

POET(H)IC INQUIRY AND THE FICTIVE IMAGINATION SILENCE, VOICE AND STORY

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Women's voices have historically been silenced in a vast array of contexts. Ethical incongruities exist between theoretical perspectives regarding right action for protection of women's dignity and the tangible dilemma presented by systemic silencing. A fictive imagination found in the arts – and literature in particular – often plays a role in bridging that ethical gap between theory and practice. Using my arts-based approach of poet(h)ic inquiry (Duff, 2016a), I portray the symbolic power of women's voices, fictionality, and textual polyvocality in a research-based play. Poet(h)ic inquiry is a method for ethical reflection incorporating spiritual and poetic-aesthetic values: a pedagogical space of inquiry within a non-fixed site of teaching, life-long learning, creativity, and knowing, located at the confluence of the creative writing process (in the context of fiction as research), ethics, and spirit. In "Story about Story. Toronto 2001," I inquire poet(h)ically, in a speculative fictional tale about a woman's journey with her baby, using research journal data and "freefall writing" notes as springboard for a "fictive leap" (Mitchell, 1977). Through the fictive writing process, knowledge is generated with respect to themes of isolation and connection towards re-finding the lost self's language. Voices heard and unheard, pinpoint an ethic of meaning towards transcending silence, suffering, and colonial injustices. My story evokes ironies and eco-ethical queries within wildlife research, as well as questions evoked by the sensory overload of urban commerce, and an unspoken class system. I include reflections on fictionality, literature, and redemption.

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POET(H)IC INQUIRY AND THE FICTIVE IMAGINATION: SILENCE, VOICE AND STORY

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Heather Duff is an interdisciplinary artist-scholar who holds a Ph.D. in Drama Education from the University of British Columbia. Her dissertation, which explores philosophical links between ethics and spirituality in research-based theatre, includes an original full-length play script. Her poetry and fiction have been published in numerous literary journals and anthologies; she was a finalist for *The Malahat Review's* 2011 Long Poem Prize. As Artistic Director of Vancouver Youth Theatre (since 2001), Heather directs collaborative, issue-based plays; she is also Instructor in Continuing Studies at Simon Fraser University. Her research interests include poet(h)ic inquiry; multimodality; poet(h)ically engaged art; fiction/poetry/playwriting as research; research-based theatre; ethnodrama; lifelong learning; meaning theory; decolonizing methodologies; multifaith dialogue and contemplative practices.

Abstract: Women's voices have historically been silenced in a vast array of contexts. Ethical incongruities exist between theoretical perspectives regarding right action for protection of women's dignity and the tangible dilemma presented by systemic silencing. A fictive imagination found in the arts – and literature in particular – often plays a role in bridging that ethical gap between theory and practice. Using my arts-based approach of poet(h)ic inquiry (Duff, 2016a), I portray the symbolic power of women's voices, fictionality, and textual polyvocality in a research-based play. Poet(h)ic inquiry is a method for ethical reflection incorporating spiritual and poetic-aesthetic values: a pedagogical space of inquiry within a non-fixed site of teaching, life-long learning, creativity, and knowing, located at the confluence of the creative writing process (in the context of fiction as research), ethics, and spirit. In "Story about Story.

Toronto 2001,” I inquire poet(h)ically, in a speculative fictional tale about a woman’s journey with her baby, using research journal data and “freefall writing” notes as springboard for a “fictive leap” (Mitchell, 1977). Through the fictive writing process, knowledge is generated with respect to themes of isolation and connection towards re-finding the lost self’s language. Voices heard and unheard, pinpoint an ethic of meaning towards transcending silence, suffering, and colonial injustices. My story evokes ironies and eco-ethical queries within wildlife research, as well as questions evoked by the sensory overload of urban commerce, and an unspoken class system. I include reflections on fictionality, literature, and redemption.

Keywords: arts-based research; fiction as research; fictive imagination; ethical inquiry; poet(h)ic inquiry

*[Somewhere]
... between
the real and the fictional,
reason and speculation,
history and imagination,
and — crucially —
the philosophical and the fictional...*

found poem in (McManus, 2005, p. 56)

Silence as Ethical Dilemma

An indisputable focus on safety, health, literacy education, and justice for girls and women world-wide includes the right to quality of life and meaning (United Nations, 2020). Nonetheless, ethical gaps exist between theoretical perspectives advocating for women's dignity, self, and voice, and the psycho-spiritual-socio-political dilemma of silencing in its oppressive forms, from systemic injustices to oppressive histories even in the literary world. The arts – and literature in particular – often play a role in offering a non-fixed site of praxis, bridging that ethical gap between theory and practice.

Historically, medieval literature drew upon “classical and biblical discourses” (Dinshaw, 2007, p. 13), usually in Latin, where “The Bible conjoined women to keep silent, and medical writings confirmed women's secondary, derivative, and frail nature” (p. 14). It was a society where “women's textual access was limited” and thus, “of necessity, women developed different modes of textual engagement” (pp. 23-24). Early women authors such as the mystic Julian of Norwich, were aware of the power of literature to both destroy and create; women wanted to engage in a, “culture from which they were in other ways excluded – indeed, as literary critical acts” (Dinshaw, 2007, p. 24). This synthesis reminds us that although silencing of women is yet a social dilemma, historically, there has been a tangible threaded yearning among women for literacy and literature. Potter (2003) indicates that the rise of the English novel was linked to “increasing literacy (especially among women)” (p. 171), that feminist studies find, “a relationship between women and the early novel that demonstrates the novel's polyvocality” (p. 173). Gallagher's research (1994, p. xviii) reveals that language such as “marketplace” and “fiction” linked to words like “woman” and “author” share “connotations of nothingness and disembodiment.” Potter argues that Gallagher's (1994) study also reveals that despite the inequities, some early female novelists “gained financial advantages from emphasizing their femininity, publicly embracing remunerative authorship and successfully feminizing it in popular discourse” (p. 173).

Virginia Woolf's literary/socio-political work, *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf, 1929/2001), illuminates significant ethical questions surrounding women's social and economic place in the literary world:

For that visit to Oxbridge and the luncheon and the dinner had started a swarm of questions. Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for works of art? – a thousand questions at once suggested themselves. (p. 31)

Literacy educator Bonny Norton uses financial metaphors in her investigation of notions of identity and “the model of investment” (Norton & Darwin, 2015, p. 42), whereby under-voiced women and men can build their symbolic resources and cultural capital in the process of language learning amid power differentials. Hence, literary and textual engagement can be considered cultural capital, not directly measured in terms of financial and consumerist paradigms. In the context of women's spirituality, Bickel's arts-based research (2008, 2009, 2010) highlights revelatory projects that focus on the “relational, sacred, and aesthetic” (2008, p. 81), thus honouring the symbolic and the spiritual over the monetary.

