

Literacy and Travel as Metaphor:  
Learning to Travel, Traveling to Learn

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## Abstract

Literacy is more than the ability to decode words on a page, just as travel is more than checking off a list of landmarks. Travelers, readers and writers create meaning by engaging with texts whether those texts are based in language or place. Cultivating stillness, becoming consciousness of mediation and being open to risk-taking and surprise are three ways in which travelers, readers and writers can enhance their learning experiences.

This research poses the questions: How do travel and literacy resonate with each other metaphorically? How can a teacher apply the connections between travel and literacy in the classroom? Both the experience of traveling in different cultures and the habit of documenting that experience sharpened my curiosity about approaches to and perspectives on travel as well as the reading and writing that were an important part of the journey.

I am a high school English and Social Studies teacher who backpacked around the world for nine months and experienced that travel through the lenses of my own reading and writing. During my travels, I kept notebooks with poems and writing, took photographs, and, with my traveling partner, kept an online blog of our experiences. Using this material as data, and applying the methodological practices of writing as inquiry in this thesis, I explore the hypothesis that travel and literacy are metaphorically resonant and the comparison between the two offers insights into teaching and learning.

Part 1 of this thesis contains the thesis overview, a description of who I am as a researcher, traveler, reader and writer, and the literature review. Part 2 consists of three

narratives based on the three themes that emerged to describe the metaphorical resonance I found between travel and literacy: the importance of stillness, the consciousness of mediation, and the value of risk-taking and openness to surprise. This section includes some writing I did while traveling. Part 3 synthesizes the narratives with the theoretical literature and discusses the applications of my findings to classroom practice. These reflective pieces are the means through which I gained insights into my own literacy and travel practices and perspectives.

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## Part One

### 1.1 Introduction and Rationale

#### *Motivation for this study*

After five years working as a high school teacher, encouraging students to follow their dreams, I realized that I had not fulfilled the promise I had made to myself in high school, to travel the world. At the same time, I was starting a graduate degree with a course called “Reading the World,” which reminded me that I had once been an avid reader and enjoyed writing poetry.

I needed to take action towards fulfilling my dreams of travel and recharging the reader and writer in me. I began to make plans to take a leave of absence and teach abroad. When I met Michael, who is now my husband, I decided the time was not right to move out of the country. Instead, we decided to take the next year off and go backpacking together. This inquiry is the result of my reflection on those nine months of travel. The reading, writing, and exploring I engaged in over several months caused me to draw connections between literacy and literacy learning and approaches to travel: I began to think of travel as literacy and literacy as travel. Paulo Freire’s (1987) statement that reading the word implies reading the world became a reality as I wrote, read, and explored cultures new to me.

My motivation for becoming a teacher was to share my enjoyment of learning, and particularly of reading and writing and help others cultivate their own agency—their ability to effect change in their world-- as a result. I believe that literacy and learning can

provide options and opportunities for individuals to challenge themselves, pursue what satisfies them, and stretch their growth.

There are differences in the ways we learn to be literate, just as there are differences in how people travel. In the North American culture in which I teach, literacy learning/teaching can be rigid, pre-packaged, and for some teachers and students, exhausting, just as traveling can be reduced to strict itineraries or formulaic adventures, giving rise to a language that echoes consumerism in its implied sense of acquisition. Tourists and travelers sometimes are heard to say, “I did Italy and France last summer.” Similarly, students say, “We did that novel last year.” There is a finality in that verb “to do” that might shut some door of potential.

Teaching has provided me with insights into the many ways people understand the world and how they express that understanding. My nine-month journey deepened both my understanding of how I choose to travel in the world as well as my understanding of my own literacy and my potential as a teacher of literacy. I now see the world as a text to be read and to be written -- I create meaning as a traveler. I also see reading and writing text as a way of traveling within and beyond myself -- I create meaning as a reader and writer.

After I returned from almost a year on the road, I began to reflect on the many ways I had documented my travels. Like my students do with projects, I chose a range of media to both record my observations and to create meaning from them. Aside from the images I carried in my head, I also had photos, notebooks full of journaling, poetic drafts and an online record of my journey in the form of a blog. The blog, which can be found



on the Internet at <URL: <http://luckhounds.blogspot.com/>>, consists of twenty-six entries, chronicling adventures in different locations. Michael and I posted entries together, usually from an Internet café, uploading photos and collaborating on the story we wanted to tell. Both being English teachers, we would deliberate comma use or the perfect adjective, taking great pride in our compositions. We'd also have the chance to read the comments posted by our friends, family and other people who began to follow our travels by reading the blog.

Both the experience of traveling in different cultures and the habit of documenting that experience sharpened my curiosity about approaches to and perspectives on travel as well as the reading and writing that were an important part of the journey.

### *Rationale*

Since I read and wrote consistently throughout the trip, I decided to use writing to explore how literacy and travel are similar, to figure out their metaphorical resonance. In the end, thinking about one as the other illuminated new understanding: that both literacy and travel benefit from stillness (which leads to contemplation), consciousness of mediation, and openness to risk-taking and surprise.

Using writing as the catalyst to further develop my understanding of these practices seemed to be the most appropriate approach to take. Writing as inquiry is a well-documented research method (Neilsen, 2001, Richardson, 2005), and writing creative non-fiction seemed to fit the nature of my inquiry well because of its parallels with a journey. To write is to take chances, to learn through exploration. Like buying a

plane ticket with multiple destinations, writing gives me a framework for where I am going, but permits freedom between destinations.

### *Organization of the thesis*

Part One of the thesis provides an introduction and theoretical framework for my research. More specifically, Part I introduces the inquiry by explaining who I am as a researcher. It sheds light on why my experiences in travel and literacy lead me to question their connection. It also reviews literature on reading and writing as meaning-making processes, as well on writing as inquiry as a methodological approach to this work.

Part Two is the research work itself, a collection of reflective narratives on my backpacking experiences and learning. These nonfiction narratives are written for a broad audience of readers, people interested in traveling and in teaching. They include anecdotes, poems and reflections on what I gained from different experiences. Each of these narratives is meant to illustrate the issues in traveling that illuminate its connections for me with reading, writing, and literacy learning. The themes of the narratives include the value of stillness, the consciousness of mediation, and openness to risk-taking and surprise.

Part Three of the thesis looks at the implications of my experiences and reflections on literacy learning in the classroom setting, namely how I incorporate the three themes of my narratives into my teaching.

## 1.2 Travel and Literacy Background

I lived in East Pubnico, Nova Scotia until I was eighteen, when I moved to Halifax to go to university. It was a happy, safe place to grow up, and it provoked me to look outward. The expanse of the ocean from our backyard and the thicket of trees across the street was a constant reminder that “the action” was somewhere else. To move, or move on, would be a life-altering event and involve literal distance.

My parents’ origins affected my desire to travel. My mother was born in Pubnico, the sixth of eight children. My father, an only child, was born in Brooklyn, New York, where he lived until his mother died suddenly. At the age of nine, he moved to Pubnico to live with his aunt and uncle who had no children of their own. His father stayed in the U.S. I would like to be a time-traveling fly-on-the-wall to hear his Brooklyn accent. He went from buying guppies at the pet store to fishing mackerel from the wharf. My father seemed somewhat exotic in our small town. I always pictured him traveling alone and was amazed at the journey he had to take at such a young age. The little black suitcase he brought from New York is one of the rare artefacts of his childhood.

Dad and Mom married in 1970, adopted me in 1977 and my sister in 1980. At 28 and 29, they were keen and ready to be parents and our childhood was a very happy time for all of us. They took us to Halifax for weekends, where we’d stay in a hotel, swim in the pool, go for walks and dine out in the city or drive out to the water-park. My sister and I felt especially lucky. We always looked forward to the next adventure. We traveled to see cousins in New York and Ontario, and around the Atlantic provinces to visit

friends. In the car, Mom read maps and Dad drove. Aboard a plane, Mom said a rosary and Dad watched the in-flight movie. On a ferry, Mom rested, green with seasickness, and Dad gave us quarters to play pinball and Pac-Man.

Dad would often say, “Some people think the world ends at the county line,” and we were happy that that wasn’t us. It was clear even back then that to travel was to gain perspective, to learn. Sometimes we would get “lost” and ask a stranger for directions, and the whole event would play out like a funny sitcom episode. We were creating a family history. I was learning that travel is a positive adventure, a learning experience and a social process.

My first attempt at travel writing was in Grade 5 for a mandatory school contest. It was called “My Trip to New York” and it was well-received by my class – I won. Then in high school, I wrote in my grad yearbook paragraph that I wanted to travel the world, and a friend reminded me of that Grade 5 composition. She didn’t recall the landmarks I had named, such as the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty, but what had made the audience laugh: that I broke a lovely hand-fan in Chinatown and the angry cashier made my parents pay for it. My childhood experiences in traveling with my family and the writing/telling of those stories influenced the blog, poetic and narrative writing I did related to this thesis: I knew the best bits would be in the details.

My husband Michael and I traveled from October 2006 to June 2007 with round-the-world airline tickets and a year off work. On the road, we spent countless hours searching for bookstores, new and secondhand, all over the world. Our reading became an obsession and encouraged us to do plenty of our own writing. When we wrote about what

we had seen, hiked, eaten, or bought, we looked for the right words, and we kept our eyes and ears open to everything around us. From our blog:

We recently spent 4 nights camping on the Peninsula Valdez on the coast of Argentina, a 20-hour bus ride South from Buenos Aires. We pitched our little yellow tent about 20 meters from the beach. The old Atlantic wasn't exactly swimmable, but we had a refreshing dip.

