. A positive aspect of teaching in a multi-graded environment was that I was able to build a relationship with my students over a period of at least three years. However, the negative—and truthful—aspect of multi-grading was

that sometimes the relationship was difficult for me, for the student, as well as the parents.

The following narrative returns me to Cynthia Chambers' (2008) statement that to dwell in a place requires "an education of attention" (p. 120). Aoki describes dwelling as "relational... a way of being with others, particularly teachers with students in classrooms" (as cited in Chambers, 2010, para. 2). The death of a student, or one of the student's loved ones, epitomizes Fowler's (2006) *curriculum of difficulty*. Coping with unexpected tragedy—a time of sorrow, a time of helplessness and grief—requires watching, listening, feeling, and tapping into our students' senses.

Tragedy at the Railway Crossing

One June morning all the students in our little school were travelling the 20 miles to Milk River to go swimming. Amidst the student chatter, I heard, "Adrian, that's not true. Everyone who kills someone doesn't go to jail. The guy who killed my mother and sister didn't go to jail!"

My ears perked up to pay attention to where this conversation was going. Fortunately Michael's statement was not challenged and the conversation ended. With extreme sadness, I recalled the tragic event.

Returning home from the Regional Science Fair in the city, Michael's mother and sister were stopped at the Highway 4 railway crossing just outside of Lethbridge. As they were waiting, an impaired driver pushed their mini van into the path of the train. The little five-year old and her mother were both killed. The impaired driver switched places with the passenger in his car, and there was no proof of culpability.

I recall the dread I felt about going to school the next day. I did not know at the time that this was part of curriculum-as-lived! What would I say to the students? How would they react to a little Kindergarten student being killed? Not really knowing what to do, my fellow teacher and I gathered all the students in the library, had them sit on the carpet, and we talked about what had happened. Of course, the children had already heard the news over the weekend; our task was to reassure students, respond to their concerns, and encourage them to love and support Michael and his father, and each other.

The school staff—my teacher colleague, our assistant, and I, did the only practical thing we could do—we brought food to the home of the grieving family and visited awhile. Chambers (2006a) alludes to this act of compassion, referring to Butler’s (2004) observation that “[V]isiting and feeding mourners rather than sending flowers—awakens us . . . to what is precarious in another life, or, rather the precariousness of life itself” (p. 34). Our presence, as well as our food, fed the hurting hearts of the mourners (Hierath, 2014, p. 10).

Closure of our little school on the prairie had reared its head many times throughout my ten-year tenure. Finally in the spring of 1996, with next year’s bare-bone staff, and the possibility of losing students to the elementary school in town, it was necessary for the parent council to give serious consideration to closure. The closure of any school is an emotionally charged issue, but in a rural community, its impact is felt socially and politically.

The End of an Era

The date was March 8, 1996. The venue for the Parent Advisory Council meeting was the library. The agenda consisted of one item. This was a difficult situation for me, as well as for the parents and staff of Masinasin School. The mood was somber as I announced:

As you all are aware, the predicted enrolment for next year is maximum 20 students. The division has only assigned one teacher and a 0.2 full-time teaching assistant for our school. Taking into consideration all of these factors, I just don’t feel that I am able to offer your children—my students—the quality of education that they deserve and you expect.

After some discussion and a few tears, consensus was reached by all present that closure was the only option. As the teacher/administrator, parent, and community member, I felt a great sadness to be the last administrator of Masinasin School. To this day, I cannot drive past or re/visit this place without reliving moments and memories. On the other hand, I feel honoured to be a part of this community institution. I celebrate this by following the lives of my past students and observing their accomplishments. And, I recognize the wisdom and foresight of the parents who chose the best path for their children despite the consequences for the life of the community.



Figure 37. The former library, which today bears little resemblance to the meeting room where parents made the decision to close Masinasin School

My narratives support Clandinin and Connelly's (1999) statement that teachers' stories are "both personal—reflecting life history—and social—reflecting the milieu, the contexts in which teachers live" (as cited in Huber & Wehlen, 1999, p. 383). Because the method of *currere* is recursive, I re/visit not only this *topos*, but also my teaching philosophy as well as my pedagogy, both shaped and molded in this rural multi-graded environment. And, I appreciate the degree to which Masinasin School reflects and was integral to the life of this rural community. Re/visiting this school and telling its stories is one way I can recognize this community icon and honour those whose educational journey happened here, in this *topos*.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching,

it is critical we know about the person the teacher is

—Ivor Goodson, from *Studying Teachers' Lives*

Narrative: Integral to Curriculum Studies

Curriculum is more than mandated content, course outlines, or lists of resources. Reconceptualizing *currere* in a personal, evolving, and authentic manner, as my project demonstrates, can be useful for educators as well as students. Aoki states, “Governments mandate curriculum developers to create documents that guide life in ... classrooms, but life on whose behalf [?]” (as cited in Chambers, 2003, p. 3). A narrative approach offers a way to transform the field away from the institutionalized, the designed, and the developed. Carson (2006) states that “[m]aking sense of the course of life is a complicated conversation that has enlisted multiple discourses, which include phenomenology, gender studies, post-structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, and critical race theory” (p. 189). If the point of education is *understanding*, curriculum should address not only academics but also self-formation, the state of society, the historical significance of our time and place in this world. In other words, narrative is integral to curriculum.

