

# *Landwash Readers: A Space of Collective Reading in the Medical Humanities*

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My personal remembrance of the winds in Newfoundland and Labrador is a visceral presence still; and not a squall that lulls one to rest, but a wind that rubs and cuts like sandpaper, shaking anything not nailed down. This bustling wind is itself an important element of this textual piece, and to see it as such is to engage in a curriculum which is “itself a search for meaning” (Greene, 1995, p. 89). Along with the froth of the salted seaborne air, such cutting gusts outline a grammar of land and sea dependent on the shattering constancy of change, cultivating “multiple ways of seeing and multiple dialogues in a world where nothing stays the same” (p. 16).

I position reading as a complex scurry of activities, involving every aspect of the reader’s self and her world. Drawing frequently from the insights of Maxine Greene, this dialogue on a space of reading engages in “the miracle of related experiences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, pp. xix-xx), a provocative and infinitely grasping dialectic of unease and openings, which, in viewing reading dialogically and challenging “subject-object separations,” provokes a constant “reaching beyond where one is”

(Greene, 1995, p. 99)—a naming of obstacles in the tensions of language. The position that book clubs and other collective reading formations continue to occupy in our ideas of literary community, while admittedly not unique in their acceptance of books as cultural products requiring more than one voice, one tool and one set of eyes, does suggest an increased recognition of the importance of literacy as a public and shared endeavour.

At the edge of the campus at Memorial University, in St. John's, Newfoundland, I walk in straight to a pub, and seat myself down in the company of fellow readers (though my claims to fellowship are tempered by my status as interloper). The topic at hand is not one, but many—a landwash site of poaching in language, desire, and subjectivity, of constructing social and contextually transgressive meaning through friction and pleasure, and imagining the possibilities drawn through and on a textual site. And like the splinters of a fractured self, we are always already in the squall of the literary imagination.

This paper emerges as part of a larger study, and involves a reading group in the medical humanities at Memorial University's faculty of medicine<sup>1</sup>. The group that will be discussed is the *Humanities, Arts & Medicine Interest Group*, known henceforth as HAM<sup>2</sup>, and whose mandate, as expressed on their website, is "to discuss art that engages themes of health and illness." As students and faculty who view the arts and medicine as complementary fields, insufficient unto themselves, they engage in a process of naming what their environment lacks and in so doing, connect with a freedom only available to those who seek and name their restrictions (Greene, 1988, p. 6-7). While working with HAM, I observed the group's reactions and interpretive practices as applied to two diverse pieces of literature. The first, *Paula*, by Isabel Allende (1996), can be described simultaneously as an act of mourning, a confessional, a journal, and an autobiographical work of magical realism. The second is

*Quick*, a collection of poetry by Anne Simpson (2007), whose principal themes are death, the body, the natural world, transubstantiation, and the ways in which thresholds and borders manifest themselves in the liminalities of everyday life.

My analysis here is framed by two key metaphorical concepts that I use to think about the space and time of this reading group: that of *poaching*, and that of the *landwash*. As with Greene (1995), I also find it necessary to dwell in “the domain of imagination and metaphor” (p. 99). The use of metaphor is here enabled as it “produces hybrid realities by yoking together unlikely traditions of thought” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 212) and encourages “an ability to take a fresh look at the taken for granted,” without which we might drown and “remain submerged in the habitual” (Greene, 1995, p. 100). While these metaphorical models guide my overall approach to the research context in which I am involved, when it comes to my interpretation of the findings I open into other metaphorical spaces as well.