Decades after Virginia Woolf's era, women authors of fiction now represent a broader inclusion of diverse ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and socio-economic backgrounds. Writers' percentages in the form of royalties on sales of books tend to be more consistent due to more international readerships (Burgess & De Rosa, 2017). Most contemporary authors, however, need other means of employment to supplement their fiction-writing practices. Nonetheless, story itself is a more universal practice for women than that which may seem to be offered by the text-based, marketable publishing world. A universal sense of validity of self – linked to voice and story, is also validated through many less formal methods such as women's journal-writing practices (Schiwy, 1996), and sharing writing and other art forms in community (Shira et al., 2014).

Story as Practice

Among diverse multidisciplinary perspectives, Carol Picard's nursing research on silence and invisibility of women in midlife is referenced in Leavy's introduction to *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (Picard, 2000, cited in Leavy, 2009, p. 12). Leavy argues that arts-based research practices present effective methodologies for identity research in “giving voice to subjugated voices” (p. 13). Picard's (2000) integrative research with 17 midlife women participants on expanding consciousness through “evolution of the self,” “self-reflection,” and “transcendence” (p. 150) employs methods for participant sessions such as exercises in personal narrative and creative

movement, thus offering “a vision for nursing praxis that might be a multimodal menu for expression of meaning” (p. 156). In her conclusion, Picard refers to “this embodied integration” (2000, p. 155). Picard’s research on meaning, aging, and movement resonates with arts-based educational research on meaning-making (Meyer, 2010), as well as with multimodal storytelling approaches through arts-based research adopting dance practices as inquiry (Duff, 2016a; Snowber, 2002, 2014, 2016; Ricketts, 2007, 2014).

From a philosophical perspective, former nun, now writer-social activist-theology professor, Mary Jo Leddy (2007) embodies in her own life journey that “a common social vision or ideal is something people aspire to, are exhilarated by and are willing to make sacrifices for. It transforms present action” (p. 117). Leddy also writes about the dynamic value of story: “Between the facts of our social experience and any reflection on them, we need the mediating images of artists and storytellers to give us some way of reading the signs of our times” (p. 114).

Moreover, political theorist, Susan McManus (2005) contends that an open-minded fictive imagination is key to “the capacity of theory to articulate visions and possibilities” (p. 5), towards imagining utopian and deconstructive political futures. She argues for “storytelling and literary imaging ... [which] can provide the essential ingredients in rational argument” (p. 4). McManus’ inquiry looks at “what modes of imaginings underlie theoretical world creation” (p. 57), claiming that “political and ethical advantages form a mode of theorizing that recognizes the fictive modality” (p. 7).

Literacy, literature, and fictionality, then, can be key to the restoration of unjustly silenced voices and stories. The fictive modality may be both a pragmatic and profoundly influential symbolic resource towards hearing these voices, across progressive cross-disciplinary research with a future-visioning consciousness.

Methodology: Poet(h)ic Inquiry

Ethical gaps in qualitative research paradigms have long presented an area for questioning.¹ Among myriad aspects requiring focused concern within qualitative research, Pranee Liamputtong (2010) notes that cross-cultural qualitative research poses ethical and methodological challenges due to a history of colonized research agendas. Liamputtong contends that due to profound cultural-political shifts, “cultural integrity” (p. 17) needs to be a value underlying the design of decolonizing, healing and compassionate methodologies including, “storytelling, narratives, music, drama, and the arts” (p. 24).

Among the panoply of arts-based approaches for multi-disciplinary researcher-scholars, artists, educators, psycho-socio-spiritual and health care professionals, as

well as for feminist/decolonizing philosophers, is the approach of Poet(h)ic Inquiry (Duff, 2016a). Poet(h)ic inquiry is a pedagogical space of inquiry within a non-fixed site of teaching-life-long learning-creativity-knowing at the confluence of the creative writing process, ethics, and spirit, situated within the context of fiction. Poet(h)ic inquiry is a method for ethical reflection incorporating poetic-aesthetic values in arts-based research, encompassing “a plethora of collaborative art forms, genres, literacies and multi-modalities” (Duff, 2016a, p. 2). My short piece entitled “Story about Story. Toronto 2001” is contextualized within fiction as research, which includes myriad textual and intertextual genre variants – from my short fiction that integrates some intertextual elements (Duff, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 1997), to genres such as novellas, novels, prose poetry and a poet(h)ics of narrative poetry (Duff, 2016b, 2017, 2020). Expressions of fictionality range from literary realism to the speculative, in addition to interdisciplinary hybrid genres engendered by fictive language and imagination, such as the graphic novel, and fiction-informed performance art embodiments of text and narratives.

The parenthetical (h) in poet(h)ic inquiry represents the symbolic role of spirit harkening to “Aoki’s notion of presence-absence *yu-mu* (Japanese) (Aoki & Jacknicke, 2000, p. 3)² akin to what is ‘unseen’ as in the embodied notion of spirit as breath, with its multi-linguistic parallels such as *prana* (Sanskrit), *ruah* (Hebrew), and *pneuma* (Greek)” (Duff, 2016a, p. 2). Through Poet(h)ic Inquiry, the fictive imagination in contexts of life-long learning (Duff, 2016a, p. 2), vis-à-vis aesthetic value with respect to an ethic of meaning, exists at the same generative, dynamic intersection with the cognitive dimension of ethics, and the *pneuma* dimension of “spirit” exemplified by the breath-sound of an (h). I focus on lingering in that potentially redemptive and transformational pedagogical space. The “language of self” (p. 177) is found in written, spoken, and performed languages, and the *yu-mu* (presence-absence) found on stage and in life, within the nuanced languages of silence. These languages of silence are found so often in contexts calling for a conscious movement towards ethicality, moral sensibility, and a sense of justice.

Parallel and complementary arts-based approaches include a/r/tography (Irwin, 2013; Irwin, 2008, Irwin & de Cosson, 2004); narrative inquiry (Leggo, 2004a, 2008a, 2008b), and poetic inquiry (Gaylie, 2008; Kelly & Leggo, 2008; Leggo, 2006; Prendergast, 2007, 2008), whereby researchers pursue poetic ways of knowing (Leggo, 2004b, 2006). Other arts-based approaches include sociological fiction (Leavy, 2009; Watson, 2019, 2016); performative inquiry (Fels & Belliveau 2008); living inquiry (Meyer 2010); performance ethnography (Gallagher, 2007); Ethnodrama and Ethnotheatre (Saldaña, 2011, 2010b, 2010a, 2005); and research-based theatre (Belliveau et al., 2020; Belliveau & Lea 2016, 2011; Duff, 2016a, Harris & Sinclair, 2014; Prendergast & Belliveau, 2013; Goldstein 2012; Norris 2009).

