On Learning to Write Her Name: An Example of Research Informed by Literary Anthropology

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> "Your name is Tara, isn't it?" asked the teacher, puzzled. She glanced at the name tag, which read *T-a-r-a*.
> "Yes. But that writing doesn't say it," Tara sniffled. "THIS is how it's sposed to be, like my mommy writes it." She pointed to the label on her lunch kit, "See, *T-A-R-A*! You only did the *T* right, the other letters are not my name!"
> The teacher could see now. Tara needed to be an uppercase girl, a *TARA*, for a little while longer. . . .

This vignette is one taken from my research into young children's experiences of learning to write. Like all events of learning, the experiences depicted in this example represent a complex weave of individual and collective practices. Like most representative narratives, the depiction of this event offers a snapshot of experiential complexity. I have named these vignettes *narrative tableaux* (Laidlaw, forthcoming), pointing to the way in which attempts to represent lived experience are always partial depictions, not unlike fictional writing. As representations of the weave of history, memory, language, and geography, such tableaux emerging from research contexts require complex interpretations. It is possible to read the preceding vignette from a variety of perspectives, and to create additional meanings through juxtaposing it alongside other texts, including historical works, literary fictions, as well as more conventional literacy research texts.

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In the article that follows, I examine the tableau of Tara's experience as a complex representation, informed by Sumara's (2002) interpretation of "literary anthropology" and other complex approaches.

Literary Anthropology and Literacy Research

In recent decades, a number of anthropologists have written about the emerging relationship between anthropological inquiry and literary or narrative based studies (Bateson, 1994; Behar, 1996; Geertz, 1988). These inquiries challenge the commonsense belief that researchers are able to precisely and unambiguously represent the experience of others. Such work has contributed to an increased interest by human science researchers in the relationship between knowledge and literacy and literary representation practices. Because most human science researchers depend on print text for the dissemination of research, the question of authorship and the relationships between truth claims and the writing of text has been closely examined (Behar, 1996; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Richardson, 1997). While there continues to be an obligation to interpret culture, the reporting of this should be understood as a particular kind of fiction, where fiction is understood as a selection and interpretation of experienced events by the author (Lather, 1991). Understanding reports of research as forms of fictional representation has facilitated an understanding of ethnographic writing as an interpretive art, and as something that relies upon numerous literary conventions in representations of knowledge (Richardson, 1997).

Following the work of Iser (1989, 1993), Sumara (2002) presents interpretive practices for literacy research that are conceptually informed by *literary anthropology*. (See also http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/iser/ and http://www.antrhopoetics.ucla.edu/apo302/Iser_int.htm for Iser's perspectives on literary anthropology). The term literary anthropology represents the complex ways the reader's relations with texts participate in the ongoing development of the reader's personal identity. Literary anthropological research is organized by the belief that a relationship to a literary text can become an interesting location for the continued interpretation of culture and the way culture is influenced by history. It is within such literary commonplaces that readers collect past, present and projected interpretations of themselves and their situations.

Sumara (1996) has developed literary anthropological research using literary texts such as novels as research commonplaces. However, he has also extended this by reconceptualizing other literacy events (interpretive writing, in particular) as similar literary commonplaces (see Sumara, 2002). What constitutes the "literariness" of a specific event or experience, is not so much the genre used to organize research but, instead, the phenomenological nature of the experience. As Sumara (2003) suggests, many lived experiences, including watching movies,

interactions with others using Internet technologies, or writing personal memoir can be considered as different forms of literary fiction, since they all require practices of representing, imagining, and inventing (http://www.tmc.waikato.ac.nz/english/ETPC/article/pdf/2003v2n2art8.pdf).

In considering the tableau of Tara's name reading/writing event a "literary" event, I am not suggesting that it is not a "real" one. The represented experience did, in fact, emerge from an actual research experience, occurring within an action research project where a number of events of emergent writing, reading, and story-making were documented in a kindergarten classroom in an urban Canadian school. However, I will suggest that I cannot represent the fullness of the experience *as Tara experienced it*. What I can provide, instead, is an interpretation of Tara's experience that includes some details about its contextual contingency, as well as my own complicity in this contingency. In so doing, I hope to create a research text that, in its tableau form, has a literary quality.