The idea of poaching is employed in reference to de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), where reading itself is envisaged as an act of poaching and appropriation, and where “everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others” (p. xii). De Certeau regards the act of reading as one of clandestine labour, where meaning in subjectivity is accomplished through a hidden struggle of unceasing inventiveness and translation, as the reader engages the possibilities of place through acts of dispersion and association, themselves motivated by a series of secret desires. Such a concept also works to emphasize “the exploratory and productive *action* required of the reader or participant in the arts” (Greene, 1995, p. 96), wherein a text is a meeting place, from a vantage subverting the supposedly-systematic impulses to completion. Acts of poaching are like the insensible plodding of footsteps—they come to pass whether or not we think about them, yet they’re always involved in the string of a reader’s decisions, where the

choices made determine where they go and what they poach, “to be personally present to what they see and hear and read” (Greene, 1995, p. 104). Also, as “the action itself closes off alternatives” (Greene, 1988, p. 5), *where* I poach is *where* I choose to value, for as “place is a pause in movement...the pause makes it possible for a locality to become a centre of felt value” (Tuan, 1997, p. 138), and from there to move on. The movements and rhythms of collective reading, however, as fractal and purloining impulses of the “extraordinarily ordinary instances of life” are themselves also subject to another transformation—from the banal to the criminal and scandalous (Nafisi, 2003, p. 6). In acts of reading, as we claim and produce a meaning for ourselves from texts we did not create, there is always an interwoven sense of stealing and of gamble. Just as a poacher hunts for game on a land that is not her own, the reader treads for meaning on ice that could crack at any moment.

The second key metaphor originates from the phenomena of tidal flow and regeneration, the movements of which encourage an impermanent space of natural flux, known in Newfoundland and Labrador as the “landwash”: “The sea-shore between high and low tide marks, washed by the sea” (Story et al., 1990, p. 297). Story (1997) writes how “in Newfoundland, the ‘landwash’...has long been recognized as a rich, productive area. It is a margin, and now in other places the margin is increasingly gaining recognition as a site of change and progress. In Newfoundland, they knew that all along” (p. vi). Dwelling in the landwash, then, as in a space of collective reading, depends on acknowledging the fruitful nature of liminal activities as methods of intellectual and affective pedagogical uncoverings, to “break with the ‘cotton-wool’ of habit, of mere routine” (Greene, 1988, p. 2), and in so doing, to look for openings, refusing to limit oneself solely to a “grazing on the ration of simulacra” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 166). Like the landwash, what matters most in reading is not what you find, but what you make of what you find, where the pedagogy empowering one to create informs

the pedagogy empowering one to attend, and vice versa (Greene, 1995, p. 138). When we occupy a text, or sit as a member of a reading group, we read with one foot on the melting beach and the other on solid land.

The landwash, as I see it, functions in three related ways: a) As a reprieve, and a predictable moment of pause; b) As a space of adventure and questioning, similar to Greene's concept of aesthetic education (1995, p. 137), where what is discarded by the waters is never known beforehand; c) As a space of danger, and a place you must leave, throwing certainty into disarray, and demonstrated by the violence of the Newfoundland shoreline (see Figure 1, p. 6). In drawing a distinction between a *visit* and a *tour*, Chambers (2006) symbolizes the former as "a viewing with no obligations," while the latter, which is where I locate the productive nature of the landwash, and its potential for the field of curriculum studies, "is a form of renewal, a way of renewing and recreating people, places and beings and their relationships to one another" (p. 35).

The space of HAM is thus in a landwash site, visits that "become sites of inquiry and pedagogy" (Chambers, 2006, p. 35), spurring a space of adventure where rocks are overturned in the hope of finding scurrying and scuttling crabs of acuity, but a space which also must be abandoned for safety from the crashing waves of the natural world—an awareness of overarching discipline. The imperatives of poaching in this space are thus made obvious; as poaching implies treading on land that is not one's known, it is an active seeking out of resistance and acting out of freedom—breaking through "the persisting either-ors" (Greene, 1988, p. 8)—and since the blending of theoretical and physical categories brings a distinct awareness of this transgressive fact, there will always be a relative lack of safety that arises from "arsing around down in the landwash" (Guy, 1975, p. 13).

