

Book Review

Chambers, C. M., Hasebe-Ludt, E., Leggo, C., & Sinner, A. (Eds.). (2012). *A Heart of Wisdom: Life Writing as Empathetic Inquiry*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

DIANE WATT

University of Ottawa

This exquisite collection of creative non-fiction expands possibilities for education through its rich and provocative articulation of life writing as curriculum inquiry. "A Heart of Wisdom: Life Writing as Empathetic Inquiry" (2012) is a companion volume to the editors' previous work, "Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for our Times" (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009). In the first book the editors theorize and perform literary métissage through the braiding of their autobiographical texts to "get ... a heart of wisdom" (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 233). The latest book offers a compelling response to their initial invitation to take up life writing, incorporating "more stories from more locations by more authors" (Chambers et al., 2012, xxii). Through the

writing and reading of these highly personal texts “new imaginings of possible worlds” (p. xxv) emerge.

In these inquiries into live(d) educational experience, teachers, students, professors, artists, poets, community-based educators, writers, and parents, generously share moments of struggle, vulnerability, and insight. The authors re/write their deeply personal experiences of “coming to understand what matters to them most, and what sustains them, others, and the places they inhabit” as well as “what they have given their hearts to” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. xx). At the same time, the practice of life writing opens to a proliferation of textual practices. This is, indeed, a “new kind of scholarly text” (p. xxv). Each contributor selects a representational form that conveys the complex interplay of intellectual, affective, and aesthetic meanings they wish to express. The result is a scholarly feast of poetry, essays, songs, photographs, fine art, performance art, memoir, auto/ethno/graphy, journals, letters, and hybrid texts. Reading becomes an entry into the shifting, subjective “educational interrelationships that compose lives” (p. xxi). This is tremendously productive terrain from which to theorize curriculum from cosmopolitan Canadian perspectives.

This collection consists of 47 individual contributions that respond to three key questions: *What critical moments of learning/teaching have changed your life? What stories need to be told? What questions should be asked?* This métissage is organized around four strands: *Memory Work, Place Work, Curriculum Work, and Social Work*. The editors braid a range of themes and topics to mix and juxtapose “genres, genders, and genealogies; races,

ethnicities, and cultures; and professional, pedagogical, and personal affiliations" (Chambers et al., 2012, p. xxii). Each section leads off with a contribution by one of the four editors. In the first strand, "Memory Work: Min(d)ing the Past, Facing the Present," contributors draw upon a variety of life writing genres "to articulate the understandings they have come to." (p. 1). Leggo's poem, "Bread Crumbs: Finding My Way in Poetry" (p. 5), opens this section. The reader is instantaneously drawn into a diverse array of ordinary, yet meaningful, moments from his life:

because I can never tell
a whole story, I seek fragments
since I am an incomplete sentence
I seek communion with others
(Chambers et al., 2012, p.5)

Leggo's poetry performs the significance of everyday lived experiences and relationality – themes which echo strongly throughout this edited collection. Reading Leggo inspires one to write.

The second strand, "Place Work: Mapping Rhizomatic Migrations," draws on postcolonial themes such as migration, home/not home, local/global transnational experiences and relationships, and mixed identities. In "Triumph Street Pedestrians" Hasebe-Ludt and Sholefield invite us to accompany them on their "walk of contemplating *place*" (Chambers et al., 2012, p. 107). They braid three writing strands together into a conversation with each other about some of the insights of mentors, poets, and scholars who have influenced them and who have "walked this *topos* before them" (p. 107). Their personal, decolonizing

narratives, intertwine with, and interrupt grand narratives. These scholars enact an “Aokian curriculum” (p. 111) in the “tensioned, textured spaces” (Aoki, 1997; Aoki, 2000) of lives and places. With great empathy, they bring to life the particularity of one Vancouver neighbourhood in continuous transformation in the generative spaces in-between cultures, languages, and transnational movements.

The third strand in the book, “Curriculum Work: In Families, In Schools,” engages curriculum as “profound relational work” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. 181). The editors suggest it is the “deep rapprochement between different epistemological, political, racial, and pedagogical frameworks and life worlds that remains our biggest challenge” (p. 182). Chambers draws from memories of her own life and schooling experiences to reflect on what literacy is for, in *Spelling and Other Illiteracies*. She suggests the need for a literacy “that helps adults and children find their way home... [one that] makes it possible to dwell in the land that nurtures them, to belong to and with each other, human and other-than-human, in that place” (p. 188). Chambers asserts that teachers have a responsibility to “the stories told and to those not told” (p. 189). This is literacy as community, ethics, and social justice.

In the final strand, “Social Work: Vulnerable Beings, Political Worlds”, the authors engage the notion that the personal is always connected to local and global contexts. The editors view life writing as a form of inquiry that multiplies possibilities for connection, arguing that “a different academic culture is needed, a culture that supports life writing” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. 282). In, “Finding Canada in the

American Midwest: Life Writing as Public Discourse,” Sinner reflects on how life writing might “open debate about academic responsibility and the vitality of public discourse” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. 286). She proposes renewing “the tried discourses of our conferences” through life writing “at the intersection of academic and public discourses” (p. 292). Sinner asserts that such pedagogic encounters may “expose our interdependence and interconnectedness” (as cited in Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 130). Could life writing provoke more embodied ways to embrace our roles as public intellectuals?