In order to create critical awareness from such literary events, some explicit interpretive process is required. To develop the interpretations presented later in this essay, I engaged in multiple practices. For example, initially, I began by selecting this event from a number of others that had emerged within the data gathered, and by uncovering further layers of interpretation when this vignette was read alongside texts which examined the history of alphabetic literacy (e.g. Ong, 1982; Olson, 1994), texts addressing early literacy (e.g. Clay, 1991; Gee, 2001; Sulzby, 1991), works of fiction (e.g. Gowdy, 1995), and texts in the area of literary theory and anthropology (e.g. Culler, 1997; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Iser, 1993; Sumara, 2002). I also re-read and responded to notes created in reaction to the research text/tableau (which I approached as a kind of literary fiction) and made notes about other literary and non-literary works and experiences that seemed topically related to this research interest.

Creating Historical Archives

As mentioned, the process of literary anthropological research begins with practices of reading and note-taking that are juxtaposed. These interpreted responses require hermeneutic interpretation if they are to become useful to both the researcher and to readers who later examine the researcher's published interpretations. This sort of hermeneutic inquiry might be best understood as the project of trying to make sense of the relationship between experiences of being human and practices of making and using knowledge (see Gadamer, 1990; Smith, 1991; Sumara, 1996a). Hermeneutic inquiry seeks to illuminate the conditions that make particular experiences, and interpretations of those experiences, possible. Put simply, hermeneutic interpretation is the activity of engaging in creative interpretations.

For Gadamer and his mentor Heidegger (1966), hermeneutic inquiry and interpretation moved beyond biblical and legal origins and entered into the realm of the interpretation of human experience. Both philosophers developed hermeneutic inquiry as the study of the complex relations among human subjectivity, language, and culture, insisting that all understanding is layered with prior experience and must be understood historically. An event of interpretation, then, must consider both immediate contextual circumstances as well as the ways in which these circumstances have been historically influenced. This means also that an experience of identity becomes one where past, present, and future understanding merge into events of consciousness that, in part, are presented and shaped by language. Gadamer (1990) developed this view into a dialectical hermeneutics where understanding is described as the interpretation of relationships between humans and cultural artifacts. One such cultural artifact, the literary text, becomes an important site for the interpretation of human memory and history when studied in relation to the reader/writer and the act of reading/writing. The form of the tableau might contain similar possibilities for literacy research.

In order for work to be considered hermeneutic, it needs to be historically informed. This means, in relation to literacy inquiry, that subjects of research interest must become known as complexly and deeply as possible. Thus, in researching the vignette of Tara, I layered readings of histories, literary texts, memoir, and other readings alongside this tableau example. Each time I read this research text, I would re-visit the previous layer of notes recorded and include new links to texts I found to be interesting or interrelated. Such textual marking, re-marking, and response activities contribute to hermeneutic inquiry since they remind us, as researchers, to try to remember that all experiences are both historical and contextual. Each time we re-visit a literary or research text that we have previously annotated, we can remember the context of the previous reading(s) and, at the same time, notice how our current interpretive context has changed (Sumara, 1996a). In foregrounding the historical and contextual aspects of such interpretive situations and practices, and in creating new data that represents these aspects, juxtaposed with "original" research texts, we can develop an archive of data supporting research questions and interests.

Research Texts as Commonplaces

Significant to literary anthropological research methods is the practice of using a particular artifact as the *commonplace* around which ideas are developed and interpreted. This practice helps to organize data and other information, providing a complex, yet manageable structure within the interpretive report. Often, a literary text becomes the commonplace (see, e.g. Sumara, 1996a; Sumara, 1996b; Laidlaw, 2001). However, it is also

possible to structure data in ways that these might also act as commonplace texts.