The first day we rented a little Chev with a pair of Germans, one of whom didn't trouble himself with the use of deodorant. We drove around the peninsula and saw colonies of elephant seals, hundreds of them, just lying there like milk bags. There were a few jumbo sea lions with full furry manes and frisky attitudes. The penguin colony was huge and they were very friendly although they kept pestering us for cigarettes and lights. They brayed like donkeys. Another surprising little fellow was the armadillo, who freaked us out because he would freeze for a minute then charge like a mini-linebacker... (Amiro & Cosgrove, 2006, Peninsula Valdez).

We circled the globe by plane with ten major stops and several added flights. Few people who ask where we went can sit through a recounting of the list of destinations (see Appendix A). When I read the list, I think back to how the places looked, sounded and felt, but I also associate them with the reading that accompanied the trip, as though the literature itself were a backdrop our adventures there. When I recall a novel, the place it was read comes to mind (see Appendix B for reading list).

Throughout the course of our trip, I saw my ability to travel develop as literacy develops, through the processes of planning, research, some risk-taking, openness to surprise and taking time to appreciate the experience. My early notions (of literacy, of travel) developed in childhood and grew with me into adolescence. As I became older, I have revised my perspectives on the world and on what it means to be literate.

### 1.3 Literature Review

#### *Travel as literacy*

“We learned we cannot define a country until we walk its streets and breathe its air” (Schaller, 2001: 241).

The act of traveling and the acts of literacy are analogous. To travel thoughtfully is to “read and write” your own adventure and creating your own meaningful experience. To read and write thoughtfully is to create meaning by traveling with and through text to various “places” geographically, emotionally, intellectually and conceptually. There are as many different ways to travel as there are stories to read and write. The processes involve surprise, adventure, creating your own stories and participating in others’ stories, experiencing a range of emotions from inspiration to frustration to curiosity, finding novelty, and facing a number of challenges to your beliefs and your energies. Literacy learning is a process of learning to become at home in a world we both choose and are given (Neilsen, 1989), and similarly traveling is learning to find home in unfamiliar places, to make, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has said, the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

*The reader/traveler and the text*

A reader needs something to read, traditionally, written words. She perceives the symbols that make up words and creates meaning from those symbols. Louise Rosenblatt's theory of reading explains the process as an interaction between reader and literary text; this interaction (Rosenblatt uses the term transaction) constructs the meaning of the text or, to use Rosenblatt's term, the poem (Rosenblatt, 1978). Further, readers bring their personal experiences, their cultural understanding and their beliefs to the text, and the interpretive process of reading is different for each individual. What I take from Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* may be similar, but ultimately different in interpretation from another reader's take on the novel. Rosenblatt says:

“Each reader brings to the transaction not only a specific past life and literary history, not only a repertoire of internalized ‘codes’, but also a very active present with all its preoccupations, anxieties, questions, and aspirations” (Rosenblatt, 1978: 144).

Texts are made up of symbol systems; written texts' symbol systems are the conventions of writing – letters, words, and syntax. I argue that places can be read as texts as well and that their symbol systems can include the local language, food, geography, history, etc. Texts, like novels or towns, are places where we, as readers and writers, bring our backgrounds, intentions, and aspirations in hopes of making meaning.

As a reader needs a written text, a traveler needs places to travel. Such places become potential texts where the traveler brings her knowledge and understanding into a

new environment. With an awareness and willingness to reflect, the traveler reads new experiences, and her experience of the travel becomes a “poem” in Rosenblatt’s sense of the word. She has made her meaning out of those experiences, those places. As English teacher Mike Finn writes: “Meaning is an intellectual and emotional construct... It’s provisional and subject to revision as we acquire new knowledge and accrue new insights from new perspectives and experiences” (Finn, 2003: 4).

Both the traveler and reader meet their texts –a poem, a novel, a waterfall --and new knowledge is created between them. The new text becomes part of the fabric of the reader/traveler’s knowledge adding to and modifying all previous knowledge – this is how learning takes place. As a reader I am open to travel through the pages of a novel, to be able to laugh, cry at words on a page, or to care about a character’s plight. As a traveler, I found myself in new locations asking questions: *What is the history of this place? What values are in embedded in this new language or geography? How has this culture developed?* Exploring these questions and allowing myself to become engaged with places as texts was intellectually and emotionally satisfying.

Whereas the necessity for literal, physical movement marks the traveler’s text, a reader of print material can find the benefits of travel without the financial requirements and without having to move. Anyone with the ability to read and the openness to interaction with a text can read the world through printed text – transacting with linguistic nuance or vivid descriptions, for example. In my case, as a traveler/reader I was cognizant of both of these types of reading—I read my environment, the culture, the sights and scenery in new locations, but I could also travel into the many worlds found in novels.



*The writer/traveler and the text*

“Writers travel constantly. They cannot help it. At home or away, they are always making tracks. It may be that travel is the most telling metaphor for what writers do. Over and over they move; and they go back, partly because the world is moving too... the perilous, exhilarating journey out of everyday, the taste of the world’s skin, the jolt of difference, the need to register what the world speaks or declines to speak to us: all of that is the writer’s need as much as the traveler’s” (Rooke, 1994).

Writing is a constructive process, like reading. Countless researchers in writing have affirmed that writing is as much a process of creating meaning as it is an act of recording (Elbow 2000, Emig 2001). Writing is also a form of inquiry (Richardson, 2005, Neilsen, 1989), a means of discovering ideas and insights and transforming the writer’s perspectives.

As I write, I reflect and revise. Ideas are revealed and clarified. It is an activity whereby I am interacting with words as text that allows me to contemplate my thoughts. In my journal, I wrote:

How strange to have electricity between the strands of your hair, to hear tiny concurrent crackles. I tug a large plastic pick through my long hair gently snapping through tangles. The ends are split, bleached, estranged from my scalp like a city’s suburbs are to its core. They go haywire with the distance from the roots.

The physical movement in writing parallels the movement in travel. The hands and eyes especially are engaged in developing what the body and mind feel and think. They tap letter keys or dance a pen over paper to explore and express what the body and mind are considering. When writing is satisfying, it builds momentum that sustains itself (Wiebe, 2008); the mere physicality of the act of writing feels more active to me, in some ways, than the act of reading. Similarly, I found that once I got moving as a traveler, I got “bitten by the travel bug” and I know that momentum will continue as I think about where I’d like to go in the future. One satisfied curiosity leads to a new question to explore on the page or on the road.

But theorists argue there is more to the impulse to write than movement: it is to mine meaning from experience. Some, like Bruner, claim that it is through the telling of narratives that we construct a version of ourselves in the world. Narratives “arrange events, summon characters, create metaphors and other tropes which weave a cultural fabric that not only brings meaning to our actions, but also creates a milieu in which we can act” (Bruner, in Luce-Kapler, 1997: 18). We take parts of ourselves and fit them into a sense of wholeness.

*To tour or to travel in the world and on the page*

“I don’t like tour groups. I don’t like their reduction of a country to a few key monuments and maybe a snack: France is more than the Eiffel Tower, baguette and Brie; Rome is more than the Spanish Steps and gelato” (Schaller, 2001: 236).

I distinguish between tourism and travel as such: a tourist goes somewhere primarily for escape and for pleasure while a traveler goes somewhere primarily with the expectation and desire to learn. (I appreciate the fact that the effects of travel on either may be similar – a traveler may find escape and pleasure and a tourist may learn; what I am proposing here are tendencies.) A tourist runs a greater risk of missing aspects of a culture because their experience is from inside the borders of the tour package or planned events. Tours simplify. To me, tourism has associations of relaxation and indulgence, while traveling suggests an exploration into the unknown. Most tourists enjoy their leisure while someone else does the work of cooking, cleaning, entertaining, and often transporting them from one place to another. A tourist is often the person who chooses the all-inclusive resort package so they don't have to take chances or make decisions and they know what to expect.

Similarly, a reader who goes to the chain bookstore to buy the new bestseller is a tourist of sorts. In both cases, someone is buying access to prepared or acclaimed events and attractions. The chain bookstore assures the convenience of pre-selected reputable books (the top-ten display case assures the buyer of the books' popularity) just as an all-inclusive resort promises hassle-free transport, accommodations, food, drinks and entertainment.

A traveler has a different approach. She uses what she knows and builds on it. A traveler follows leads, does research and takes risks for the sake of learning about places, people, or herself. A traveler needs more freedom than a tourist does. A tourist often wants an experience that's more predictable, a concrete experience -- one that is expected.

Obviously, such comparisons may be too easy, resulting in definitions of ‘tourist’ and ‘traveler’ that are over-simplified and even stereotypical. After all, there are advantages to predictability, to pre-packaged experiences, and already-recommended books and to bus tours: some people are restricted in terms of time, money, mobility, and resources and are unable to approach each reading or travel experience with fresh, untainted eyes. Even maverick travel books such as the *Rough Guide* series or *Lonely Planet*, which started out as books for people who wanted to avoid the usual sites and experiences, are now considered mainstream.

I have been both traveler and tourist, sometimes on the same day. When I travel, I wish to discover a place for myself, to go off the beaten track in my traveling and my reading. I am thoughtful and aware of staying open, trying to duck under others’ expectations and prescriptions. When I tour, I want, for whatever reason, something pre-planned, relatively safe, an experience that doesn’t leave me feeling lost.

The drawback to tourism in both travel and reading experiences is its link to consumerism. By this, I do not mean necessarily the financial expense involved in touring, but the belief system inherent in both. Consumerism affects travel as it affects reading: it causes us to think of consuming destinations and books rather than interacting with them or opening ourselves to being changed by them. Such a perspective assumes a relationship with the world in which ideas and material things are commodities for personal acquisition and, often, for self-aggrandizement.