This is valuable to teachers, because, as Pinar (2004) contends, we must move away from classroom conversations that have become too formalized and abstract, conversations that relegate students to “ventriloquists,” merely parroting what is taught to them from textbooks (p. 186). Pinar (2004) reiterates Webber’s (2003) warning that a “divorce between school curriculum and students’ self-formation...ensures profound

social alienation and, on spectacular occasions, violence” (p. 186). Such a move encourages educators to engage in what Pinar (2004) calls “extraordinary complicated conversations” (p. 186).

This reconceptualization encourages curriculum that promotes understanding, care for self and others, and supports ethical actions and decision-making in our public and personal spaces and places. This is reflective of curriculum scholars such as Noddings (1995) who queries whether curriculum that primarily emphasizes academic adequacy meets the needs of every student, or even any student. Noddings (1995) suggests that priorities should be reordered to focus curriculum around themes of care—“care for self, for intimate others, for associates and acquaintances, for distant others, for animals, for plants and the physical environment, for objects and instruments, and for ideas”(p. 365).

Research, using narratives as a source of data, can act as a catalyst for conversations with/in educational systems. How so? Who we are as teachers is dependent upon our experience as revealed through our narratives. Our identities as teachers are determined by our *topos*—where we have lived, engaged in relationships, experienced our unique *currere*. Narrative inquiry is integral to curriculum studies because until I understand who I am as a person, I will not understand who I am as a teacher. Knowing myself means knowing what I bring to the classroom, what I offer my students, why I do what I do.

The same is true for my students. Life writing allows students to voice their individuality, why they are, who they are, in our increasingly diverse and complex classrooms. Implementing this approach to curriculum provides teachers with insight to

build a safe and caring environment for all students in the ever-changing and demanding classrooms of the 21st century.

For those engaged in educational policy-making—politicians, school board members, and administrators—narratives provide authentic data to enlighten and guide future pedagogical and curricular investigation. Moen (2006) muses, “What is remarkable is that the voices of teachers are virtually absent from the public debate on teaching” (p. 9). I would add that what is also remarkable is that the voices of students are virtually absent. We need to hear these voices. “The question then becomes, how we can orchestrate these conversations so that students [and teachers] can enter into them?” (Pinar, 2004, p. 195). My inquiry presents an argument regarding the significance of narrative in curriculum studies. As a teacher, my lived experiences, my rural upbringing, my accrued wisdom and knowledge, is relational to the manner in which I design, interpret, and implement curriculum and facilitate the conversations in my classroom.

However, the primary purpose of my qualitative inquiry project was to learn more about *my* identity and the factors that make “me, me.” Therefore, the critical question remains: Why should anyone care about one single teacher from a community in rural southern Alberta? In searching for a response, I return to my two primary tasks—that of a curriculum scholar exploring a *curriculum of place*, and that of a life writer re/visiting and re/writing.

My Stories: Why Do They Matter?

My narrative inquiry portrays a place with deeply ingrained values, a tightly knit community, a place where children were educated in a small multi-graded school, and a place where the *topos* has remained basically unaltered, in contrast to the rapidly

changing world. It describes a place where careful stewardship of the environment is essential to one's livelihood and where attention to food, to *terroir*, plays a distinctive role. It defines a place where close proximity to the USA, as well as the influence of American ancestors, contributed to the uniqueness of the people who live/d here. The result is a distinct perspective, slightly Americanized attitudes and values, the common use of non-Canadian terminology (the use of miles, not kilometers), and spellings (honor, not honour)—components that speak to this “border” *topos* and its people. The goal for exploring my *curriculum of place* was to find common ground, to search out “a place to begin the difficult work of reaching into and across the territories of difference” (Chambers, 1999, p. 148) with my fellow Canadians. My project, hopefully, will unearth the commonalities that shape the social and political environments of all human beings so that we can authentically appreciate each other.

Why should my process of re/visiting and writing matter to readers? The process of life writing permitted, or rather *required* me, to observe myself in a way that I had not expected. Smith (2012) wisely observes, “Life Writing involves a kind of recovery of, well, Life” (p. xv). Re/visiting my places, re/telling my stories, helped me to make sense of the complexities of life, to laugh, to reminisce, to grieve, to understand what was/is important, to know why I am who I am. Chambers et al. (2012) remind me that although re/telling my stories makes me vulnerable, opening up this space can stimulate conversations with others, who are equally vulnerable, but willing to share their personal stories (p. xxvi).

My narratives may not tell of great accomplishments. They simply tell of my life, my place, of who I am. They offer a space for broadening interaction with my fellow

human beings, they encourage me to listen to their stories, and to know that bits and pieces of all of our narratives will resonate and connect us. Most importantly I know that everybody has a story worth telling.

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