Poet(h)ic reflection is also inspired by decolonizing methodologies. We search for integrative balance between our understanding of the relationship between human survival ethics linked to social justice, and the broader perspective of Earth-oriented, ecological justice linked with a universal sense of Earth as sacred. It seems that not only women lacking in privilege and other marginalized communities, but the Earth itself has been silenced. Indigenous methodologies honouring “story as methodology” (Kovach 2010, 2009) resonate with arts-based research intentions. The *ethic of respect* is a strand of ethics highlighted in poet(h)ic inquiry (Duff, 2016a, pp. 197-198), illumined by Indigenous wisdom and storytelling as method, with respect for stories silenced, that deserve the telling (Tuhivai-Smith, 2005, 1999). Dénommé-Welch and Rowsell (2017) explore “epistemologies of silence” (pp. 10-11), from the sense of quiet reflection, to the silent stories lost in systemic silencing in the context of colonization and its intent to annihilate Indigenous languages: “Locating what has been lost, silenced, hidden, or removed traces absences in the past in the present and helps to excavate silenced thoughts” (p. 13). Ultimately, these authors conclude that “silence is transitional and invites change” (p. 23). Dénommé-Welch’s self-location as artist-scholar with Anishinaabe ancestry positions him to offer research perspectives “in which aesthetic experience has presented new possibilities for decolonizing hegemonic discourses of knowledge and epistemology” (Dénommé-Welch & Rowsell, 2017, p. 12).

Across the canon of emerging and well-established Indigenous authors in Canada, are exemplars of fiction as decolonial research. Bev Sellers’ transformational residential school memoir *They Called Me Number One* (2013) is an unforgettable piece of creative non-fiction. Poet Jordan Abel (2013, 2016) uses erasure and other innovative methods to expose colonial injustices. Lisa Bird-Wilson’s intertextual poetry, inspired by archival residential school records, notably *The Red Files* (2016), utilizes methods such as erasure and found poetry as well as historical fictional characterizations to make visible those truthful residential school stories once hidden. Métis Canadian Cherie Dimaline’s multiple award-winning young adult speculative novel *The Marrow Thieves*, set in a dystopia, refers to a fictional character RiRi, who “worked hard to process Story in silence, not wanting to prove our theories of being too young to know the whole truth” (Dimaline, 2017, p. 92). The fictive imagination within Indigenous storytelling, then, highlights truth, renders the invisible visible, and the once silenced, voiced.

I situate myself as a multidisciplinary and poet(h)ic artist-researcher-educator, parent and advocate, committed to the silence of a meditation practice. As a witness to story, I recollect the story of a young Indigenous mother in a mom’s group in which I participated, who mourned her child who had been missing for many months; she told us her account of betrayal by the system that had not even bothered to investigate. Her story out-shadowed all of us – touched on the sacred, as our diversely classed strollers from threadbare to high end models sat parked nearby and our not-missing sons and daughters played in the next room with a childcare professional. Being a witness to

stories such as this, increases my awareness about the need to address the ethical dilemmas of systemic silencing, evident in colonizing infrastructures that do not honour the Earth.

My theoretical-contextual framing, then, encompasses decolonizing methodologies, eco-feminism, eco-spiritual connectivity to the Earth (Duff, 2000b) and a poet(h)ics of metafiction through story told in text and in oral storytelling multimodalities. Independent research goals to design interdisciplinary artistic projects interconnected with socio-eco-ethical relationality, inform my approach of poet(h)ic inquiry – increasingly relevant to psycho-spiritual notions of self.

In “Story about Story. Toronto 2001,” I inquire poet(h)ically through a speculative (meta)fictional tale about a woman’s journey with her baby, utilizing research journal data and *freefall writing* notes as springboard for a “fictive leap” (Mitchell, 1977). Mitchell’s theory of freefall writing is linked to his image of that spontaneous moment of a child’s trust fall backwards into the snow to make a snow angel. I was honored to have seen the wind in W. O. Mitchell’s creative writing workshop when he was Writer-in-Residence at York University in the late 1970s. In my experience, the fictive leap is akin to the phrase *leap of faith*. It is a generative space of soul movement, whereby sense memory, in the form of sensual images, emerge from random or tangential thought patterns, from autobiographical material enriched by time’s passing, and from the mutability of one’s vast inner landscape of interconnected tales arising from varying life contexts. In addition, sense memories often arise naturally from meditative practices. Sense memories surface so that we can process them. As word artists, we allow these to be transformed from the assumed priority position of psycho-socio-historical accuracy into a freshly found world whereby inspired creativity, freedom, and the self’s language (Duff, 2016a) matters more than linear facts. As such, this is research towards a decolonial possibility. In this non-fixed site of meaning and liberation, anything can happen. Whole worlds can be fashioned out of clay and language; diverse characteristics of people sifted through one’s lifelong lens take on new dimensions, towards hope and redemption. My intertextual piece integrates referentiality to the pedagogy of literature studies as well as to the lifelong learning site of motherhood. This is fiction embodying the creative process of writing itself, space-time shifts and magical realism turns, such as a journey between continents where ecological challenges present the characters with a situational ethic.

Story about Story. Toronto 2001

August 16, 2001

In plane on way to Toronto. Last week I penned a poem in my head that I forgot to write down.

*I tell my son
I have no more milk
so he quaffs the marrow
from my bones.*

Who I am. The epitome, of epitome.
Don't forget earplugs, Infant Tylenol, floss, baby wipes.
(*Stop.*)

August 19, 2001

Start again. Story about Toronto, past filtered through present, visiting icons, subway system, *Go Train*, with its long emerald striped train cars.... I used to live here, and it was home but now it is merely the transition point between past and present.

There's something familiar about Toronto and very strange. I push my son's stroller through Union Station and locate the public washroom. My nine-month year old calls out gleeful sounds as some wilderness animal in the distance, relishes the sound of his own echo in the cavernous washroom; he will someday love his own voice saying important things. Older ladies murmur. A broadly smiling woman cleaner with paper towels for the dispenser stops to reassure me: "Children down in the Caribbean... They just raise themselves. They don't need so much fussin' as children here...."

(*Stop.*)

A New Beginning

I used to live here and it was home, but now, the transition point between past and present (future). There's something familiar about Toronto, and very strange. I push my son's rusty umbrella stroller into Union Station, low end with pale green leaf pattern (seventeen dollars from Zellers), then locate the public washroom. I notice perimenopausal workers on well-earned coffee breaks, representing varying ethnic groups. I learn from a broad-smiling West Indian Canadian cleaning staff person that – in community – children down in the Caribbean "just raise themselves." These women cluck at my young son, who bellows deep, throaty animal sounds, plays with his own echo in the ancient cave of this old Toronto public washroom like it's a forgotten stairwell or empty cathedral; echoes leave imprints for gargoyles; and I wonder who is the gargoyle, my son or me.