Important to developing such commonplace texts is what Iser (1978) describes as moments of indeterminacy. He elaborates these as particular gaps in understanding, suggested by the text, that must be filled in by the reader. The sorts of texts used for literary anthropological research should create generous locations for inquiry by providing playful, interpretive space that allows readers (or researchers) to insert their own experiences and interpretations to account for perceived gaps in the narrative.

In creating a commonplace text for this research project, the notion of the *narrative tableau* (Laidlaw, forthcoming) is used to reshape an event considered as data into a more literary form. The concept of *tableau* is one borrowed from the dramatic arts, a structure used to describe a representation that appears as a"frozen statue" or "still image." In the work of drama, tableaux are created by using participants' bodies to create a symbolic image or portrayal; such structures are contained and economical, yet remain complex and detailed (Neelands & Goode, 2001; O'Neill, 1995). An example of tableau, as used in drama, involves having small groups of participants freeze into position to represent a particular scene or event (e.g. the first day of school, for the teacher, a moment of crisis in the novel The Giver). As an artifact or embodied text, a tableau can be viewed and interpreted in multiple ways, observed from a variety of perspectives, and examined in relation to past, present, and future events. Like the literary text, the tableau offers a commonplace for interpretive work, providing a site for juxtaposition, interrogation, and response. Like the literary text, the tableau is meant for an audience, to be "read" and interpreted by others. Importantly, tableaux contain the gaps and indeterminacies that evoke further response and interpretation.

Narrative tableaux, as I have used them here and in other work (see Laidlaw, forthcoming), are concise narrative representations of research events. These were developed from literacy events which occurred in a kindergarten classroom in an urban school in Western Canada, and were initially collected via traditional methods of data gathering: audio-tape recordings, field notes, transcribed texts, and artifacts of literacy created by the children. Though the tableaux did occur as actual events, as they shifted to a more literary narrative form, I began to regard them more like a kind of researched fiction. A particular moment, sculpted within the tableau, was transformed into a commonplace text, one that enabled more space for interpretation and invited the creation of new knowledge within layers of the markings and re-markings surrounding the particular tableau event.

I should point out, as well, that not just any moment from data collected can be used in creating a tableau. I developed a number of tableaux, including the one at the centre of this article, in a process of rereading, reexamining, and reviewing transcripts, field notes and

recordings, looking for moments which seemed to invite further reflection and interpretation, events which evoked a curiosity to search below the surface or fill in the gaps. Iser's (1978) notion of indeterminacy was characteristic of such texts. The pieces that became tableaux were examples that were often initially puzzling rather than being unambiguous illustrations of literacy. I then represented such events in the form of a tableau, using narrative or fictionalized forms of writing.

Interpreting Tara's Experience

One challenge in the development of literary anthropology as a research method has been to find ways to represent the complexity of the "commonplaces" developed during the research and interpretation process. How is it possible to create research reports that present insights as well as trace the complex associations (both non literary and literary) that enabled such insights? How is it possible to create a research report that presents conclusions, yet still retains sufficient indeterminacy that the reader is encouraged to enlarge (and, indeed, collaborate on) the interpretations suggested? In developing a beginning response to these questions, I offer some interpretations of Tara's literary tableau. In between these interpretations, I also include quotations from texts that were read alongside analyses of Tara's event of early literacy. These textual insertions are provided as reminders that analyses of data collected are always considered within the researcher's contexts of involvement. Although the use of bibliographic citation has become the typical manner in which these contexts are represented in research reports, such citations do not generally capture the complexity of such contexts. Even when quotations are used to represent the exact words of an author whose analyses or data is incorporated to support an argument being made, the reader cannot be certain what has been deliberately or unconsciously omitted.