Figure 1: The threat of the Landwash, May 10, 2008







Though reading is traditionally framed as a solitary activity, since I am prompted by Greene's (1995) argument towards a freedom in reading, that "literacy is and must be a social undertaking" (p. 121), I look at the particular dynamics at work in the meaning making strategies of a collective reading formation. In this paper, my focus rests not with the specificities of reading experience that govern the interpretive

practices of HAM's group members, but rather with the manner in which they experience a space of collective reading, and how they set up such a space in opposition to what they understand as the dominant culture of medical school. What concerns me is the nature and function of this fluid notion of "readership," how its arrangements are altered in the context of a collective endeavour, "through indigenous processes that are common and ordinary, and yet largely invisible and unofficial" (Robertson, 2003), and how literary fiction serves as a generative site for the interpretation of "past, present, and projected" modes and movements of subjectivity (Sumara, 1996). "There will always be a play of differences," notes Greene (1995), "through which meanings can emerge. There will be, there ought to be, moments of recognition, moments of doubt. But there will also be endless interrogation as diverse persons strive to create themselves in their freedom" (p. 121). And indeed, I can think of no better way to characterize the power of this shared context of reading—as an artful manifestation of individual freedom and creativity, and as the waves roll in and leave what only the resourceful reader can touch, spontaneously extolling and engaging with the positions of others in their presence and absence.

With an awareness that "no material is transparent" (Steedman, 1987b, p. 37), and that the forms of hermeneutic activity are never straightforward, I turn to the work of Carolyn Steedman (1987a, 1987b, 1992), in determining what it is I am looking for in the transcribed texts of my respondents. In *The Tidy House*, Steedman (1987) is concerned with the use-value that young children obtain through their employments of language, and how they use language to position themselves subjectively in relation to the symbolic codes of a social world. In analyzing a piece of prose written by a group of young girls, and looking at the historical uses that adults have made of children's writing and speech, Steedman observes a significant "distinction between adult's use of children's writing and children's use of it" (p. 27). Through writing, the children

described the patterns they encounter in their “social life, and the narrative served them as an exploration of the social theories by which they were being brought up” (p. 31). The use-values of their writing lay in questioning those principles they saw epitomized in their families, and through this interrogation, questioning their own futures as working class women. In looking at “the ways in which little girls have used written language in order to become the women they were expected to be” (p. 75), when common metaphors of princesses and dragons don’t suffice, “it is the words on the page, the shifts in topic, the symbols employed and the tenses used that make the evidence for us to interpret” (p. 62).

There is an important difference between the use-values enunciated by people through language, and how the researcher uses this evidence to construct their arguments. For Steedman (1987), in the “split that exists between children and ‘the child’” (p. 194), the fantasies of researchers, expressed through conceptual *forms* such as childhood, are in many ways at odds with the actual experiences of individuals (Steedman, 1987b, p. 37)<sup>3</sup>. There is thus a dangerously “fine line between appropriating the subject narcissistically (thus erasing her) and reading the subject autobiographically (reading as a form of resistance)” (Robertson & McConaghy, 2006, p. 7). For myself, I employ a strategy of interweaving interview excerpts and theoretical ideas, and rather than trying to gauge conclusively what it is the participants in HAM are saying about acts of collective reading, I attempt to honour their narrative contributions by involving them in a discussion with varied theorists and thinkers. Put differently, I allow them to speak with the theory rather than through it.

Using Steedman’s (1992) insights into how to effectively react to the rhetoric of respondents, understanding that “the researcher has a massive transferential relationship with the past” (p. 201), and that language is never a transparent medium of communication, my analysis

of reading experience pays attention to the ways in which the readers in HAM use language to position themselves subjectively in communicating issues of power and desire. This is a partnered process of sculpting, though inevitably mediated as well, where the words, “work together to unconceal what is hidden, to contextualize what happens to us, to mediate the dialectic that keeps us on edge, that may be keeping us alive” (Greene, 1995, p. 115).