The designated "Baby Change Area" is in an upper room section of the washroom, up three stairs, which proves it was not designed by someone who has ever actually changed a diaper. *The upper room*. I scoff at the monstrous architectural *faux*

pas whereby one has to carry the whole damned stroller with child, up several glossy blue painted concrete stairs to the change area, a counter at the back of the farthest room, yards away again from the garbage can; thus, the soiled diaper and a conspicuous pile of equally soiled wipes must lie in wait on the counter as I buckle the kid back into the stroller. At this point I can launch the well-aimed items of contention into the garbage can on the other side of the room. A coiffed pasty white woman in a designer black suit, whom I conclude must be a divorce lawyer, glares at me through our shared reflection in the mirror, indication that I have deeply offended her. I muse about how I once was on *l'autre côté* – observing from my position of childless entitlement, countless bedraggled moms struggle with children in public places. I don't remember being so judgmental when I was on *the other side*, except when I witnessed a mother "lose it" in a public place. *She can't handle commitment...* I would think. I am now ashamed that I made any judgement, for now I see how fragmented motherhood makes one feel.... It's like one of those Reality TV shows, where, in the bush, fit youth eat insects, compete for survival, while trying to avoid falling in love with other contestants – except that the *Motherhood* game is not quite so exotic, and there is no time for sex.

By now, my son fusses in a major way; his cries pierce the acoustically challenged heart of "Toronto the Good." I manage to push the stroller out the washroom door, which half-throws my lower back out, exhausted by yet another struggle with yet another diaper. I push the stroller out the washroom door, exhausted in advance by yet another struggle with the steps down from the upper room, by the long, long time eaten up. The main underground lobby at Union Station, dingy but for a bombardment of doughnut smells, cinnamon buns, bagels, Danishes, baguettes, biscottis, sweet and assailing the nostrils to cover up the diesel smell of fast trains. The cinnamon bun concession dominates and for a few horrific moments, I am sure I've been swallowed into shadows of the eating disordered from the collective dingy past of Toronto. So compelling are these bakery smells that I wheel the stroller to each booth, a wider circle in the bowels of Union Station. I wheel the stroller to each booth and find myself getting pulled into magnetic window displays. My son points out various items. There are the sugar-dusted twisted doughnuts, an old favourite from Ontario days. Another booth with gigantic cinnamon buns, with plump raisins and melted white icing, some drizzled with chocolate. Then freshly baked bread and bagels with cream cheese. I finally select a modest apple turnover minus the sugar crystals – full of fresh fruit, I reason, and so to be more nutritious.

I stand and eat the turnover at the top of a short flight of stairs above the TTC subway turnstiles, crumple the paper bag up and stuff it behind my son's back, then pick up the whole stroller with sticky fingers and plod down, one stair at a time. It's a balancing act. I am an acrobat from *Cirque de Soleil*, a pack on my back, my hiking boots apart as stabilizing pillars. One arm grips the back of the stroller, a bloodless

white-knuckle grip. The other arm on the metal rod that precariously connects the wheels below his seat. I wonder if there is anyone around to offer to help me, wonder at how people can pass by this spectacle and say nothing, but they do, apparently conscience-free. I count the dirty steps to keep my mental focus – one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine – this fragile cargo.

At the bottom there's a revolving door at the TTC turnstiles, which I can't get through, of course, and the Caribbean man in the ticket booth gestures wildly towards the gate made especially for strollers, but only the thinnest of strollers; wheelchairs need not apply. I struggle through the metal bars of the gate and search for northbound trains, end up carrying the stroller down three more flights of stairs. Having a baby was supposed to define me, make me into something real, identifiable, breathtakingly so. It is somewhat disillusioning to find that I am far from unique, that millions of others have also "become women" in the birthing initiation – albeit exhausted, nameless ones. I observe an assortment of sophisticated Toronto career women; as trophies, they carry slender uncluttered briefcases and Yoga mats. People call out offers to help but usually in the dead middle of the stairs, such that if I stop for even a second to answer them, I will surely topple into the grey, dust-filled bowels of Toronto. So, I rarely answer except to bark out a hasty, "Not now!" or "Later!" or "Thanks, no!"

We descend to the subway station. My baby son seems as fascinated by the fast trains as I am nauseated. He points at the dark abyss of a tunnel, as if at the impending train. It is hot and humid down here, hot as a coal mine. I cannot help thinking about Zola's novel *Germinal*, about those coke ovens and pits, endless days covered in coal dust, thin butter and cheese briquet inside a paper bag to last a ten-hour shift – late 19th century industrial France.³ When reading it years ago for a course on French Lit in translation, I remember thinking Zola really knew what it was to be human. I can scarcely breathe. It is a different kind of mine here, though, more of a land of lights-too-bright on old boot-scuffed floors, blasting signage, seeming disorder, and overabundance. In Union Station there are too many choices, and yet all seem unidentifiable as actual nourishment. Cinnamon swirl odours have dissipated, lost among the diesel fuel and dirty yellow brick walkways down here, seeming dingier, somehow, after decades of observation by waiting passengers, and that dreaded wasp-yellow safety line at the edge of the subway platform, sensing a collective despair, like we are descending a mine shaft.

The train screeches to a halt and I wheel my squealing son over the space between platform and open doorway, into it, cool, air conditioned, quite pleasant. I sit down on a seat against the wall, lean against it, sigh heavily, then open my blouse and nurse him in the coolness, stroke his brow. It seems safe enough to nurse in public. Hamish falls asleep in my arms. Seated across from me is an Indo-Canadian tapestry of women, two older women wearing gold-tinged saris, one young mother and four

giggling and squirming daughters, from aged ten down to eight-month-old twins, all dressed in gold, turquoise and pink silk or satin dresses, crimson bindis on their foreheads.

"We were at a ceremony," explains the eldest girl, noticing my perplexed expression. She holds one younger sister on her shaking hip.

"Someone's wedding?" I ask.

"No, just a ceremony. I don't know the English name of it."

I accept her answer, nod, smile.

I find myself wondering if I will run into Margaret Atwood again. I am certain that I saw her on this TTC subway once five years ago when still inhabiting my childless self, thirty-something, visiting my mother. She was smiling at me, like Mona Lisa. I am sure it was Atwood, but I dared not ask as she was clearly seeking discreet transport underground, and she may have even been researching a fictional character.