A traveler is like a reader engaged in aesthetic reading, when “the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that

particular text” (Rosenblatt 1978: 25). A traveler may, like the efferent reader described later, take away new knowledge from their experience in a new culture, but, unlike the tourist/reader, is more likely to be open to be changed or to have his or her perspectives revised. A traveler is more likely to inquire further rather than judge superficially.

Rosenblatt’s description of what she calls efferent reading involves readers whose attention is “focused on the concepts, the solutions, to be ‘carried away’ from their reading” (Rosenblatt 1978: 24). Efferent reading is important: it allows us to follow necessary instructions, build a car, or understand the steps to follow in first aid. But when the practice of reading is pursued primarily to be able to take away the experience as a commodity, the reader then becomes similar to a tourist. A well-rounded reader is able to have both aesthetic and efferent experiences (sometimes in the same novel— caring about the characters and learning about aspects of the Belgian Congo, for example, from *The Poisonwood Bible*).

In John Steinbeck’s novel *The Wayward Bus*, Mrs. Pritchard’s notions of travel are described as follows: “The truth is that she didn’t want to go to Mexico. She just wanted to come back to her friends having been to Mexico” (2000: 52). An implication could be that Mrs. Pritchard uses her experience to boast rather than learn. She “carries away” a token of an adventure that she thinks will add to her own social status: here the travel becomes social capital. A modern-day Mrs. Pritchard may claim to have “done Africa.” She went on safari in Kenya, was miserable the whole time, but bought a few pieces of tribal art that now hang in her dining room. This tourist-as-consumer attitude is summarized concisely in the idiom “Been there, done that, bought the t-shirt.”

Many tourists are travelers-in-training and to dismiss tourism entirely is unfair.

Anyone who travels is making discoveries, and those discoveries may lead them toward a traveler's mindset with more opportunity and experience. In some cases, it has to do with confidence and willingness to take a risk. Toddlers who ask to have the same book read to them every night or the child who re-reads the same book are rehearsing to build literacy and confidence. When I began to travel I had to learn to take risks; in the same way, as I learned to write—essays, poetry, blog entries – my writing became more mindful and more confident.

Vygotsky's theory of proximal development (1978) is helpful here. For the reader, tourist or traveler, "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978: 86). On our backpacking trip, Michael was my own more capable peer in terms of travel. He had traveled (and read) much more than I had. He introduced me to new authors and places in the world I might not have ever considered on my own. He has my trust and importantly, during our planning and traveling, he had a knack for guiding me just outside my comfort zone or as Vygotsky describes it, my zone of proximal development.

In the same way, literacy learners who are guided away from approaching text as a commodity and toward engaging with it as a place to open new worlds and stretch their understanding are, I believe, going to be more creative and productive in their learning. For example, a major part of our travel was an two-month period in Polynesia, specifically Rapa Nui, Hiva Oa, Raroia and Tahiti. These are not mainstream destinations for backpackers on a limited budget -- the area is geographically isolated and expensive.

We went there because of one of Michael's favourite books, Thor Heyerdahl's *The Kontiki Expedition*. I had experiences in those two months that helped me grow in unexpected and necessary ways. I went from being somewhat shy -- and assuming locals perceived North American travelers as a market from which to extract money -- to someone open to creating real friendships and sharing meaningful experience. As a result, Polynesia stands out for me as an especially memorable time and place.

### *Writing as inquiry*

“And that is where writing and inquiry begin, I believe. At a place as individuals where we are so attuned to the process we are connected to the world. This space is where literacy lives and breathes, where struggles and connection shift and strain. It is not an easy place to be, but it is alive, a kind of lyric presence that keeps us open” (Neilsen, 2006).

Writing as inquiry is a research methodology that has been recognized in educational research, particularly literacy research, for the last fifteen years. To write is not only to document and record, but it is also a mode of making meaning (Emig, 2001; Elbow, 2000). Some version of “how do I know what I think until I see what I say?”, often attributed to E.M. Forster, is a phenomenon commonly understood by writers. Educational researchers have documented the role of writing in transforming perspectives, developing agency, and challenging assumptions (Neilsen, 1998; Luce-Kapler, 1997; Rasberry, 1997; Richardson, 2005). Using writing as inquiry to document and reflect on one's own experiences is an ethnographic process; writing to reflect on my

travels as literacy (and literacy as travel) is a form of auto-ethnography. Carl Leggo writes that, “autobiographical writing is especially connected to lively relationships of family and kin and community and culture” (2004: 19).

To me, creative writing is a path to discovery, a form of research bubbling with life. Writing journals, poetry, and blog entries all became the raw materials of my auto-ethnography and all these texts are “intertextually connected” (Leggo, 2004 ). Memoir and travel writing, popular genres in the public sphere, often reveal to the writer new patterns of understanding and revised notions of self (Birkerts, 2007). This inquiry uses these genres as research tools to discover insights I have gained about travel and literacy and the ways the practices and assumptions about each can inform one another.

To write requires us to stay open, be attuned, and, in travel writer Paul Theroux’s terms, go overland. In an interview with Michael Shapiro, Paul Theroux said, “Going overland is the only serious way of traveling” (Shapiro, 2004: 147). Travel by land is a closer relationship between the traveler and the place. Theroux sees a train, for example, as “a cultural artifact, a big wheezing thing that represents the country and contains its citizens, their chickens, their eating and sleeping habits” (2004: 147). I associate travel by land with less luxury, more time, and more opportunities for learning. For example, to travel by bus from Buenos Aires to Santiago allowed us to stop in small towns that were off the major tourist-trail.

To write poetry while traveling is an extension of the traveler’s engagement with the text of the world. As Wiebe describes it, “poems are an attempt to linger on the artistic moment that can bring self and others together... Often that moment appears



commonplace but every art depends on nuanced details and lingering spirit” (2008: 95).

Wiebe feels “alive when writing poetry, like [he is] an explorer striking out, in love simply with adventure and willing to go places [he’d] never intended to go” (2008: 95). As I scribbled what to me were poetic words in my notebook at an Amazon lodge that was new and strange, I felt that precise sensation simultaneously in my writing and in being there as a traveler.

When I wrote my travel poems, I was recording sensory experience and following tangents in my thoughts. Later as I revised and edited them, I considered poetic form. Metaphors had naturally crept into the raw material and usually the work needed honing to be satisfying as poems. In the revision and editing comes learning, as Wiebe puts it:

The poetry speaks not so much about me, or us, but the journey I like to call *ourselves in poetry*. This approach allows that artistic material to speak, and affords us the opportunity to question and play with loose ends of inquiry (of poetry), the unexplored places of pedagogy (in poetry), and to consider the overlap of living in and out of classroom contexts (by poetry) (99).

Upon returning from my trip, anticipating the direction of this thesis, I was drawn to a metaphor as a guiding impulse for this inquiry. I.A. Richards claims that thought itself is metaphoric. As Zwicky writes, to understand a metaphor is “to recognize that if one context or conceptual constellation is laid over another, just so, aspects or outlines will spring into focus, a common pattern will be discernable—one that makes a difference to our grasp of the individual constellations or contexts separately” (2003: 24L).



## Part Two

### 2.1 Introduction

I wrote the following three narratives by looking back on my travel experiences, reviewing and incorporating some of the writing I did while traveling such as my poems, journal entries and blogs. During that recursive process of reading and re-reading all of my writing, I saw three recurring themes underlying what I consider the most memorable and influential experiences in my travel. These three themes highlight the metaphorical resonance between travel and literacy -- they are: stillness that enables conditions for contemplation, consciousness of mediation of experience, and openness to risk-taking. These themes apply to my approach to and perspective on travel and literacy as well as the research process itself.

### Learning to Travel, Traveling to Learn: Narratives, Poetry and Reflection

### 2.2 Narrative: Stillness

#### *Reading, writing, and the value of time and contemplation*

Whale-watching off the coast of the southern tip of Nova Scotia is exhilarating, a chase to get close enough to see a whale splash around and lift a tail, smack the water with a flipper, or spurt water from a blowhole. The water is deep and dark and the whales

move fast, darting away as your boat approaches. But in Puerto Piramides, Argentina, the same whales nurse their recently born. As a whale watcher there you can glide up in a boat close to them in calm shallow waters and watch as they remain quite still. The whales seem accustomed to being observed all day long by people in tour boats and in the clear blue water they calmly tend to their calves and prepare them for long lives.

This contrast of being busy in one place and calm in another parallels my experience with travel. In Nova Scotia, I'm a full-time teacher and life gets hectic. I try to do my job well, keep up with family and friends, and keep my home comfortable and clean. There are bills to pay, phone calls to answer, crannies to clean. But when I was in Argentina watching whales, I was a full-time traveler with very few obligations other than finding food, shelter and having fun with my travel partner. I looked at the whales as if into a mirror, thinking, *Ah, this is good. A designated time and place to chill out.* I wrote "Right Whales," a poem about them and the associated tourism:

### Right Whales

Striped cliffs of compacted sand cup the quiet beach

in a semi-circle stadium.

Rolling water becomes a stage

and understudy waves put on a modest show.

The great right whale

celebrities slowly swim south

way south  
so they can cool out  
a maternity leave in the nursery cove.

A mother drifts above  
the shadow underneath, her calf, suckling lipless  
at the fatty milk released, inseparable  
they drift together, one tail  
beneath another, repeated curly brackets }}

On the beach, a tractor  
pushes and pulls a boat cradle  
in and out all day long,  
a hamster-wheel cycle of tours.