In the following text, I include representational elements from other texts read during the process of thinking about the literary tableau in question in order to underscore the idea that while I, and other researchers, can offer interpretations, these necessarily emerge from our own histories, such as my recent history of readings juxtaposed with my study of Tara's tableau. For ease of reading, I will include the tableau once more:

> "That is NOT my name!" insisted the child, verging on tearful hysterics.
> "Your name is Tara, isn't it?" asked the teacher, puzzled. She glanced at the name tag, which read *T-a-r-a.*
> "Yes. But <u>that</u> writing doesn't say it," Tara sniffled. "THIS is how it's sposed to be, like my mommy writes it." She pointed to the label on her

> lunch kit, "See, *T-A-R-A*! You only did the *T* right, the other letters are not my name!"
> The teacher could see now. Tara needed to be an uppercase girl, a *TARA*, for a little while longer. . .

First, it is important to acknowledge that there are a number of ways of looking at the aspects of Tara's literacy as presented in the tableau. For example, familiar to most educators would be an examination of the skills and knowledge that are demonstrated and those that are not yet evident. I acknowledge, as well, that an examination of how Tara is beginning to construct her own developing knowledge as a writer and reader would be of interest from more holistic emergent literacy perspectives (such as those of current "balanced literacy" approaches), and that learning to read and write her name is a significant event in her developing identity as a literate individual. I do not dismiss any of these perspectives; indeed, believe that each provides a particular frame which recognizes important aspects of the complex landscape of early literacy development.

The perspective I wish to explore instead, however, is one informed by complex theories of cognition (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991; Johnson, 2001), one that intertwines readings and concepts I have juxtaposed alongside the vignette of Tara's reading/mis-reading experience. Such an examination of this event necessitates, in addition to the other analyses, the inclusion of a layer of historical and hermeneutic interpretation, both for Tara as an individual child, and for Tara as someone who is participating in a larger initiation into literacy culture and practices.

> Even the best ethnographic texts—serious, true fictions—are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control. (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 7)

As Olson (1994) observes in his cognitive studies, young, preliterate children often approach print, text or logos emblematically. That is, children may view such texts (e.g. an "exit" sign or fast food logo) as emblems for the things themselves rather than as representations of actual words. "It's McDonald's, Mummy!" a child says, in response to seeing the "Golden Arches" while riding in the car. Beginning readers may also use alphabetic text in similar ways, for example, believing that the word "little" should say "big" because it appears as the longer word. Emblematic approaches to text can also be traced historically. North American Aboriginal representations and symbolic practices provide a number of examples (e.g. the totem pole). As well, the ritual or sacred use of texts often imbue them with emblematic meaning, where print is understood to have mystical properties, so that there is a reluctance to destroy or damage sacred texts. When Tara reads the uppercase version

of her name as representing herself, and denies that the other form that includes lower case letters is her name, she presents such an emblematic approach to text. Her written name is regarded as a part of herself, and should not be altered in form, as the teacher discovers. But Tara is not alone in regarding text emblematically, her example reminds us of the complex history and practices involved in the development of alphabetic representation curiously replicated in early emergent readers and writers. Tara's experience, it would seem, also taps into a larger history of the invention of systems of writing.

> When I write, I have a real existence that is proper to the activity of writing—an existence that takes place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 121)

Tara's writing of her name is also complexly interconnected to her own personal history, embedded within a particular set of relations and her own memories and experiences. It is the way her mother taught her to write her name, and likely this experience was a part of her initiation into literacy, experienced in the familiar spaces of home. A shift in how those letters are written, such as the teacher's alternate printing using lowercase letters, is a disruption from her familiar texts and practices. In asking Tara to print her name differently, the teacher is, in effect, asking her to abandon one of the markers that binds her to her mother, to home. Tara's distress with her encounter with school literacy, set against her own prior home literacy practices underlines a significant moment, an acknowledgment of a difficult choice between the world of mother and home and that of teacher and school.