### Drumming In and Drumming Out: Spaces of Continuity in Collective Reading

In approaching the dialogues of HAM, I look at the ways that language is used to describe these encounters of reading experience, as “an ‘art’ which is anything but passive” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxii). Each of HAM’s members insist on the informal and casual nature of the group, and that the group’s activities are inextricably marked by difference; from mainstream medicine, from book clubs, and from the overall, “dailyness of things” (K, I-1, p. 17)<sup>4</sup>, a difficulty illustrated by one member through the prevalence of a “get yourself through the day, and do what needs to be done” sort of attitude (B, I-2, p. 3). This “participatory involvement” with the arts, in which difference is marked from the outset, enables those in HAM “to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed” (Greene, 1995, p. 123).

Though her pleasures derived from reading in HAM are also of an affective nature, Karen (the group’s self proclaimed “instigator”) envisions the reading group as a site for troubling “the trope of boundary” (Ashcroft, 2001, p.128). For the group’s members, the curriculum they’ve witnessed in medical school is most frequently directed towards a purely rational model for understanding the human

body, and in such an atmosphere, being an artist marks you as subversive almost 'by accident,' as "a public sign of recognition not only of (a) virtuous...identity, but also of the burden imposed by being special" (Robertson, 2002, p. 201). HAM can thus "be construed as one form of cultural constitution or cultural resistance" (Long, 2003, p. 145), and though sometimes such marks remain hidden, this is not always the case: "We're not trying to be...anti-establishment, or anything like that. It's just kind of an accident" (K, I-1, p. 10). Out of such "accidents" emerge a subjective use-value for HAM's readers—a form of public affirmation and resistance in a practice of subversive artistic conservation, through which, "If you played piano before medical school, to keep playing piano in medical school" (K, I-2, p. 6). But this task is not simply a matter of wishing it so, and as Karen regretfully remarks, "You have to look like a human being in order to get in, but then as soon as you start medical school, those things are *drummed* out of you" (ibid.). Amongst the members of HAM there is sometimes a shared and disorienting nostalgia, "a common experience of feeling trapped in an educational script (they) did not write" (Robertson & McConaghy, 2006, p. 7).

The concept of *drumming* here takes on qualities beyond those of the simply rhythmic, and moves instead into the territory of violence, coercion, and regulation, since "subjectively," as Tuan (1977) recognizes, "space and time have lost their directional thrust under the influence of rhythmic sound. Each step...is striding into open and undifferentiated space" (p. 128). It's a place where the waves of the ocean are giant handclaps, and not the whisper of trickling drops. It's also such a drumming that reduces the multiplicity of writerly performances, for as "the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world," in the face of the barrel beat, mistaken for the heart beat of a living thing, such a text is "traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the

plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” (Barthes, 1974, p. 5). When Bridget speaks of attempts to reflect artistically on her medical practice and the inner workings of human physiology, through introducing poetry in her classes, she relates that “I was trying, but I got beat down a little bit. I got tired. It was hard for anyone who’s a sensitive soul, and it beat me down pretty hard. The people are so cruel...to their patients” (B, I-2, p. 6). The incidence of such beating distracts from reflections on life and death, as “soldiers who march to military music tend to forget not only their weariness but also their goal—the battlefield, with its promise of death” (Tuan, 1977, p. 129).

Such cruelty is one of the unofficial attitudes of medical school referred to by Wear (2006), which, “if the formal curriculum doesn’t deal with them directly, take up residence in the hushed (but often informally sanctioned) corridor talk among many students and residents, in the shorthand jargon they use to categorize particular kinds of patients...unlike themselves” (p. 93). Military drumming transforms the fractures of a collective into a single entity: the plush mallets of the bass drum bring about, and sustain, a single cadence of worn footsteps, and with a constant, recurring beat, everyone eventually falls in step. “Such repetitions,” note Robertson & McConaghy (2006) “beat at the heart of catastrophe” and, as they observe in the writings of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, uncover “a wound released in prosody that is a form of address, whose crying out asks us to witness a truth that the survivor herself cannot know” (p. 6). Bridget says of the medical school environment, that “It’s all very (hit) (hit) (hit)” (ibid.) as she taps her knuckles on the table, indicating a force, a sharpness, a regularity, and a ‘nowness’ to thoughts, *as breath*, a pulsating narrative that “commands others (then, now, and always) to awaken to its imperative demand” (Robertson, 1999, p. 164). There is a semiotic trauma here in witnessing, and as Robertson (1999) asks:

When language is used in times of social and psychological crisis, how does that language always contain silences, struggles, and representations that may appear to be incoherent by very virtue of the fact that writers are attempting to assimilate or depict what is, in fact, an unassimilable experience (massive suffering, fear, and death)? (p. 163)

A confession can be beaten out of someone; if one can drum something into you, one can also drum something out. For Karen, this military essence of medical school is at odds not only with her life as an artist, but also with her scientific nature:

It's very militaristic, and it's all about evidence-based medicine, professional protocols, all this kind of thing, and I didn't really come from this. I studied evolution, where it's all about diversity, and strength in diversity, so to come from that background to go into professional school, where you're aspiration is to be just like the next guy is soul destroying. So to counter that with a group of people, and medical students, who see the value of *looking* at things, and not just getting sucked into this biomedical model...is just so refreshing. (K, I-1, p. 15)

Remarkably, the regularity of drumming as a unifying force (for there is power in such a surge), and as a dwelling in the positive elements of collective projects, is applied directly to HAM's organization, a caustic power turned onto its reiterative head: "To do that once a month, its like 'Oh, right, this is important. Oh, I'm not just hallucinating, like other people think this is important too'" (ibid.). In conversation over books, where readers can "plunge into subject matter in order to steep themselves in it...it is never enough simply to...recognize certain phenomena...there has to be a live, aware, reflective transaction if what presents itself to consciousness is to be realized" (Greene, 1995, p. 30).

For these readers, this space of collective reading functions as more than just a recognition that medicine can be represented in artistic terms, but that such reading itself, in a shifting landscape populated by interpretive acts, challenges the notion that one line of interpretation is ever enough. What's more, and just like the movements of a rhythmic refrain, revolving around the variances of a single repeated gesture, the landwash has a clearing quality as well; the laps of the waves, though violent, can also lull you to sleep. In this way, too, the readers in HAM "choose in a fundamental way...between a desire or harmony along with the easy answer and a commitment to the search for alternative possibilities" (Greene, 1995, p. 129). Even though Karen realizes in the "beat" a destructive force, she also sees its productive potential, understanding the impulse on which it preys: that of dependability, and the internalized stolidity of the visible. She says,

So now (HAM) is an activity of the medical school, even though very few medical students come to it. At least it is there to say that this is important in practice, not just in principle, and here, look, we do it every month. That's why it's so important that we do it every month. (K, I-2, p. 6)

### To Rally 'Round the Trenches Deep: A Space of Hope and Collusion

In Bridget's interviews, she frequently mentions how the time she spent with HAM *helped* her, and provided her with a forum for substantive resistance as a mechanism for survival, against an academic environment in which she felt overwhelmingly alienated. Felman (2007) writes that, "'stumbling over words like cobblestones' is, in one of Baudelaire's definitions, the nature of the poetic act" (p. 123). The text of HAM can thus be taken up poetically as well; a "tapping of perspectives"

that allows for a reading of the world that is always *different* (Greene, 1995, p. 116). Such openness to an unrest in reading is here a practice of *becoming*, and which can be transported elsewhere: on the street corners, in reading patient's charts in medical clinics, in looking to other people for questions and answers. This movement that is always *becoming* while it moves is thus like the insurrections of the ocean's waves, and never *becoming* in a stable sense. It distributes reading as a grappling with the intrinsic variability of truth claims and subjectivity.

Long (2003) acknowledges this potentially curative function of book clubs, as she writes that "reading groups resemble therapy groups and consciousness-raising groups" (p. 72). However, she also recognizes that reading groups, being "centrally focused on books and ideas," differ from therapy groups in fundamental ways, and though "they may engage issues of identity...their primary mission...centers on reading, the pleasures of the text, and normative conversations that consider both books and like experience" (p. 73).