The tourist flock shuffles down like Magellanic penguins  
in their identical life vests, flotation orange.

We camp meters away from the beach  
in a park of sand and bushes  
our little nylon egg-top home, yolk-yellow.

We tumble into our sleeping bags

and frolic into our sleep  
after too much red wine and wake  
to the sparse chirps and twitters  
of south hemisphere sparrows, and reach  
around the too-bright tent light  
for a bottle of water, still  
half in a dream about quenching.

We stroll at beach pace  
in languid semi-strides  
    thick sinking sand  
the colour of oatmeal.

It feels  
like the skin of cake.  
but crumbles and melts into loose batter beneath  
    each footstep.

Early evening, the clouds grow coral, their striations curve  
over the bay of whales, where we followed, desperate  
to know them in a natural state.

So close to shore – we're practically neighbours

Relinquish your camera, we say.  
Look with your eyes  
at our miniscule proportion  
compared  
to theirs.

The whales travel and choose a spot to nurse. I traveled and chose a spot to...  
*what?* Well, that's the interesting part. What do you do when you're away from your  
treadmill lifestyle?

For me, traveling became time to read the world, to see it as a text – a book, a  
collection of short stories, an anthology of poems. This is my lens as an English teacher –  
this is how I see the world, as text, and how I recreate it. During our travels I found that  
reading the world around me –the landscapes, the cultures – was complemented by the  
print reading and writing I engaged in as well.

### *Reading*

Reading books became an integral part of my traveling. My partner and I left  
Halifax, each with a large backpack and two or three novels. Over the nine months that  
followed, we read dozens of novels, often bought in obscure little used bookstores, and  
we occasionally splurged on a book that was new or unique in some way. We read on  
busses, trains, and planes. We read in parks, hammocks, bunk beds and on sandy beaches.  
In the same way a child's memories of books are often fused with associations of place  
and family (DeCasper, 1986), my memories of certain places include the book I was

reading in the fabric of that memory. The fictional stories mingled with our own stories as travelers; the fictional characters mingled with people we met along the way. I read *Tortilla Flat* in Argentina and a month later met Steinbeck's Danny and the boys fishing, drinking and living off the land in Rapa Nui.

When I think of Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes*, I recall the first somewhat shaky weeks in Mexico and Peru, adjusting to the newness of travel, taking time to relax, read and sympathize with young Frankie and his miserable Irish Catholic childhood. The next book I read was *The Poisonwood Bible*. I remember reading the last half on a long road-trip through Bolivia. We had joined four younger travelers in Uyuni to share the cost of a four-day Jeep tour through salt flats, lagoons and geysers. As I read, they were playing a boisterous card game around me, yelling the game's expletive name occasionally and jarring me from the African landscapes in print back to the equally foreign landscape of Bolivia. *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *Pride and Prejudice* got me through some sweltering afternoons in the Marquesas where the shade was as necessary as water, far from Hardy and Austen's cool misty England. *The Time Traveler's Wife* was a science fiction love story that kept me entertained and added a romantic nuance to our rented cabin.

It was from under a veil of powerful anti-nauseate medication taken on a cargo boat in the Tuamotus when I laughed hysterically after reading the following lines from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, one of the classics we picked up in a set in Chile:

Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were



rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived (2000: 45).

The heaving motion of the cargo boat required me to stay in my bunk for the first few days of the voyage. The other passengers were doing the same thing, lying around the boat waiting until we stopped at an island, not socializing at all. I was a captive reader. Reading *Frankenstein* made it all the more surreal.

### *Writing*

During my travels, in addition to reading, I did a lot of writing. I kept a journal of what we were up to and wrote poetry as snapshots of places we were experiencing. Reading and writing was an inseparable part of how I traveled.

Reading print material abundantly enhances my appreciation of the surroundings; I transform words into images and feelings and connect the new information to the puzzle of what I already know and who I am. My concentration is fixed on creating the story the author provides. When I put down a book and juxtapose it with the literal world I am in, my inclination is then to translate that world into words. The author I'm reading at the time has an influence on my articulation, how I put experiences and observations into words. I noticed this in my partner's writing voice as well. He dabbled with verbosity in his short stories as he read Proust.

The philosopher Simone Weil (2005) claimed that language can keep our minds imprisoned; as humankind's unique and primary means of communicating, language has enormous power, but it can shape how we approach experience. Not every piece of

writing feels satisfying. Sometimes I would reread my journal and think of how much more there was to a situation than what I could express.

I've noticed that reading creates and strengthens a pathway between the written word and perception. It's a bridge that can be traveled back and forth more easily with practice. A reader perceives an articulation and a writer articulates a perception. As a writer, I benefit from reading and practicing that translation of a perceived concept to the written word. The more I am immersed in language, the more resources I have to articulate what I see and hear. On composition, Henry David Thoreau wrote that he felt as if his life had grown more outward when he could express it (1987) and Don McKay suggests (2001) that language always has the capacity to touch upon wilderness, those inarticulable experiences and sights that elude the grasp of language.

Writing enhances understanding as well. Although the process of naming and describing can reduce an experience, it can also clarify what I'm thinking and reveal ideas that might have been subconscious or nebulous. Marshall McLuhan (2005: 7) writes, "In a word, metaphor is a kind of bridging process, a way of getting from one kind of experience to another. This reaching out always involves a resonating interval rather than a mere connection." While traveling, writing was my means of metaphorical expression. Images that showed up in my poems sometimes symbolized more complex concepts than what I thought I was simply describing.

### *Stillness*

I found that the act of reading requires and cultivates stillness, stillness I need to appreciate the world. I appreciate my experiences by articulating them, mentally, in

writing or aloud. I learned that I need sufficient time to connect with (transact with) a text and a place. My travels started with an adjustment period and gradually I grew to have a new relationship with time itself. One of the first poems I wrote was about a bus ride from Lima to Cusco:

Cusco, Peru

Winding roads into a queasy altitude  
the propositions begin before we're off the bus,  
girls at a gas station knocking on the windows  
bottles in hand – *mate anis*  
She writes half backward  
– *mate anis* – on my dirty window and I'm curious  
    because my head is light  
And the bottle's brewed tea might sooth  
As herbal tea can  
    -- back in my Halifax apartment  
lined on the kitchen shelf  
green, chai, roobios, blueberry  
    and orange pekoe in the cupboard  
    each cupful in a sterile envelope  
    and all I can see on the bottle she offers  
    is the broken seal

how do I know where it's been?

I don't know

what my immune system will strain

I put a dime-sized amount of hand-san

in my palm for good measure, off we go again

and I comb my hair to freshen up

on the comfy bus that blares

American movies dubbed in Spanish

and tilts as we take hairpin turns

up, down and around the Andes

where the occasional ungulate

looks up, chewing, not altogether unassuming

We're heading to Machu Picchu...

This poem speaks of my physical state in a new place. I was habituating myself to new foods and sleeping in different hostels every few nights. My digestive system was often confused and I was conscious of anything that might irritate my health, hence using the hand sanitizer, trying to ward off a few germs. My body was somewhat run-down but what I had on the road that I did not have at home in Nova Scotia was the benefit of time. Being removed from my career was a palpable openness of opportunity. "Culture shock" seems too strong a term for what I experienced as I traveled, but it somewhat

encompasses the feeling that there was so much to learn about a place. In South America, where my rudimentary Spanish limited me from fully participating in conversations and understanding written information, I often focused on geography, flora and fauna – those phenomena for which there is no language barrier. I have taken nature for granted when I'm home, when I have less time for stillness, and when I am more likely to be engaged in conversation because I'm in an Anglophone world.

Stillness. The very word looks like a reverberation with its double l's and s'. Stillness is a state of "taking time." Time is moving aggressively and it requires taking. This life is busy. It's tempting to keep looking ahead, and indeed looking ahead and working for the future is rewarding. I remind myself to focus on that reward. Stillness is the time to be grateful for, or at least aware of, the present. The present is, after all, the time you were looking forward to. If the present isn't satisfying, stillness is a time to be analytical about what isn't right.

To assess the present is to observe your surroundings and your self. To be still is to be undisturbed – it is a quiet time. Stillness is an important component of meditation that applies to literacy and travel. Desmond Tutu (2004: 99) writes, "All of us are meant to be contemplatives. Frequently we assume that this is reserved for some rare monastic life, lived by special people who alone have been called by God. But the truth of the matter is that each one of us is meant to have that space inside where we can hear God's voice." Stillness is a requisite for contemplation. Though we all might have different versions of what God is or means, God has historically commanded contemplation. David M. Levy (2007: 9: 237) poses the question, "If questions could be justifiably raised more

than two decades ago about the pace of life and its consequences for looking and thinking, how much more urgently might such questions be raised today?"

While traveling, one place where stillness became a luxury was Bangkok. Our time there was to be a quick stopover en route from Perth to Rome, but we decided to extend our stay for ten days. From the airport, we went straight to Khao San Road – a buzzing hive of budget travelers. The street itself was at times overwhelming although fun and exciting. It was as if we were in a travelers' bubble until we walked or took a taxi out of the area to explore temples, parks and the mega-mall MBK:

In Bangkok

Khao San Road is a circus, a bubble, a labyrinth market,  
a spectacle of sellers and consumers  
of watches, t-shirts, purses, peanuts  
of Cds, sympathy, smiles, sad eyes,  
of gimmick, of taunts, of touts, of  
creative cliché.

Sticky skin, heads on swivels, negotiate  
down a tourist street.

Scents materialize, lure and repel, lure and repel --  
curry, sage, sewage, spring rolls, b.o.  
exhaust, perfume, cigarettes, coconut oil.