> If reading is a passage between the public and the private world, the journey is fraught with danger. To give oneself up to the text is to relinquish the world in order to have the world; it is a birth and a death. And so, it should not surprise us to find a child wary of reading, reluctant to follow the line across the page without knowing where it leads. (Grumet, 1988, p. 145)

Tara's writing and reading experiences are embedded in a complex web of history, relations, texts and practices. She enters the classroom with her own "horizon of experience" (Gadamer, 1990) and encounters a different layer of experience at school, other ways to "write herself." The challenge for the teacher, of course, is to bring together these multiple worlds—that of the kindergarten classroom and those of the children who arrive with their own complex histories, who must eventually transpose these practices which schooling offers, or demands, onto their prior experiences with literacy at home.

For Tara, and other children learning to read and write at school, literacy is not just a new skill to be added on to their existing repertoire of language experiences, as if it were a Lego™ block. Rather, literacy, and the literacies of schooling, will be inextricably intertwined with the child's future experiences and perceptions of her environment. Engagements with reading and writing result in further implications for learning and identity and offer benefits in terms of being able to more fully participate in the literate world. But there will also be some costs and consequences, as occurs with the use of any technology. As Ong (1982) and McLuhan (1996) suggest, alphabetic writing is, after all, a technology, an invention, and such technologies change the context for social, cultural, and personal interactions.

> When a child enters school, even where the language of instruction is very close to the language of the home, he or she is still at risk when teachers spend their time teaching correct forms instead of celebrating the fact that every child already knows some language pretty well. (Bateson, 1994, p. 207)

As Tara gains in literacy, she will develop an increased awareness of her own spoken language. She will change her pronunciations of some words, adding the letters or sounds she begins to notice through her use of print. Her world will gradually become permeated by text. Eventually, like many literate individuals, she will use writing to fix her memories and thoughts onto the page. As Tara grows older, she may also begin to interpret her own identity in the kinds of narratives offered through print: the self which is translated through her own written texts or the "papers" she takes home from school, and the collection of texts which may be offered to her, such as the written responses to her work, report cards, letters, e-mail correspondence, text messages. These texts will have subtle influences on Tara's own experiences—how she is reflected back through print may begin to influence her actions, both inside the classroom and in her life beyond schooling.

> Are real people fictions? We mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others.
> (Winterson, 1995, p. 59)

It is also important to acknowledge the influences of culture and gender on Tara's learning. Her difficulty with the teacher's "new" version of her name may arise partly because she has been exposed to English literacy practices, and has lived in a home where her parents thought it important to teach Tara to write her name, anticipating that this knowledge would be helpful to her in kindergarten. For some of Tara's classmates, however,

kindergarten provides the first encounter with writing, with English, and with the alphabet.

Tara's name, too, provides a narrative of gender—it identifies her as a female child and, as such, may invite particular "normative" gender expectations. Tara's objection to lowercase letters, her insistence that her name remain in uppercase, presents a resistance which the teacher may consider inappropriate for a kindergarten girl, and which may mark her as "difficult," "defiant," as someone who operates in opposition to normative gender structures.[1]

From a complex perspective, it is clear that other subtle influences impinge on Tara's literacy practices. There is the social context, the interpretive community of the kindergarten, where there are shared practices, texts, and other engagements. Tara is able to observe her peers participating in the reading and writing of their own names, where other children may experience similar sorts of confusion and resistance. The classroom is a living structure comprised of a weave of pedagogical events, texts, artifacts, social relationships and ecological influences. All of these things have effects on Tara's experiences of literacy, on how Tara learns about the writing of her name, and the writing of herself, in school.

> The main reason admirers of physics distrust literary critics is that no consensus ever seems to form about the right interpretation of a text: there is little convergence of opinion. (Rorty, 1999, p. 179)

Implications for Research in Education and Literacy

Developing methodologies informed by literary studies as an alternative to science-based inquiry presents opportunities for literacy research to reconsider, reframe and transform the ways in which inquiry may be represented, as well as creating new sites of knowledge and provoking new questions about what might be considered as valid inquiry. These methods of inquiry are more aligned with classroom practices or aesthetic learning experiences, encouraging a more reciprocal relation between the often separated domains of literacy research and pedagogical practice.