Through her encounters with HAM, Bridget engages in a struggle of hope-production, and as such *production* never finally assumes the value of a *product*, in that it only intimates itself in whispers, and like the violence of the Newfoundland shoreline, destroying and protecting the landwash, it arrives, "by accident, fleetingly, (and) obliquely in certain limit-works" (Barthes, 1974, p. 4). Alan also finds use, and pleasure, in HAM's disposition as a site where "what happens, happens" (A, I-1, p. 11), and "there are no guarantees" (Greene, 1995, p. 15). The scribbling in the writerly text of HAM, "an intersubjective creation that takes on the weight of reality, however ephemeral it may be" (Long, 2003, p. 144), certainly *helped* Bridget, but in a way that cannot be located except in the *doing*, as unlike the books that (not) everyone read, "the writerly text is not a thing, (and) we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore" (Barthes, 1974, p. 4.). For Long (2003), the substantive reality of the conversation "comes into being because of the strands that comprise it,

but it cannot be reduced to them, for it is out there, between or hovering above" (p. 144).

In developing their voices *as* readers, HAM's members strive "to be articulate enough...to *name* what [they] see...—the hunger, the passivity, the homelessness, the 'silences'" (Greene, 1995, p. 111). For Bridget, reading in HAM did provide assistance and support, helping her navigate the relationship between, on the one hand, a limited and specifically effects-driven approach towards the medical practice, and on the other, a more reflective mode of being a doctor. Of the shiftings inherent in any practice of reading, Grumet (1998) reminds us how "it is this space that opens up between the self and the other that becomes the territory of the text" (p. 27), and through the shattering of reflective openings, we trod on the text of our own lived lives (Greene, 1995, p. 116). Even though Bridget admits that most of the time she "didn't get a whole lot out of the content," being able to speak of medicine in the manner that HAM encourages, "did help" (B, I-1, p. 1). For Greene, "becoming literate is also a matter of transcending the given, of entering a field of possibles. We are moved to do that, however, only when we become aware of rifts, gaps in what we think of as reality" (Greene, 1995, p. 111).

A recurring theme in Bridget's manoeuvrings of language, especially when speaking of the loneliness and alienation she experienced in medical school, is that of military combat, and conflict in general, in which she qualifies HAM as a "subculture" within the mainstream of medical students (one might also say a guerrilla force), and a "little army against the establishment of medicine" (B, I-1, p. 1). Since all armies, regardless of their purpose or mission, share the feature of being a collective enterprise, whose energies are most commonly (though not always) exercised against the pressures of an outside threat, using and producing language that repeatedly positions HAM as an army, a minuscule military machine, means that the stresses and anxieties

Bridget endured as a medical student were of no small matter, and were encroached upon by the reflections that HAM's readings encouraged. Perhaps such collusion is also a feature of reading groups in general, since as Nafisi (2003) writes of her own experiences reading with other people, they "created and shaped our intimacies, throwing us into unexpected complicity" (p. 59).

Bridget's most persistent regret, both in the workplace and academic life, is the compromise that she feels she is forced to accept as a doctor: between caring for her patients, and being able to perform the almost unbearable overabundance of tasks that need to get accomplished in a day. As someone who is also artistically inclined, Bridget is disappointed that her ability to write has been deferred in favour of the demands required of her as a doctor. As she relates of her everyday experiences, "I'm in the trenches. I'm in the trenches. And I care about my patients too much to compromise their care, so I'm compromising this way" (B, I-2, p. 3)—by not being able to adequately read and write about medicine, and reflect on her practices as a medical practitioner. Tuan (1977) remarks on the space of dialogic reflection as a process that needs time, and as a means to curtail terror and sustain beauty:

The trough of dust under the swing and the bare earth packed firm by human feet are not planned, but they can be touching. Intimate experiences, not being dressed up, easily escape our attention. At the time we do not say 'this is it,' as we do when we admire objects of conspicuous or certified beauty. It is only in reflection that we recognize their worth. At the time we are not aware of any drama; we do not know that the seeds of lasting sentiment are being planted. (p. 143)