You're empowered, you're vulnerable.

Toothpick beer girls, stretched-on plastic dresses  
pitch promotions and special prices for you, "for you"  
and ping pong shows for your boyfriend

as hip-hop, dance beats, and dated boy-band-bubble-pop all blare  
from cheap speakers,

and in the forefront,

the sizzle

of stir-fry, Pad Thai, and the grizzly motor tuk-tuk

of a cab passing by

the croak of a wooden frog

from a walking vendor and conversation

snippets from the script of the backpacker trail,

Here's my email, I wish you well— you couldn't

stay in Bangkok too long, eh.

Well, I couldn't.

But I'll miss the spice, the shock,

and being one of the phased out foreigners

walking groggy and laden with a big backpack

my carapacial home

when I'm done with the haggles  
and knock off knick knacks  
I build up courage  
to leave the strip

To ask what I worship  
To ponder this trip

And find  
pregnant silence  
in the deep red belly of a temple  
under the eyes of a golden Buddha.

This temple in Bangkok was the first I'd ever entered and what struck me was the calming effect of being enveloped in the colour red. The overall aesthetic was entirely different from the places of worship I was familiar with, mainly Catholic churches, but being in the space resonated with my spirituality as if I were reading spiritual cues in a new language. Back on Khao San Road, my senses were so bombarded that it was difficult to read. Distilling the experience required me to look back, much like reading Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* – I reread passages of that book to enhance my understanding because the narrative had moved so quickly.



Reading in the traditional sense is a constructive process where I am meeting the symbols and creating meaning with them, contextualizing and understanding information. I noticed a distinction in reading between what requires reflection and what doesn't. For example, when I read a bus schedule, I think and make decisions, but I don't reflect on it. I don't go on to travel very far with that information. I dispose of it when I no longer need it. This is an example of what Rosenblatt calls efferent reading (1978: 24). Reading a poem or novel is completely different -- it requires more time. It requires stillness. I reflect on a poem or story, put it my metaphorical backpack and travel on with it. Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is a novel that has stayed with me for years. I recall the questions it poses when I am thinking about spirituality. I am engaging here in what Rosenblatt calls aesthetic reading (1978: 24).

How do we cultivate our openness to stillness, as readers, as travelers, and as beings that so often affect other beings? The need is profound. Without reflection, we can get caught up in trivial matters. And reflection takes time. Often I don't have the time to savour a moment, a poem, or even a spring roll. I've come to learn about myself that I need time to tidy my brain before I reflect. I sometimes harbour the very feeling of deadlines or obligations and when I've thought about those ideas that are somewhat negative and dealt with them, I can *dénoue* what comes next. It's as though I need to deal with the external before I can understand the internal.

### 2.3 Narrative: Mediation

In this age of information, I sometimes find myself trying to avoid mediation of my experiences whether I am at home or traveling. Where possible, I prefer to experience an event or text freshly. Mediation involves an intervention between me (the reader), and the experience (the text). I try to dodge external filters or frameworks in my quest to experience something in a way that feels authentic, original and independent. I'm increasingly conscious of the subjectivity of my perception and am trying to understand it through inquiry, but in the cases of reading and traveling, I'm referring to the more obvious filters created for consumers. The more I can identify or understand filters that are designed to make me consume more, such as movie reviews, travel guidebooks, bucket lists, bestseller lists, and award winners, the more I can be selective and responsible for what I consume. Once I am aware of those external filters, I can work at understanding my internal ones, my lenses.

I appreciate experiencing things for myself. I don't want a rigid framework that makes me compartmentalize my reactions based on whether I agree or disagree with someone else or a particular paradigm. Simone Weil (2005) wrote that the mind is enslaved when it accepts connections it has not itself made.

Marshall McLuhan (2005: 5) writes that "to probe is to cross boundaries of many kinds; to discover the patterns of new environments requires a rigorous study and inventory of sensuous effects." It is almost impossible in our culture to cross boundaries without the help of tour guides, whether or not we want them. When I traveled without a rigid itinerary, I enjoyed a sense of discovery and meaningful learning. One discovery

can lead to another. Similarly, when I find a book I like, I can use it as a stepping stone to other books. When I write a poem, it might set me into the motion of writing, on a writing spree. To be aware of the "sensuous effects" of a place or story is to be open to the way that place or story affects you the reader or you the writer.

I can read reviews on almost any product, place or event before I buy, go or partake. Movies are an overt and extreme example of a mediated experience in that they're rated for content before they're released (such as PG for Parental Guidance), then they're scrutinized by critics and movie-goers. Their profits are mentioned on entertainment news, then the movies are further ranked through various awards. The actors' personal lives can be marketed as sensational plots in themselves. This creates a mediated experience of the movie that can take away from its artistic value: all that mediation interferes with a raw, or what I feel as an authentic, response. I understand that part of the enjoyment of seeing a movie is discussing it later. What I do not appreciate is hearing about a movie or book before I have had the opportunity to transact with the text myself.

Yet I do sometimes trust and seek some mediation and it has at times enhanced my appreciation. For example, I'd ask my friend Nick where to go dancing in Toronto or my friend Kara what birds to look for on a hike in Nova Scotia, because I know they have done research as hobbyists and have had positive experiences in those fields. At the Tate Modern in London, I puzzled about a series of Rothko paintings, unable to recognize any real response on my own part. Then I read a description of the work (which was printed on the entrance wall) and learned that when Rothko painted the murals (known as the Seagram murals), he was exploring mood, repetition and the potential meaning of his

work in a culture he felt was saturated with images. I appreciated the paintings based on my new knowledge. When I had someone else's words to articulate a motive for the work, I could sense it for myself. In that case, someone else's lens was definitely beneficial. The mediation I seek is an introduction that may lead me to further pursue research if my interest is piqued. After all, I don't need to become a curator to appreciate a painting.

The trip I took involved a wide variety of places. Since returning home, many people have asked me, "If you had to pick one spot on your trip, which was your favourite?" It's tempting to fall into clichés or aphorisms, if I think that might be what someone wants to hear. I would love to engage in a long discussion or maybe a self-indulgent lecture, but I know the level of interest varies for everyone who asks that question. I could close the door to conversation with a statement like "Paris was beautiful" followed by a list of landmarks, but I'd rather create or continue a balanced conversation that someone can build on, so I take into account the other person's interests.

I've experienced a spasm of pressure with this question because it is a topic so dear to me that I don't want to waste my opportunity to recapture, celebrate and share a special time. I certainly don't want to disappoint someone who is asking me questions enthusiastically, or planning a trip for herself. I might want to create a solid lead to entice the person into a conversation, while at the same time be totally honest with myself in that moment. At the same time, I don't want to be another mediator trying to define how to travel somewhere. I deliberate and choose a way to answer the question. Here I get a little philosophical. *Where was I the happiest and why? Was it the place or the mood?*

*Was it a serendipitous meeting of friendly people that made our stay somewhere the best, or was it achieving a personal goal? Is that where I would return given the chance?*

I catch myself tailoring my answer to the person asking. If I'm talking to a big meat-eater, I'll sing the praises of Argentine steaks and red wine. If it's an athlete, maybe I'll mention the challenging peaks of the Inca Trail. If it's a beach-lover, I'll describe the black sands of the Marquesas or the white sands of the Tuamotus. Surfer? I'll tell them about crashing waves of Costa Rica. Sun worshiper? A stroll through beachfront parks in Sydney. Sommelier? How about the wine festival we stumbled into in Avignon? Gourmand? The 10 lbs. I gained in Italy.

These are the kinds of details I would respond well to if someone were telling me about their trip. I'm not interested in too many meaningless superlatives -- the amazings, the incredibles, the fantastics -- to describe a place or an experience somewhere. I'd exchange all those amazings for a thoughtful detail or an honest impression. This is the reader and writer in me, longing for a description that opens a door and invites me in to participate in the creation of meaning. I can research any location, see countless photos, or watch videos, but in conversation, I want something I cannot research: access to the individual who is telling the story. I want insight into that human's experience, its uniqueness, its rawness and its authenticity.

I'm a lover of lists. I enjoy being organized and completing tasks. Lists help me stay organized, give me a sense of completion, or remind me of responsibilities. When I'm teaching, I write a short list on the board daily to satisfy my students' daily greeting and inquiry of "What are we doing today?" It is a reduction of what teaching and learning

will take place, but it serves a purpose of stating a plan. More precisely, my little list is a statement of the means by which I will attempt to facilitate learning. Usually my written lists are not evocative nor do they contain any metaphor -- they serve the purpose of efferent reading (Rosenblatt 1978).

As summer turns to autumn, I list potential gifts for the people on my Christmas list – a kind of list within a list, but my most frequent list is the grocery list, traditionally composed in the kitchen, with reference to current refrigerator and cupboard contents. I decide what I want to replenish and once the list is written, I think of the items as what we need. “Need” is really a foolish word in this context since there is no threat posed by skipping or missing any item on the list. It reveals my frame of mind as a consumer. Once I've decided to buy something, I'm quite committed emotionally.

For that reason, I've made a conscious decision to avoid thinking of travel as a series of tasks on a list. What I'm also trying to avoid is the finality implied by the checking off of the items on a list. Sure, there is a working list of places I want to explore, and when I eventually go there, it satisfies a curiosity. Rather than consider that last destination checked off the list, I've learned to reflect on my experience in that place. I try to be in the moment and appreciate the adventure for what it is.