I had been convinced that she was also Pierre Trudeau's secret sister, but again, I didn't dare ask. If you look closely at their photographs, there are genetic similarities – high cheekbones, strong jaws, the eyes, darting, dark, hyper-vigilant, like low-lying animals of the Canadian forest in search of a den, or webbed ironic complexities of language that upstage everyone else who fancies themselves literate.... Then I looked absently out the window at the station names changing every few minutes on the brick walls, wondered if maybe this woman was maybe not actually Atwood at all but a look-a-like, a stunt double. As I stared or rather tried not to stare at her, I surmised that she was absorbing esoterica in her mind about my frizzy hair in the guise of studying subway train Ads.

Now in 2001, I find myself absently scanning the whole subway car looking for Atwood. I am half-disappointed that she isn't here. I wrote a Can. Lit. essay on Margaret Atwood when I was eighteen: "Guilt and Redemption in *Surfacing*."⁴ There was that line in *Surfacing* that would billow in my head for the rest of my life: "This, above all, refuse to be a victim."⁵ The narrator's aborted child haunted me. I was theoretically "pro-choice" then, or felt that I should be, as all my friends were located somewhere between second and third wave feminism – but after *Surfacing*, I could not stomach the thought. Perhaps it is dramatic irony, but here I am on the Toronto subway, half-seasick between those waves, brazenly nursing my nine-month-old, relieved that some tiny entity in my womb had once fluttered a half-metamorphosized butterfly.

This, above all, to insist on being born...

Toronto 2001: I watch the stops on the map above the doorway: Union-Wellesley-King-Queen-Jack-Ace. No Jack and Ace, just Bloor-Museum-Spadina. I place a soporific Hamish into his umbrella stroller, gingerly. His tiny body jerks in the stroller as I push it over the crack between the metal frame in the opened door and the subway platform; I re-adjust him; thankfully, he does not wake up, even when we greet dust from the streets from humid construction sites, scaffolding, makeshift pedestrian tunnels, and summer swirls. At Queen, I walk east to Yonge, then north to St. Joseph, where across the street there is a nursing home for retired priests. It's a kind of pilgrimage, to bring my new baby to an old priest, a family friend who knew my mother also. The intercom system is a nightmare, some numbers and a speaker, but which number? I finally figure out that "O" gets a nurse on Floor 4, but I can hardly hear her muffled voice, even with my ear plastered to the intercom.

The heavy door opens straight into an elevator, like in the old *Get Smart* sitcom from the 60s, and I realize that retired priests are like retired spies, needing protection. The elevator must be a security measure for transporting wheelchairs and the like. I somehow get to Floor 4. Hamish is still asleep, somehow through all this. Two extremely retired priests are by the nurse's station, one draped over his walker in a wool plaid bathrobe, the other leaning against the walls which are bare except for one small crucifix made of white plaster.

"There's definitely something wrong with this intercom," I tell one of the nurses at the Station. "I have excellent hearing and I couldn't hear you."

"Oh really?" she says. "I will take a note of it."

I know she has no intention of taking a note of it, that she placates me, but I refrain from pursuing the conversation.

"Fr. O'Sullivan expects you," she says. "Try Door 8."

Father O'Sullivan's room (Door 8) is the corner room at the end of the hall, near a painting that depicts light shining through dark trees, entitled: *Light Shining Through Dark Trees*. I knock.

Silence. I knock again, with a little more force.

"Come in."

Father O'Sullivan, icon from my youth, is somehow mysteriously linked to the early Atwood era, and one of those genuinely good Catholics one rarely hears about.

As I am not Catholic myself and did not suffer from trauma in a Catholic school as some have, I may have fewer pre-conceived assumptions. I base my friendship with Father O'Sullivan only on what is real, immediate. He is seated in a vinyl maroon chair in a long thin room with an off-white tiled floor, no rug, one window over the desk, overlooking St. Basil's Cathedral. I peer out his window at grey sidewalks, splattered with mud, a few pigeons by the doorway of St. Basil's, and a homeless guy in a tattered brown suede jacket that looks like it once was expensive, with an empty Starbuck's coffee cup asking for quarters. Inside Father O'Sullivan's room, there's a shelf with mementoes, his baseball trophies, soccer photos, photographs of Irish family members, pen pals and community picnics, Mother Teresa; she stands at a mic in her white sari with the thin cobalt blue stripes, giving a talk about poverty. I wheel in Hamish' stroller and he is still asleep, in navy-blue striped shirt and little shorts, his little golden head bowed into his chest like another retired priest.

I kiss Father O'Sullivan's cheek, soft as a baby's, I muse, and sit on the empty grey vinyl chair seat beside him.

"It sure was a pilgrimage to get here," I say. "Intercom system needs maintenance."

Father O'Sullivan grins, "Guess it's our way of keeping separate from the clanging bells of the world."

There is a silence but not awkward. There is no pressure for a christening, nor for any particular future. There is only the present. Father O'Sullivan is older – more frail this time than the last. I can tell by how long it takes him to respond. I look over at his cot with its thin grey blankets and thin white pillow, interior décor somewhere between "military-prison cell" and "extended care." In my mind, I vow to send him a luxurious comforter, so that his room can glow; it should be paisley-patterned, multi-coloured, bright, with sun or trees, better still a rainbow.

"Hamish looks like his mother," Father O'Sullivan says. "I'm sure he'll someday be an activist."

(Stop).

A New Beginning

I am in the large women's washroom at Union Station and there are noises everywhere, toilets flushing, faucets running, hand dryer machines blasting hot air, children of all ages crying, their apparent crises an echo reminder of the limits of human fatigue and hunger. Their crying sounds just as desperate as their counterparts

thousands of miles of air space away; this makes me recall CBC footage of a baby found alive in a bombed city in the middle east (I note that by some fluke of nature, all babies sound equally desperate) – and grating sounds of trains overhead, underneath in yellow-painted safety tunnels, blasting through concrete. My head feels like the twirling mechanical drizzle of cinnamon in an industrially baked cinnamon bun sold at Union Station in every other concession, which I sense might be some swirling version of post-partum confusion affectionately dubbed “milk-brain” by once intellectual mothers. (Everyone in Toronto’s Union Station, from all socio-economic strata, wants a cinnamon bun in the morning; the fragrance of them, pumped out in masses, is as intoxicating as fresh coffee, which I don’t actually drink, but like to smell it brewing.) Here in the washroom the food smells are diminished, and there is a sort of chlorine pool smell. I have been reduced to my limited mother’s sphere of scent-free hypoallergenic diaper wipes; we pride ourselves in the decorum of a neatly packed diaper bag. After changing Hamish, I carry my half-empty cup of tea – lukewarm gunpowder green – precariously, in a disposable cup clenched in my teeth, as I have run out of places to put things.