Bridget's use of the word *trenches* once again makes reference to her role as a soldier, but this time, as one engaged in an almost faceless defense, and in a constant construction of provisional edifices, against a threat

one cannot even see. In one soldier's account of fighting in the trenches of The Somme in the First World War, he remarks that, in a surprisingly commonplace way, "he who has a corpse to stand or sit on is lucky" (Stewart, 2008, p. 27), indicating that the furthest depths of emotional compromise are but a regular feature of *trenchwork*. The profession of medicine (not unlike that of teaching, where classroom practice is also referred to as "working in the trenches") is well known for the demands it makes on new doctors and nurses, and the fact that, metaphorically, it 'eats its young.' This same soldier also writes of the stopgap and dangerously plummeting nature of all work in the trenches; how "men who are standing still or sitting down get embedded in the slime and cannot extricate themselves" (ibid). In such an environment, the digging must seem a constant and grating necessity, for were one to stop for even a moment, the risks of stagnation and futility, too great for a young doctor, would only build exponentially. Bridget also experiences this sense that, even though her work may be necessary, its achievements are all too often temporary in nature:

I don't have time to think about that, or reflect on it. I just have time to make sure some girl isn't pregnant, or to make sure this kid isn't living on the street somewhere, or make sure this kid isn't going to die because she has an arrhythmia. You know, that sort of stuff. It's just putting out fires all the time. (B, I-2, p. 3)

Since armies are important not only in times of war, but also in times of peace, soldiers are often called upon in the throes of natural disaster. They set about building trenches here as well, though of course of a different nature from those in European fields, in *hopes* of diverting the flow of the fire, or sandbagging, in *hopes* of rerouting the surges of floodwater. However, regardless of the activity involved, it's most often to deal with the *effects* of disaster, rather than subverting, or even understanding, its underlying cause. Looking at HAM retrospectively,

Bridget is able to recognize one of its uses as effectively subverting the lack of time for reflection that she now experiences as a practicing doctor, and the establishment of an introspective space for looking beyond the veneer of effects, or medical symptoms that are seemingly too late to reverse.

Alan also touches upon the temporary, and sometimes seclusionary, nature of trenchwork, where “medical educators who assume a critical stance toward their work take on a role unlike most of their peers” (Wear, 2006, p. 89). He speaks of the limited and short-term effectiveness as a faculty member in the medical humanities: “I deal with medical students basically within the first month of their first year of medical school. That leaves another four years after that, so I think over time my voice is going to get drowned out” (A, I-1, p. 8). Though he shows his students that approaches to medicine are multifarious, like any other rumblings underneath the water’s surface, no matter how loudly he might scream, naught more than a mostly muted bubble will emerge.

For Bridget, an encouraging consequence of her conceptualization of trenchwork is the bond that develops among people isolated apart from the wider world, in those muddy and dodgy ditches, and with only each other to trust. The world of medicine is certainly a trench, but for the existence of humanities in medicine, there must also be a series of sub-trenches. As a self-defined member of “the outcasts of medicine” (B, I-2, p. 4), Bridget expresses how, because of her artistic nature and background, she is generally more sensitive than others to the emotional needs of patients, a sensitivity that brings responsibility, and a degree of concern that most often gets pushed to the wayside. As a combatant in a struggle that she neither created nor expected, Bridget nonetheless maintains the resolve that, as a medical student, “it was my mission to bring arts to our medical school” (B, I-2, p. 5). Though she still felt “so alienated in medicine, so alienated” (B, I-2, p. 3), HAM provided a space where, at least for a passing moment (with the temporality of a sinking

ditch), Bridget was not estranged from her own artistic nature, and could express herself without disaffection.