When I move on, I look back nostalgically, but refuse to dwell on somewhere I missed or say I've “done” a certain place. The phrase haunts me now that I'm conscious of it. (I hear it almost every time there is a discussion about travel. It is also commonly used in discussion of school curriculum, as in “We did *Lord of the Flies* last year.”) The implication is that that there is no more to know about a place when it's done, that the

door is shut, and there is no need to return. The place becomes reduced to the idea of having been there. The place is therefore consumed.

I'm conscious of being a consumer and the stigma that I associate with consumption. Consumerism in middle or upper class North American society – where basic needs are met and spending money is for extras -- is often akin to an addictive habit. If someone is addicted to something, they ingest it with appreciation, but also desperation. That consumption can be wasteful -- trendy products are only trendy for a short period of time, then they are no longer of use to the buyer because they cease to serve their image-enhancing purpose. The pleasure associated with acquisition becomes increasingly difficult to attain. Eighteenth century philosopher Edmund Burke said that, "Reading without reflecting is like eating without digesting." Over-consumption robs you of the impulse to reflect. When travel or literacy is turned into currency, it is put into that addictive realm. Quantifying places negates their qualitative value. It doesn't matter if I've been to one, sixteen or thirty countries if counting them is all I have done.

I was very conscious of the roles of mediation and my own consumerism while I was in Paris. For some now unknown reason, we only had three days to spend there. Time was running out and we'd be home in a few weeks. However, Michael's brother, his wife and their six-month-old daughter met us there for the weekend because they had been visiting cousins in England. It was wonderful to see familiar faces after eight months but we didn't have a lot of time to catch up because we were off on a marathon of sightseeing.

It had to be this way. Paris was one of those places where I wanted to see some of the famous landmarks for myself before I could relax and take in the bigger picture or

smaller details. The first poem I wrote about the city is “Paris,” a series of snapshots, isolated little moments and impressions of the time when we were *not* at major landmarks, just out exploring:

## Paris

The subway map background is crème brûlée  
with a psychedelic network  
of primary colours  
and a few more French hues  
like taupe, chartreuse, turquoise  
linked by nodes of famous sights,  
an eternal tourist track. Reliable.

It’s raining, start running, take refuge  
in a smoky café  
with a frantic howl  
and hysterical screech  
of the big shiny espresso machine.

An old fellow in a fedora broods  
in a grey Gauloise cloud,  
by the window.

The French, they smoke with purpose.



Business deals go down on cell phones,  
an American orates  
on the travesty of Euro-Disney.

A waitress writes  
the day's dignified menu on a chalkboard  
in curly cursive, she wears  
a dainty medium heel.

A break in the rain, bolt through Montmartre  
on the steps at Sacré-Coeur  
Paris panorama. Up close, the little asparagus is imposing

The second poem, "Tourists in Paris" expresses my frustration after being part of masses of tourists too many times in a short period of time. After traveling at a leisurely pace for months, I felt some anxiety because of the limited amount of time we had: we had to tour rather than travel. I felt grateful for the type of travel I'd been able to do up to this point.

The (ab)use of digital cameras was excruciating. All around me people were snapping photos throughout the Louvre -- of the same subject as the photos in the brochures. I watched what seemed like hundreds of museum-goers walk from painting to painting, take a photo and instantly move on. I understand that the photos could be taken home and shared with others who don't have the opportunity to go to the Louvre, but

made me sad that the picture-takers didn't seem to be considering the pieces for themselves; they seemed to be rushing. I wondered about all the places the photographs would end up, who would view them and why. As Emerson (1841) wrote, "Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not."

### Tourists in Paris

Mona Lisa, La Joconde, with her wry little smile  
for the enormous crowd  
that looks upon her.

After all these years, her eyes  
have seen them all,  
up down left right – her gaze is fixed  
on you, in your headphones,  
hearing statistics and anecdotes,  
a recorded guide: select your language  
a Swedish girl picks French.

People take pictures of paintings,  
and pictures of themselves, smiling by paintings  
imprisoning them  
on a screen the size of a piece of Camembert,

Why? to consume a morsel  
of masterpiece themselves, a Robin Hood robbery?  
from patrician to plebian?  
will they print them?

“To say you saw” is no reason at all  
because no one cares what you saw  
unless you felt.

Something.

Another memory comes to mind related to mediation and expectations. While on a bus between Buenos Aires and Bariloche, we met David, who was traveling alone. David asked us where we were going, where we had been, how long we'd been traveling, where we were from – what became the usual traveler-chat on “the backpacker trail”. David returned the same information. Then he showed us the fleece jacket he got made in Bolivia. It had Antoine de Saint Exupéry's Little Prince sewn onto the back. He said that the symbol was important to him and showed us the tattooed version on his leg as well. Then he asked if we're going to Pucón.

“Why? What's in Pucón?”

David's eyes bulged, “You haven't heard of Pucón?! You've got to be kidding me. You have to go! You haven't heard of Villarrica? Oh man. Do you guys even have the Lonely Planet? You have to go to Pucón, man! Do you like rafting? Do you hike?

Look, I'm going to show you this video. You can hike up to the volcano and look at it, man. It's the most spectacular thing. The smoke is coming up and you're sitting on snow. Then it's crazy to slide down. There are so many extreme sports and things to do there. Check this out!"

David pressed play and handed us his camera: a video of he and his friend hiking up a mountain, laughing, yelling, calling each other names, having a great time.

"Cool. That looks fun," I said, handing the camera back.

"Oh, I want to show you some more of my friends. Look. You want see my video of dolphins?"

David scrolled through a dozen photos or so, stopping to laugh at the one where his friends mooned the camera from the snow-capped mountain. At last David ran out of photos to show us and fell asleep, his head tilted straight back, his mouth agape, creating a funny rictus profile.

"So, do you want to go to Pucón?" Michael asked with a sly grin.

"No way, dude."

David had exhausted me. My experience in Pucón would never be EXTREME enough and the whole scene would be wasted on me. Looking back now, I try to make connections to *The Little Prince*. David must feel like the innocent boy, adventuring in earnest. To him, I am probably the boring old adult who doesn't have an imagination and doesn't want to go to Pucón. His effect on me was more like the character of the businessman, though, tallying up a list of experiences to count rather than live.

A key realization was that I'll always be "missing out" on something if I choose to look at it that way. Whether it's a landmark, a movie, a party, a tragedy or a best-

selling book, while I'm experiencing one thing, people somewhere else are experiencing something else. As well, my path can be unconventional, but it's still a path. It doesn't have to be *The Game of Life* by Milton Bradley.

What I think is useful for me to develop as a traveler, is a balance between researching the place I'm going and resisting the temptation to over-plan and do too much. I try to cultivate the openness to visit a new place without too many preconceptions and be pleasantly surprised. I'm not looking for intense culture-shock, but I am developing openness to learning about a new place while I'm in it. Part of the problem with over-mediation, of over-researching, and over-planning is that I tend to set myself up against someone else's rating of an experience. I had to learn that my (or anyone's) experience doesn't have to measure up to any particular interpretation, review or checklist. I keep this in mind in my writing and reading as well. I take part in these acts of literacy for myself first.

#### 2.4 Narrative: Risk-taking and surprise

Before we left Canada, we planned and booked two excursions in Peru – at my suggestion, the Inca Trail hike; at Michael's suggestion, a week in a rustic lodge on the Amazon. I spent time reading up on the Inca Trail: what to pack, how long the trail was and the history of the Inca Empire. I completely neglected to do any research on the lodge where Michael had arranged for us to go. Now I realize that it was fear that was stopping me from finding out too much. I'd had bouts of ranidaphobia (fear of frogs)

since childhood but I have a hunch that the phobia was a symbol of my preference for being in control of a situation.

Here is an excerpt from the blog I wrote once we were back in Lima after our week in the jungle:

After a Coca Cola breakfast we hopped into our vessel with two environmentalists from Lima and our guide Juan Carlos for the four-hour trip down the Amazon River to the lodge where we would spend the next six days. Most folks in the villages use dugout canoes and wide paddles to cruise the river. Our speedboat waves were a little aggressive. We stuck out like palm trees in the arctic.

...There were two German tourists at the lodge when we arrived, and with our neophyte enthusiasm we asked them how long they had been there, and how they liked it. They appeared dazed and listless, like people who wanted to get off a Survivor show. They said they had been there four days, and they described it as "hot." We thought that their description lacked imagination, and pitied them a little over lunch. In the end, we found that their description was apt, terse and accurate. Hot.

...The lodge had adopted two monkeys, a baby sloth, and two macaws... Juan Carlos buys animals who have been captured, and brings them to the lodge to freedom. Apparently tourists buy the animals, as well as skins, claws, teeth and bones.

...Believe it or not, we tented in the jungle one night. Our guides, Paco and Hitler (yes, Hitler, that's his first name, given to him by his godfather -- we suggested

changing it to Mitchell or something) told us the hike to camp would be two or three hours. It was FIVE hours through rough jungle brush, Paco literally clearing the way with a machete. We felt like we were in Nam. We were drenched in sweat within 10 minutes and the heat didn't let up. Don't even get me started on the humidity or the mosquitoes and biting ants.

...At one point, the guides stopped. They had been instructed to keep me away from frogs, but this one was literally too big to avoid! The thing looked like a Transformer. It was marvel, but I was too exhausted to be scared and I just walked by it at my own pace, giving it a very wide berth. I survived.

Paco and Hitler also took us piranha fishing (our lunch) and caiman-catching. To see caiman from the canoe, you shine a flashlight and their eyes glow red. It was eerie and beautiful to be in the little canoe at night. The sky was brightly speckled in foreign constellations and the lake lettuce shone with phosphorescence.