When I emerge from the Ladies washroom, beaming, with a relatively cleaner baby, I notice that the same men who (before Hamish) might have once made eye contact or even offered to assist me in the struggle to carry things, glance over at me now for a split second, assess, then scuttle as ants displaced by a child’s pail of lake water. I find that the umbrella stroller has taken Hamish and me somewhere else – it appears not to be Toronto. Perhaps Hamish’s economy stroller sports an incantation embedded within its rickety wheels, that often get stuck in cracks and slats and thin, in-between spaces. Hamish, who had fallen asleep while I was washing my hands, wakes up crying, with a kink in his neck. I try a gentle Shiatsu move on his neck, which I have practised before on other small mammals, like peoples’ pets and goats at a petting zoo. I fish out the first (unbroken) teething biscuit in the box and hand it to Hamish. Airport-like stores with stuffed koalas and kangaroos indicate that I may be at the Melbourne airport, which is utterly baffling given the short time I was in the washroom, although it seems to make sense, as my in-laws live not too far from here. I look for a bank machine, to get some Aussie cash, as this trip has been impromptu. It has been a strange year, this year before and after Hamish’ birth. I am wondering if this post-partum space-time anomaly is normal. It is hard to remember anything else exists in between Toronto (where my mother lives) and Melbourne (where my mother-in-law lives). Perhaps there is a maze-like tunnel careening towards washrooms between cities and all I need to do is to keep pushing the stroller.

Who I am. The epitome of epitome.

Don’t forget ear plugs. Tylenol. Baby wipes.

A New Beginning: Story about Oz, 2001

It is early spring in Canada and early fall down here.

The slow “milk run” bus heads south on the coast out of Melbourne to St. Kilda, Elsternwick, Brighton, Brighton East, and then inland a bit: Highett, Cheltenham, Mentone, then back to the coast where it meanders in and out of quaint towns along the coast of the Mornington Peninsula: Aspendale, Edithvale, Bonbeach, Carrum, then finally Frankston Station, where Hamish kicks his Navy-blue pant legs, with excitement, like young frog’s legs.

Off the coast at Frankston, there are three dolphins jumping arcs of triumph, in sparkling sunlit tandem in the vast green sea, spotted from my window on the right side of the bus. “Look Hamish! Dolphins jump!” I hold him up to the window. He points at the ocean, and for a delicate moment, he seems to see what I see. The dolphins are a beacon of froth, and I carry them with me.

My mother-in-law Sadie’s house is farther down on the milk run bus from Melbourne past Frankston to Mt. Eliza. There is a bus stop by her house. She waits for us, smiling broadly, in a tailored mint green pant suit, on the front porch surrounded by her magnificent garden, explained: Desert flame: peach-orange, and Kangaroo’s paw: with furry, paw-like blooms, dusty pink, and more familiar: tall Daisy, powder blue Hydrangea, crimson, deep pink, and ivory Rose bushes. Inside, she has set up a pull-out couch in the living room for me, with a fenced in play pen in the corner, with white fuzzy blankets tucked into it, and a plush white teddy bear.

“This is perfect! Thank you to Grandma!”

Hamish grins, puts his hands together as if to clap.

“Each night, you need to check his bed in case there are poisonous spiders.”

I thank her profusely and sleep deeply, despite the threat of spiders, although there is a cool Antarctic draft through the slat at the bottom of the window.

The next morning after breakfast – toast, kiwi jam, tea – I take Hamish for a walk across the road to a row of eucalyptus trees shedding canoe-shaped curled strips of bark, like arbutus trees do on British Columbia’s west coast. The eucalyptus trees soar tall in the breeze, guiding the way towards a long away horizon lit by clouds, rolling hill fields, much of it brown from wanting rain, fields, more trees, and a warm-cool breeze flowing through to us. Chestnut brown horses graze on tall greener grasses by the

neighbour's ranch fence. Hamish points tiny trembling fingers towards the grazing horses, as they snort; he chortles.

The next day, a surprise: Meg, the younger sister of the ranch owner across the road, lends us a baby car seat which her children have outgrown. She offers to drive Hamish, Sadie and me to Briars Wildlife Reserve at Mount Martha, where we park, then walk through a stroller-friendly fragrant trail of essential oils, among tea trees and eucalyptus. We look for wildlife, hoping to find koalas, grey and camouflaged by gum trees, the gnarled knobby parts, concave shreds of bark, curled at the edges, like strands of hair from the wigs of witches, but we find two cockatoos instead, our eyes always spiriting over the tops of trees.

Grandma Sadie, a former dancer, maintains her spirited step.

"I come here a lot," Meg says, "I've only seen a koala three or four times."

I look skyward to a Southern open-ness and thinning wisps of Cirrus clouds, at gnarled wood, twisted branches, and tea tree groves, woven fences made from tea tree branches, living tea trees, large ant hills and what Meg says is a wombat's den. We keep looking for koalas up in the trees, but they remain elusive, hidden.

"*Kallara* is the aboriginal word for tea tree," says Meg.

"Sounds like koala," I add for Hamish who isn't listening.

Hamish seems to tap the edge of his stroller like a drum. I give him a sip of water from his sippy cup, another teething biscuit.

On the way home, ahead we see a plump hairy animal in parched brown grass in the ditch. Meg wants to stop.

Sadie says, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," says Meg. "I think it's a wombat." She parks the Jeep on the side of the road.

Sadie holds Hamish's hand in his car seat in the back of the Jeep, nods. "Go on, check it out with Meg."

The Jeep blocks the road's view of the silent wombat, its snout swarming in flies.

We stand at a respectful distance.

"Is the wombat alive?" I say.

"Not likely. Probably roadkill."

Meg and I creep down the slight incline into the ditch.

"She's dead."

"She?"

"Look at the pouch. She's a marsupial."

"Do we need to call someone?"

Meg bends over the wombat. "There's a joey in there," she says. "Still alive."

"What can we do?"

"We have to pull him out." Meg winces, close to holding her breath against the stink, reaches towards the abdomen of the wombat, where there is an upside-down pouch, which opens at the bottom. "Wombats are the opposite of roos. Wombat's pouch opens at the bottom to protect the Joey from dirt when burrowing." Meg puts a few fingers into the open pouch and finds the baby wombat's heartbeat. "Your hands are smaller than mine. I'll stretch it open, and you can reach in."

My heart pounds at the high stakes of birth, orphans of all species, flashes of Bambi calling "Mother? Mother?" after the hunter's gunshot in the vintage Disney film, and how, as a child, I ached for Bambi, covered my tear-stained eyes. I think about Sadie back in the hot Jeep waiting for us, with Hamish. The southern sun beats down on us, sending shimmers of autumn light up from the gravel.

Meg pulls away, to give me more space.