In their social engagements with literary texts, “entering a field of possibles” (Greene, 1995, p. 111), the readers in HAM engage in a dialogue that, through the perspectives of art, reflects and tidally loops back on the customs within the institution of medicine. They engage in acts of rereading, where “every new reading is a new invention” (Sumara, 1996, p. 242), squeezing out associations through which prior readings always fail to capture the field, and notions of *surplus* and *supplement* become inevitable functions of the social nature of their task, a risky business of reading fraught with both confusion and pleasure. The texts act as a veritable springboard for discussion—as a way to talk about life, and as a way to talk about literature. As a space in which texts are trod upon, HAM poeticizes the movements of reading; through starts and stops, sidetracks and passion, there is a supple and sinuous sumptuousness that persists in their reading practices—a dwelling in the shared consumption and intimacies of a common text, a “commonplace” (Willis, 1990). Through the language that the members of this reading group employ, we can see what it means “to allow the knowledge of an/other to touch the mind” (Robertson, 2001), and that to actively encourage “breaks with what has been established in our own lives, we have to keep arousing ourselves to begin again” (Greene, 1995, p. 109). How the members of HAM talk about their experience of social reading, in its ceaseless breaching of bounds, offers us a glimpse into how we can “learn-to-live within the aporias—a language of undecidability—of such hyphenated third space” (Ng-A-Fook, 2006, p. 7).

For Greene (1988), when we cannot name alternatives—when we cannot, or fail to, grasp openings toward freedom—we are likely to linger only as objects of accommodation, while the spaces of our own choosing grow infinitely narrow. In the field of education, if we can

begin to remember such things about reading, then we can also reflect on the curriculum itself, and the relational field of student/teacher communication, as an emergent and relational space of constructive alterity. If we acknowledge that reading itself is forever bound up with the pulsations of lived life, and that “learning about the experience of reading...cannot be accomplished in the absence of inquiry into lived experience” (Sumara, 1996, p. 1), then such inquiry will always involve a conversation “interested in beginnings, not in endings” (Greene, 1995, p. 15). Dialogue among readers is here indispensable, as the accomplishments described by the participants in HAM envision a sociality in shared reading that “invites us to recuperate our losses,” and as dwelling in the indefinite nature of the ocean’s wake, gives us “the opportunity to reconsider the boundaries and exclusions that sustain our social identities” (Grumet, 1998, p. 27).

Greene (1995) notes of Virginia Woolf: “Finding a reason...made her feel less passive, less victimized” (p. 107). For these readers, reading in a shared context allows for glimpses of possibles, and rifts through which freedom can seep, enabling “them to locate themselves in time and history and at the same time critically interrogate the adequacy of that location” (Ibrahim, 2004, p. 128). Reading provides this back and forth, and the impulses of book club literacy allow relations “lived in tension and a kind of ardour, with the dialectical struggle never quite resolved” (Greene, 1995, p. 112).

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note what I name the *laughterly* qualities of HAM in the group’s title, its relation to the madness of Dr. Seuss, and an overall

tendency towards 'hamming it up' in the slippages of humour. Since the appearance of HAM on the page is slightly jarring in its colossal capitalization, these promptings to chuckle (go ahead...chuckle) can never be overemphasized.

<sup>3</sup> In this context, Steedman's definition of "form" is, "an imaginative structure that allows the individual to make an exploration of the self and gives the means to relate that understanding to larger social organisations" (1992, p. 11).

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I identify three of HAM's primary participants. Karen (HAM's Instigator) is originally from Alberta, and is the author of two published novels and one book of poetry. Though she had been employed in the past as a Seabird Biologist and a journalist for the CBC, when interviewed she was a medical student at Memorial University. Bridget is one of the rare class of medical students whose academic background, before medicine, is strictly in the arts and she thus offers a unique perspective on the activities of HAM. Though originally from St. John's, I actually met Bridget in Montreal, where she was working as a resident in adolescent health. Alan's teaches at Memorial University in the Faculty of Medicine, and is cross-appointed with History. Originally from Scotland, Alan is responsible for teaching the only class, required for all medical students, which deals exclusively with the concerns of the medical humanities. The transcriptions are referenced in the following manner: (1) The respondent's pseudonym, (2) The data source (I.e. Group meeting: GM-1 or GM-2, Interview: I-1 or I-2), and (3) page number.

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