Through literary and artistic storytelling the contributors to this collection capture and hold our attention. Each text exquisitely flows into the next. We unavoidably find ourselves reflecting on what matters most in our own lives. Taken together, these pieces work powerfully in relation to provoke thought, emotion, and aesthetic engagement with/in “the topography of our transnational commons” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. 371). As we read these texts, we begin to feel a deep affinity with the authors, with their life circumstances, and with the places and people they write about. Being privy to the intimate details of these lives – to their personal moments of paying attention – is an invitation to community. In spite of the inevitable contradictions and tensions, these are generous and welcoming theoretical and pedagogical spaces.

This collection represents “a uniquely Canadian métissage” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. xxii) whose writers speak from this place, but are “at the same time part of a larger relational network with multiple global connections” (p. xxii). They embody a new cosmopolitan

disposition mindful of here/not here without privileging one over the other. As Kelly suggests, through our stories we co-create “a Métis civilization” (p. 366). This living métissage reveals the “mixed and mixing of identities” (p. 367). The editors braid together complex layers of lived experience, relationships, and place to create a unique, passionate, and wide-ranging scholarly curriculum text. The following excerpts give a sense of the richness and depth of this living Canadian métissage:

a baby snowy owl (p. 54); on a ferry from Vancouver to Victoria (p. 292); gardens of gladiolas (p. 52); Chicken Paprikash (p. 66); slave ships (p. 112); a wild woman who loves to knit (p. 67); Japanese (pp.107 & 91); ecological crisis (p. 280); curiosity and wonder (p. 234); fathering (p. 241); haunting children (p. 271); English broken and cracked (p. 79); from Old Man Downey’s to Maggie Mercer’s (p. 8); cassava and kingfish (p. 138); calling home to Calgary every Sunday night (p. 61); tokenistic benevolence (p. 317); blood trails (p. 323); the similarities between school and prison (p. 325); willing to be surprised (p. 338); Tobago (p. 137); the stresses and strains of growing up ‘different’ (p. 97); a fallen chickadee (p. 131); a beach in Mombasa (p. 161); traveling between divorced parents (p. 98); the War Measures Act (p. 110); rainbows born on pieces of paper (p. 231); Nootka Cypress (p. 305); minding what matters (p. 257); poverty

and suffering (172); Amish and Mennonite quilters (p. 73); warm and humid Ontario (p. 55); Blackfoot (p. 180); an unexpected blizzard (p. 54); black cat (p. 302); the arrogance of academia (p. 298); Punjabi (p. 321); mountain paths (p. 116); rice (129); an inflamed brain (p. 307); Grandma's garden, field, and kitchen (p. 127); the winding cliff roads of Malibu (p. 306); the perfect mother (p. 96); cultural binarism (p. 175); my parents' cottage in Quebec (p. 333); listening (p. 225); cedar and baobab (p. 131); berry picking (p. 179); biocultural diversity (p. 366); teacher burnout (p. 267); Canadian history curriculum (p. 360); Kurdistan (p. 173); depression and madness (p. 214); loss and separation (p. 91); Ukrainian (p. 76); worries and worrying (p. 221); the full moon remembers (p. 23); compassion (p. 224); jerry-rigged games (p. 297); similarities between school and prison (p. 325); vampires and oil spills (p. 342); a cree baby given up for adoption (p. 353); opening life from this place called a classroom (p. 280); a loving relationship with nature (p. 145); complicated heart (p. 29)

Dwelling here, the reader's own subjectivity becomes entangled in the generative possibilities of life writing as emphatic curriculum inquiry and literary métissage and there is no predicting where this might lead.

"A Heart of Wisdom: Life Writing as Empathetic Inquiry" represents a truly significant contribution to curriculum studies. This collection

should be required reading in education courses in both Canadian and international contexts. If possible, it should be engaged in its entirety, especially in more theoretical graduate courses. Much of the brilliance of this work is how the texts work together to perform the concepts and theory the editors and authors hold dear. At the same time, given the wide variety of topics, themes, and texts included here, and the fact that the editors have arranged the content according to broad thematic areas, excerpts could also be fruitfully engaged in graduate and undergraduate courses. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this work, it could also be taken up in a range of courses outside the field of education, including Research Methodologies, Canadian Studies, Cultural Studies, Writing, Fine Arts, and Literary Studies.

“A Heart of Wisdom: Life Writing as Empathetic Inquiry” challenges those who might refuse to consider life writing and literary *métissage* a legitimate form of curriculum inquiry. The “revolutionary act of writing a life” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. v) offers a powerful counter-narrative to a disembodied instrumentalism and other dominant narratives. To engage in the writing and reading of such texts should be part of the ongoing process to decolonize our bodies, minds, curriculum, research, and perhaps even this land. Given the enormous challenges we face as a species in human and environmental terms, we would be well advised to continue “to write from this place...in a language of our own... to map out a topography for Canadian curriculum studies” (p. 371). This outstanding collection inspires us to take up and move life writing as empathetic inquiry in multiple, productive, as-yet-unknown, directions.