Just when we thought the jungle didn't have any more surprises, our cook Henri turned out to be the winner of 2006's Miss Jungle Drag Pageant. He even showed us a photo of himself in the contest, in a dazzling fuchsia gown, complete with sash. The photo was almost ruined by Pancho the capuchin's antics -- he had gotten into the eggs and broken them on the photo.

Mike and Kristen. (Amiro & Cosgrove, 2006, Welcome to the Jungle).

Writing that blog was extremely satisfying. It allowed me to share the novelty of an adventure I had feared but survived. It was a time full of surprises and interesting new

knowledge. There was something to learn with every step, from plant names and uses to village customs.

It was fascinating and challenging. I was often uncomfortable – overheated, itchy with dozens of bug bites, and missing running water. Part of me was afraid to be so far from home geographically and culturally, as Sarah Wheeler puts it, “loose from cultural moorings” (Shapiro, 2004: 284). But I had the presence of mind to remind myself that it was likely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I would grow from it. I also had the sense that I was living something for my family and that I would bring back some of this new knowledge to them.

I wrote a poem to try to articulate what I was thinking, feeling, and perceiving:

In the Amazon Lodge

My love's  
bug-bitten feet  
are about a foot from my face, he thinks the breeze  
is better at the other side of the space, a screen-walled  
dome of synthetic fabric,  
anachronistic in this Amazon lodge  
where the wooden handled broom  
has coarse natural bristles like the one  
Mom might have used sweeping  
Grand-mère's house—the mess on this floor, she'd say,



you little monkey.

Pancho the white-faced capuchin left  
his snack's packaging smashed from the roof beams  
where he sought them out, clumps  
of porous dry grey matter, a tiny  
buggy pantry,  
he uses his pointy red nails to crumble  
and pillage without a moment to savour  
the little refugees he eats.

We take  
listless sticky naps  
98 % humidity but we're out of potable water, time to boil.

Off to a village to see community life  
where people catch, find or grow the food  
that makes their meals – I wonder  
about soap... no 5-step skin regimes here, no laser  
hair removal or injections of venom to freeze faces.

A boa constrictor slithers by without a crease.

The locals know every bird's voice and cricket's croak:

at six months old,

the jungle baby eats

a mimic-bird's brain to help him learn to speak.

A boy runs with a machete at five.

What do the birds discuss so emphatically

in this heat?

A sloth falls

five meters from his tree buffet,

his depressing defence against soaring hunters

lands with a thud

on his sandbag bottom

drills a dent with his stub

and fertilizes his landing spot.

Sometimes my head throbs.

To stay too long in this

muddy Amazon would beat me.

The cold Atlantic

built this pale curvy body that holds

onto heat like it only comes

once a year.

So we drink from the liana branch  
a cool fresh infusion  
hoping to ingest some of the sylvan jungle's power  
where the growth is so dense it squirms  
from above and below and just under  
the river's brown calm surface  
an underwater re-enactment  
a swampy Atlantis of trees and grasses, a floor of vegetation  
and the most elaborate camouflage that feeds on and folds into itself  
patiently like the sly killer tree  
who flirtatiously dangles an innocuous tendril or two  
that happens to curl around another tree then happens  
to bring more tendril friends  
and gets stronger, gets stronger in time,  
pulling the poor old sap from the ground itself.

An illusion of blood  
on the lush crimson branches --  
how sinister  
compared to my patriotic maple  
who happily puts on an autumn show for highway drivers

speeding along at 110 km/hr.

No such vectors in the Selva  
where the earth affects the people  
more than the opposite.  
Perhaps your speedboat will be halted  
by a submerged fell tree  
or the river vines will tangle  
in the outboard motor  
and you'll have to adapt  
because your cries are quickly muffled  
out there.  
Deep in there.

Our stay in the Amazon was a powerful experience. It made me feel stronger.  
Pema Chodron writes:  
The spiritual journey involves going beyond hope and fear, stepping into  
unknown territory, continually moving forward. The most important aspect of  
being on the spiritual path may be to just keep moving. Usually, when we reach  
our limit, we feel... freeze in terror. Our bodies freeze and so do our minds.  
Rather than indulge or reject our experience, we can somehow let the energy of  
the emotion, the quality of what we're feeling pierce us to the heart (2000: 15).

We followed our stay in the Amazon with the Inca Trail hike and from then on, we only planned ahead a few days in advance going from town to town through Bolivia then Argentina. After about two and a half months, I started thinking of myself as “seasoned” on the backpacker trail and considering certain situations cliché. My interest in other travelers was waning; I was getting a bit smug.

I was feeling pretty smooth in regards to my traveling skills and my ability to appreciate the moment, yet still a tinge jaded by the recurring conversations I was having with other backpackers. We always asked and got asked the same questions: Where are you from? How long are you traveling? Where are you going next? What is there to do here or there?

One night in a hostel in Bariloche, Argentina, after a bottle of red wine, I scribbled furiously in my notebook, trying to record what was going on around me while remaining subtle. I was swept up in the seedy feeling of writing while intoxicated, letting the words pour quickly without revision or deliberation, thinking of myself as a modern, female Jack Kerouac, living an alternative life. Here is what I wrote:

Bariloche – Mundialisacion

*Que bueno*

*El vino tinto barato y lindo si magnifico para turistas*

*Amigas nuevas*

*Solamente pocos pesitos.*

In a hostel common room, a drunken girl writes...

My journal waits under the flowing black ink  
of a pen bought in Bolivia. Argentine reggae from the computer to my left –  
a French guy checks his email. Across the table Cozzy's scrawling his clepto prose.  
The American girl tells me Albuquerque's known for ballooning while  
a quiet German girl writes in her journal after practicing English and Spanish  
with her German friends.

At the computer, everyone grasps at their future  
and former lives. No one knows which connection  
will come into fruition, everyone spilling their travel  
plans in rehearsed scripts, accustomed to receiving details  
that take a direct route through the mind without respectable analysis  
or dedication  
to memory – thus, the life of a long term traveler...

Not sure why the lines of my consonants have taken on enough egoism  
to defy the predetermined lines of the journal.

It's the Malbec.

I'll create a font, Drunk 14.5 pt.

Sometimes my location is surreal and I feel my portability in viscera.  
Where my body is, my senses perceive, my soul interprets.

The expectations of the self adapt. I move, I grow.

Nearing my peak of Spanish fluency after months of practice, I was playing with words, trying to express my appreciation of where I was with the made-up title word “Mundialisacion” – my incorrect translation of the word of “Globalization”. Looking back, I remember having the sense I was outside myself while writing, which explains the third person narrative in the first English line. I looked around the common room stealthily, making observations and wrote a snapshot, making assumptions along the way. The word “egoism” should probably be changed to “egotism” since I meant “self-importance”.

Our hostel was called “El Gaucho” (meaning a cowboy from the South American pampas), and the backpackers were mostly European, Israeli or Canadian. A typical outfit would be hiking shoes, jeans or track pants, a fleece, and maybe a quirky t-shirt or a funky blouse. One evening as the sun was setting, we were sitting on the deck, sharing a beer with travelers. My partner was discussing Marcel Proust and smoking with a French guy. Then the cowboys arrived.

Jeremiah and Paul were from Cheyenne, Wyoming. I was quickly humbled. They walked up to the hostel carrying enormous saddles. They wore cowboy hats, slim-fitting jeans and button-down shirts. Their only baggage was a “bedroll” each. Paul was slim with dark hair and shiny dark eyes. Jeremiah was big and broad with light brown hair and a reddish beard. Without a doubt, they stood out in our backpacker scene. Paul was the first to speak,

“Howdy. Y’all know if there’re any beds open at this hostel?”

The cowboys checked in and came outside for a beer. They told us they'd bought horses in Bolivia, ridden through Chile and left the horses with a family in the last town. They told us a few stories about drinking homemade wine and nearly freezing to death on their horses. Michael, who had taken hundreds of pictures in the last months, asked if they had taken many photos. Jeremiah said he didn't carry a camera, but someone had given him a photo. He pulled out a grainy folded 5 x 7 of a sunset.

The juxtaposition of the cowboys with the rest of the travelers shook me out of my backpacker's ennui by giving me hope that there would be more characters ahead in unexpected places and that I was being too hard on the ones that were annoying me, considering how much we had in common, relative to Jeremiah and Paul.

They seemed so sincere and wholesome that they made me rethink why and how I was traveling. I had to let go of the over-planning and expectations of my journey. Cameras, technical gear and mementos mattered less and less after that meeting. It was like reading a random book – not recommended by anyone -- and enjoying it immensely. There were adventures to be had that were not in the *Lonely Planet* books, even in the "Off the Beaten Track" sections.

Months later in the trip I felt a sense of harmony in Atuona. It was a perfect balance of stillness, reflection, preparedness and risk-taking. We spent three weeks in the Marquesan village in French Polynesia. Compared to South America, traveling around Polynesia provided a stark contrast because of its geography. In South America, we were on the move every few days, but in Polynesia, instead of busses and trains, our transport was limited to the planes, boats or ships. Consequently, we had less mobility and concentrated our time in three areas: first Tahiti, second the island of Hiva Oa in the



Marquesas and last, the archipelago of the Tuamotos, where we traveled by cargo boat from atoll to atoll until we reached our destination, Raroia, where we stayed for ten days with a local family.

In Atuona, we rented a little bungalow designed for visiting government workers and for three weeks, we felt like we had a home. The extended stay gave us time to become comfortable in the community. We found out what time the baguettes were ready each morning at the store, and when the fishmonger, Kina, would be by the mango tree selling fresh red tuna. It was a pleasant surprise to be able to prepare and have sashimi for lunch daily as backpackers.