Knowing I must transcend the smell of death, I reach my fingers into the pouch opening, uncannily elastic and still malleable – some miraculous evolutionary quirk in spite of the mother's stiff body. Even the dead wombat's hair is stiff, some of it blood-soaked. I can feel the live baby wombat's nose, breathing warm and damp, a squirming, trusting body.

"Head first," says Meg.

The baby wombat seems to mold – sleek and curled, into my fingers, like soft dough for baking powder tea biscuits that you knead with warm hands in a wide bowl. With my left hand, I feel for the back of his head and then put my right hand in and around his tiny back and guide the rest of him out, slowly, until the last paw pulls, half-reluctantly, free; he looks around, adjusts eyes to the light, little pointed teeth shining white; four paws hang loose.

Meg laughs loudly. “Hello there!”

Meg has ripped off her gray-yellow Aussie sweatshirt, with a Qantas Airways kangaroo logo, to the fleecy inside out of it, forms it into a makeshift pouch, which she tucks around the joey in my arms. “Now you’ll have to hold him.”

We walk over to the Jeep. Sadie looks calm but I know she has been worrying. Grandma Sadie is in the back seat with Hamish, who fusses in the car seat. Sadie hands a wad of moist baby wipes to Meg and me which we take gratefully.

“Until you can get to soap and a sink,” says Sadie.

I sit in the front passenger seat with the fleece-pouched joey in my lap, on the left as Meg drives on the right. She puts on driving gloves. Somehow, I fasten my seat belt under my bundle, feeling like a rookie midwife. The baby wombat quivers, perhaps fearing the unknown. When we reach Grandma Sadie’s garden, the dust-blue hydrangeas bloom fiercely.

Meg drops us off, assures us that there is room at the ranch for rescue animals. “I can take care of him for now. I’ve done this before, with wallaby joeys.”

I hug the baby wombat tight, like I hug Hamish wrapped in his towel after a bath. I am hesitant to pass over to Meg the rescued joey, this tiny orphan symbol of something of which I dare not speak, not easily surrendered – a sibling for Hamish he might never have, other babies lost, all life’s missed chances, like wildfire, inaudible voices within and without, and across the world, callingI want to linger in concept of “mother” that does not end with the last heartbeat, this silent, womb-like pouch in her mangled body – unlikely site, shelter until a neighbour redeems what has been taken.

We humans are kept busy either destroying the earth or saving it.

So I do pass the squirming bundle to Meg, like a torch in a relay. She takes it and wraps the fleece-pouched wombat inside her loose jacket.

Hamish squints under his navy-blue sunhat, pushes at the car seat buckle, wanting freedom. He is his own little man, emerging from the marsupial pouch.

Sadie dashes into the house and brings out some rubbing alcohol and cotton swabs, to sanitize our hands, my seat belt.

“For today...thank you,” I say to both Meg and Grandma Sadie.

Meg leaves the Jeep parked in our driveway, looks both ways, meanders across the road towards sway of eucalyptus lining the fence at her brother’s sprawling ranch, the sleek joey wrapped tightly like a human newborn suckling at a dry corner of the fleece, ravenous, curled into soul.

He waits for....

A New Beginning

Hamish and I are in Toronto and it is 2001.

Somehow, Hamish will learn to need less “fussing” and to raise himself.

Every visit to Father O’Sullivan and Grandma Sadie could be our last. We will visit my mother again and again over the years, and then he will visit her alone, sometimes. Someday, Hamish will help her with her wheelchair and sneak in jelly donuts to the Care Home. Uncountable, are the many silences and spaces between my mother and my son and me, and as he grows older and more mature, he will telephone her and wait as many seconds as it takes, for her to respond. She also will wait for him, even if he doesn’t know what to say.

I find my old essay on *Surfacing* in a box in the guest room cupboard in my mother’s condo: “Guilt and Redemption in *Surfacing*” in a faded cardboard folder with only my old “A” and “A+” assignments (Anything below “A” had been essentially cast into the fire of denial.) I find this paragraph:

The [Atwood’s] style is cryptic, hazy, and somewhat perplexing, thus encouraging the reader to disentangle the words as the heroine must decode her life’s puzzle. The character’s initial portrayal is that of a disguised woman, enveloped and saturated in nothingness. She is enclosed in her own bottle of guilt, on the shelf with the frogs, to which she so often refers. Furthermore, it seems that language is a ritual for Atwood in *Surfacing*, that the emotion is ineffable, and the process is painful. It is only at the end that the writing becomes clear, almost “multilingual” in its clarity, but this is because the narrator’s life has, too, been deciphered.⁶

I think now that I knew then, but know it more now, that I was not just student but heroine of my own story, in need of decoding.

I wish I could rewrite it with what I know now.

What I know now.

I ponder Atwood's nameless narrator in *Surfacing*, how she sees a crucifix on the side of the road – to her an “alien god.”⁷ I understand the alien part, as stationary dying Christs that one encounters can seem alien; or perhaps there are too many made from molds in factories, so they look identical. A singular conceived earth child in *Surfacing* to redeem the narrator's aborted one, the *Germinal* child “conceived” in layered coal dust on lovers near death deep in the mine – mystical new birth of a new social order, a just world – these are newly shaped identities.

On “redemption” – both *Surfacing* and *Germinal* are portrayals of bodies redeemed by and in the earth.

I look for the keen silence of earth and take it into myself.

And I will re-write and re-write bits of text from old essays on imaginary parchment – define, re-define.

I look to re-conception of the wombat orphan in a kind of cross-species communion. Eco-justice? Hamish will not remember the wombat, but someday we will tell him the story. I replay the scene over and over like a film clip: saving and re-saving the baby wombat. I believe she was more than roadkill. Was it trauma? Perhaps for the baby wombat who could do nothing but listen for his mother's last breath breathed, and beyond, in silence, for rescue. Yet, in dying, the wombat mother's wounded body became a monastic cave in contemplation towards survival of a threatened species.

Epilogue

“Story about Story. Toronto 2001” enshrines notions of poet(h)ethical relationality to text, to voice and story, to Earth, where we may hear the self's language. It is also a story about research. Through fictive imagination, knowledge is generated with respect to inter-related themes of isolation and connection, and to a spontaneous referentiality to activist fictional characters from texts (by Margaret Atwood and Émile Zola), provoking the re-envisioning of literary interpretations in and beyond literature. Zola's prose is poetic, although his novel represents the naturalist stream of literature, depicting the psycho-socio impact of late nineteenth century industrialization; metaphors of germination echo “beneath the wheatfields, the hedges, the young trees”, and above

“fields were quivering with the growth of the grass” (Zola, 1894, p. 527). Zola’s ethic and aesthetic are expressed as humanity itself grows “towards the harvests of the next century” (p. 527). In that next century Atwood (1972) explores the psycho-socio milieu of a central female character grappling with ethicality, identity, self-knowledge, and mourning, finally finding her deep connectivity to earth. Atwood’s prolific career includes later metafictional exemplars such as *Life Before Man* (Atwood, 1979), *The Penelopiad* (2005), and her speculative, historiographic metafictional novels – *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019) both set in the oppressive female silencing of the totalitarian regime of Gilead – that provoke an interpretive poet(h)ics of her metafictional writing ethos to which my nameless protagonist alludes.