As well, because such methods are informed by pedagogical and literary practices, they may also create opportunities for developing new ways of thinking about teaching. Literacy teaching and learning involving fictional or narrative practices, informed by contemporary theories of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1938 & 1978), result in the creation of complex and situated relationships with texts, or stories, and participants. Such practices ask children to layer their own personal and

[1] I would like to acknowledge Dennis Sumara's (2000) unpublished manuscript, "Recognizing heteronormativity: Queer theory and the work of learning and teaching" for challenging my interpretations to include normative gender considerations

collective experiences and histories in relation to their responses to and interpretations of both fictional texts or stories and the work of their classmates—methods that may be extended, in similar ways, to research practices.

The elaborated location offered within a literary anthropologic structure provides opportunities for interesting and productive interpretations to occur—not merely simple interpretations of texts, prior experiences, or what might be considered as data, but also interpretations of the complex ways these intertwine and create a new location for inquiry within the research text. Data may become sites of ongoing interpretation and archive collections. Such work creates a more reciprocal relation between researchers and their inquiry, where texts, research events and interpretive work are viewed as mutually co-evolving and intersecting.

One difficulty that researchers using aesthetically informed methodologies often address is the problem of representation in typical research reports. Summarizing and generalizing one's study tend to be the accepted practices for creating reports or articles for academic journals, something that can be problematic in attempting to represent alternative research practices. Alternative ways of writing about or representing this sort of inquiry need to be developed as well as accepted by the research communities within literacy education.

Over time, I have experimented with different ways to present this work and the insights emerging from this research example. I have been able to do so using the basic method of anthropological inquiry presented in this article. The reading, marking, rereading, re-marking of literary texts, juxtaposed with engagements with non-literary texts and other collected research data (autobiographical, biographical, ethnographic), creates the skeletal framework for interpretive work. Alongside and following these reading and response activities I have engaged in "interpretive linking" (see Sumara, 2002). While not all of these assigned writing/interpretation practices have yielded productive insights, many of them have. As these interpretive "puddles" are created, I have continued to collect them as printed text, notebook collections, or ongoing computer files. Over time, as I continue the process of reading/rereading, marking/re-marking of text, placing these in relation with one another and with additional experiences, including the writing practice of creating short interpretive texts, I uncover new insights, as I have done in the work with Tara's tableau.

While I tend to repeat these research processes, final research products are always conditioned by additional factors. Often, in order to better understand some of my research preoccupations and interests, I have needed to develop a larger analysis of particular thematics (for example, the relationships among language, literacy, history, memory, childhood). These thematics, it is important to mention, do not prompt

the earlier response and interpretive practices, but *emerge from* the thinking that develops from such activities.

Concluding Comments

Literary anthropology asks researchers to continually consider and reconsider both what they know to be the contexts of their inquiries and their methods for learning about and representing those contexts. Although it is not possible to represent the completeness of children's experiences, it is possible to show the complexity of those experiences by focusing on how one small event is connected to larger historical, contextual, personal, and collective events. Rather than trying to represent as much of what is known about Tara and her contexts as possible, I have attempted to create a literary/narrative tableau—a small fragment of information about Tara—and to interpret it in relation to the tightly woven web of context from which it emerges. As well, following advice given by cultural anthropologists (Behar, 1996; Geertz, 1988), I have endeavored to represent some of my own complicity by showing some of the textual identifications and influences throughout the analyses of the literary tableau.

In the end, I do not believe that I can truly represent Tara's experience. However, I can represent my interpretations of what it was like for me to become intellectually and creatively involved with information suggested by Tara's literacy narrative. The interpretations provided in these analyses, then, are not so much conclusions about Tara, but, instead, are insights developed about my involvement in this research event. In reporting these insights, I believe I can offer some ways of thinking about the relationship between literacy practices and the ongoing development of personal and collective identities that might be interesting for both researchers and literacy educators.

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