My characters – the un-named narrator-mother; her son Hamish; women in the subway; a wise cleaning woman; the man at the turnstile; Father O’Sullivan; Grandma Sadie; Meg; and the narrator’s mother in Toronto, also un-named, are interconnected spiritually in their journeys of self along a space-time continuum. My story invites reflection on the differentiation between oppressive silence and contemplative silence, and on poet(h)ic themes linked to evolving eco-feminist spirituality and interconnectedness to the Earth, where women and men (in fiction and in life) dance-breathe in a space always intimately close to birth and death, linked to poet(h)ic themes of losing and re-finding the self’s language. Poet(h)ic inquiry honouring the self’s language, (Duff, 2016a) of the un-named narrator of “Story About Story. Toronto 2001,” may be embodied by voices – heard and unheard in silence – that pinpoint an ethic of meaning.

Ethical considerations are interdisciplinary; thus, a common concern for ethical research practices that protect the dignity of both animals and humans, links the Humanities and Sciences. Calculable, are expenses such as for “milk replacer” (Engfield et al., 2018, p. 108), for a sub-culture of volunteers hand-rearing “orphaned pouch young” due to “anthropogenic marsupial deaths” from road traffic. Another wildlife research concern is mediation across public ethical quandaries around intervention versus non-intervention (p. 104). Moreover, there is a psycho-socio-political research component in ethical cost assessment across Australian wildlife rescues, due to “compassion fatigue or secondary post-traumatic stress disorder” (p. 105); sometimes “disenfranchised grief” – where human-animal bond mourning is invalidated – can result in a “silencing effect on the carer” (p. 111). Arguably, road-kills are casualties of colonization and a dystopian layer of reality. Hence, my fictional story brings up connections, ironies, and eco-ethical queries within wildlife research, such as questions linked with human intrusion into the natural life cycles of wildlife. Qualitative research may evoke reflection on the relationality of self to Earth and its creatures. As such, conclusions and recommendations relate to wider-reaching cross-border wildlife issues across both geographical and psycho-socio-spiritual borders. If there is also a poet(h)ics of wildlife research, then, the road-killed wombat mother and her surviving

baby may be symbols of sacrifice in the process of envisioning interspecies healing futures for Earth. Through poet(h)ic inquiry, these scenes inquire without concrete answers, on the silencing of voice and story, on voicing the silences, and on respect for the global eco-fragility of Earth.

Questions are evoked also by sensory overload of a Canadian city – produced by commerce consumerism, and a colonial undercurrent manifested in a (literally) underground class system, enacted by the scene of a single mother's attempt to navigate urban transit systems. This pattern is broken only by the cameo role of a Caribbean Canadian cleaning woman who speaks unforgettable words that enhearten in a prophetic way, while revealing her homesickness for the Caribbean. This spot-lit cameo role points us towards a quest to discover contemporary decolonizing women authors of speculative fiction, who offer fiction that may intrinsically be research as well, on the potentiality of imagined futures beyond dystopian fictional worlds – dystopias not too far off from the all-too-real inherited atrocities of colonization. Inspired works of speculative fiction authored by a myriad of decolonizing international contemporary authors include Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian author Shani Mootoo's (1996) novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, where the fictional, magically real island of Lantanacamara takes on poetic and paradoxical significance in its juxtaposition of vibrant, lush flora and fauna, with darker, life-altering imagery.

Perhaps Virginia Woolf's inquiry from ninety years ago about women, poverty and fiction (1929/2001, p. 31) – set in a place enthroned by colonial philosophies, is not easily answered except to pause in ethical inquiry. Although readers and literary theorists continue to be fascinated, perhaps Virginia, who suffered from depression, did not need to stage her drowning in order to write fiction. From a safer riverbank, one can envision flatter stones, in surrender, skipped across a river that flows with a transcendent sense of self at one with the Earth. The connection between literature and the eco-sociological question of poverty, may be, in essence, that "poverty of spirit" is the bedrock issue. We may find ourselves on a quest for a contemplative *ethic of meaning* at once both found within, and transcending, both "real" and "the fictive."

A Poet(h)ics of the fictive then, might resemble a hybrid genre, para-political, a meta-fiction, fiction about fiction. A fictive imagination – where, in the grand arc of lifelong learning and literature, writers, readers, and storytellers alike find their places, offers a modality for the distillation of truths, a synthesis and creative integration of life's sense memories even in contexts where too much silence may be ethical dilemma.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Within qualitative research, arts-based research is a methodological pathway that may address ethical gaps. In particular, ABHER (arts-based health and educational research) can bring the ethical perspective to the forefront of social quandaries that result in loss of careers or lives, deterioration of the family, fear, depression, stigma, as well as health-related detours. Even in this fruitful new field of arts-based research, there are significant ethical gaps, however (Boydell et al., 2012; Gallagher, 2007; White & Belliveau, 2010), related to a quest for ethicality (Denzin, 2006; Norris, 2009) – in particular, where research participants with unique, creative and emancipatory contributions may benefit more from respectful acknowledgment than from anonymity.

² Aoki's position, as both curriculum scholar and family survivor of second world war Japanese Canadian internment, uniquely positioned him for his educational theory regarding the ambivalent theoretical-philosophical-spiritual pedagogical spaces within *yu-mu* (presence-absence), which expresses a theoretical-pedagogical-philosophical-spiritual dimension:

Yu-mu as both "presence" and "absence" marks the space of ambivalence in the midst of which humans dwell. As such, *yu-mu* is non-essentialist, denying the privileging of either "presence" or "absence," so deeply inscribed in the binarism of Western epistemology. As the groundless ground in traditions of wisdom, the ambiguity textured in *yu-mu* is understood as a site pregnant with possibilities (Aoki & Jacknicke, 2000, p. 3).

³ *Germinal* by Emile Zola. See details in the References.

⁴ My essay, "Guilt and Redemption in *Surfacing*" was written hastily, befriended by a half-melted chocolate bar under a desk lamp for an English course on Can Lit in an undergrad all-nighter, December 1976.

⁵ "This above all refuse to become a victim" is from the novel *Surfacing* (Atwood, 1972, p. 191).

⁶ This is cited from "Guilt and Redemption in *Surfacing*" (Duff, 1976, p. 1).

⁷ The image of an "alien god" is from *Surfacing* (Atwood, 1972, p. 18).