The fishmonger's cousin, Santos, was a respected tattoo artist. Kina, his wife and friends showed us several examples of his work on their own bodies, including a manta ray across Kina's entire back and a dolphin on his wife's foot, both detailed with intricate traditional Marquesan designs. We started to do some research on what the symbols were. Another tattoo artist lent us his binder containing pages and pages of Marquesan images – sea and land creatures, flowers, tiki parts and geometric patterns representing different islands. We designed a tattoo for Michael incorporating a Rapa Nui moai with Marquesan symbols, sketched it out and went to see Santos at his house. I flipped through his sketchbooks and was torn between two female tiki creatures. He said he could cross them for me and began his work.

I decided to go first lest I lose courage while watching. The setting was very casual. Santos had the tattoo chaise outside on his shaded veranda. He played ambient music from a huge stereo. Chickens and roosters pecked around freely and the view was the green of palms. The breeze was a lifesaver in the equatorial heat.

Santos began by sketching a rough shape on my leg with a red ballpoint pen. It didn't look very promising. Then with the buzzing needle full of black ink, he proceeded to draw a detailed tiki mermaid filigreed with symbols working together, telling their own stories. After about an hour of pain, the end result was exquisitely detailed and pleasing. I breathed a sigh of relief.

It's a special souvenir for me because it reminds me of the sense of calm we had in Hiva Oa. The mermaid reminds me of our daily swims. Her manta ray tail represents the island. It was enriching to spend time with local people and learn about their culture in terms of daily life including art, diet and history. We made friends that would visit us at the bungalow and drop off armloads of fruit from their yards. They taught us Marquesan and Tahitian words and showed us traditional dances. We were lucky in the connections we made and that feeling of friendship was a rare treat so far from home.

I wrote a poem called "Marquesan Tattoos." The last stanza refers to my relationship with Michael. That personal relationship is a significant aspect of my travel and learning experiences. We were discussing plans for our wedding; details he would have otherwise found tedious were apt distractions from the sting of the tattoo needle. It is rare to seriously discuss the effect of emotions on learning, but they are there and real, in the travel world and in the classroom. If a strong feeling distracts me, it's difficult to concentrate on anything else. I assume that happens to my students as well. This touches upon the social nature of travel and learning.

Overall, the poem "Marquesan Tattoos" is an exploration of my introduction and appreciation of Marquesan history and culture. To trust a man and his rough ballpoint sketch to create permanent art on my body was a leap of faith, as was the journey as a

whole.

## Marquesan Tattoos

Winding circles, lines converging  
thickening at confluent points, spinning  
over depressions, leaving  
negative space positive

Hidden in the stylized symbols, a gecko  
clings with his magic Velcro feet, jerks  
head or tail, swallows  
a fly, a whale  
camouflaged in a curly black wave that breaks  
without a crash

Concentric shell shapes morph  
thin tiki fingers, and my hand clenches  
I'm on a table, leg extended  
artist's elbow on my foot  
peers into his art  
instinctively guides the needle through the top cellular layers.

My face, a possessed contortionist  
I fight not to squirm where the skin is more taut  
pulled around the bone like the top of a drum, he blots  
A bit of blood, stained black.

Michael's turn, he looks stoic, his creation manifests  
permanently on his shoulder and bicep  
he squints, I know, a nerve  
has been touched , I create diversion  
talk guest-list and favours  
he concentrates,  
as I describe how we'll post a seating plan  
and distribute cake to our loved ones next year.

Our time in the Marquesas also gave us time to appreciate the preceding months. Rapa Nui had been an introduction to Polynesian culture and the Marquesans were the ancient settlers of Rapa Nui, so we could make some cultural connections. People we met on Rapa Nui taught us to be open to friendship and about Polynesian hospitality, which we encountered on every island and atoll we visited. In my own culture, I'd learned to be suspicious of anyone very eager to be friendly or share something. As a traveler on the South American backpacker trail, I'd often felt like a big dollar sign approaching locals always trying to sell me something. But in Polynesia, I was offered friendship and learning experiences that seemed too good to be true.

Rapa Nui is Easter Island's modern Polynesian name, but I prefer the original Polynesian name "Te pito o te henua," -- the navel of the world. If you picture the Earth with the Pacific as its big pregnant belly, Rapa Nui is the protruding little navel on that blue expanse. Isolated.

The flight there from Santiago was an especially memorable one. My anticipation was palpable. I had read the *Lonely Planet's* Easter Island section several times, as well as *Among Stone Giants: The Life of Katherine Routledge and Her Remarkable Expedition to Easter Island*, and *The Kontiki Expedition*. I knew about Thor Heyerdahl's controversial theories and the research of the late Father Englert. I had discussed Rapa Nui many times with Michael, picking for details about the time when he went there alone, three years before.

Although the week we spent there was full of memorable moments, one highlight was meeting Tete and Tovi, two Rapanui fishermen. They picked us up when we were hitchhiking. Tete was the driver, a large tanned shirtless Polynesian with long curly black hair and a cowboy hat. He shouted to us from his Jeep,

"Ia orana! Where are you from?"

"Canada!"

"Where are you going?"

"Anakena Beach."

"What are you waiting for then? Come in, man!"

Tete was loud and exuberant. He introduced himself and his passenger, Tovi, then they both started joking around in Rapanui to each other, laughing hysterically. I had my first pang of paranoia, thinking *Why are they laughing so hard? What have we gotten*

*ourselves into?* Finally they switched to English and started talking to us.

“We can both speak English. I bet you didn’t think you’d find a Rapanui talking English. We lived in the USA. I was in Seattle.”

“I lived in New York,” said Tovi.

They explained that they had each married (and eventually divorced) American women they had met while the women were tourists on the island. They had both tried living in the States for a few years but their island always lured them back. They were boisterous, friendly and dropped us off at the beach. We said thanks and goodbye, thinking that was the end of our friendship. We spent the day at the beach, on the white sand and in the warm waters, under the gaze of a few moai. It was beautiful.

Setting out to hitch back to the hostel, we stopped at the little beachside fast-food truck for a drink. Walking towards us, we were surprised to see a familiar face – Tete’s.

“Hey guys! Did you have a good time today?”

“Yeah, of course. This place is paradise.”

“You looking for a ride home? We went fishing today. I thought I’d stop to see if you needed a drive.”

“Wow. Thanks. Sure, we’ll take a ride home.”

“Let’s go – I have my fish in the truck.”

“How many did you catch?”

“Oh, about thirty.”

“That’s great.”

“That’s nothing for us. We catch that or more every day.”

We piled into the Jeep and Tete took off down the dirt road.

“When did you arrive in Rapa Nui?”

“Last night.”

“What? You just got here? So you haven’t been to Rano Raraku yet!”

Rano Raraku is the extinct volcano that served as the main quarry for carving the moai.

“No, not yet. I thought maybe we could get there tomorrow. What’s the best way to get there?” Michael asked.

“HAHA! THIS is the best way to get there! You want to go off-roading?”

“Okay!”

With that, Tete took a hard left off the road onto a path invisible to us, laughing maniacally as we bounced violently in the back seat. He suddenly stopped the Jeep and got out. He pointed towards an opening in the ground and explained that it was an entrance to a cave.

“You go in here and walk through. It comes out over there,” he said, pointing, “Do you want to go in?”

“Um... no. No, thank-you. I don’t think I have the right shoes on,” I offered weakly, signaling my sandals. Really, I was scared he’d taken us there to kill us and have us bury ourselves. The series of flippant decisions we’d made throughout the day played quickly in my mind and my parents’ voices rang in my ears – *Hitchhiking? Are you nuts? Hopping into a vehicle with two men you don’t know at all? Off-roading? Wasn’t that a red flag?*

“Well, let’s keep going to Rano Raraku,” Tete said at last.

Actually, I had nothing to worry about at all. They showed us Rano Raraku, and

much more. Tete jumped into the lake below it and swam around in the cool water, yelling at us to hop in. I took some video from our camera and a herd of horses randomly ran passed me. Tovi had been a park ranger and he guided us to the top of the volcano for bird's-eye views of the ocean and hundreds of moai in various stages of completion. As we hiked up, he told stories and pointed out details we never would have seen on our own.

“This place is my history. It is my life. I can never be away from here again,” he said gravely.

Returning to the Jeep, the men said a few words to each other in Rapanui then invited us to Tovi's cabin for supper. We stopped to pick up some beer.

At Tovi's place, there were a few lawn chairs outside and a fire pit in the yard. He positioned a metal rack above the pit and built the fire while Tete gutted the fish.

“Ever see a fish like this?” he asked, holding up something seemingly out of a fairy tale.

“What is that? Is it a lure? Did you paint that?” I asked, eyes like saucers. He bellowed in laughter.

“You think I painted this? HA HA! Here, touch it.” He offered it to me and I happily grabbed it. Sure enough, it was the cool smooth texture of a recently dead fish, familiar to this Nova Scotia former fish-plant employee. I held it, fascinated, trying to make sense of the colour scheme -- teal green with bright pink, yellow and orange stripes. It was a beauty. I took it into the sunlight for a photo-shoot.

“That will be for you, Kristen. You will be the princess tonight. The parakeet fish is the best to eat. It's the fish for the royalty.”



Tovi roasted a dozen fish on the grill right over the fire. Tete set the table. He brought the chairs together and positioned a big plastic crate as a table between them. Then he disappeared into the woods.

“Original Saran Wrap! HAHA! These are Rapa Nui plates.”

He laid out huge banana leaves over the crate, then walked toward a small tree and plucked off a few limes. He got a little bowl of salt from inside the cabin and smiled.

“There, this is all we need. Cheers.”

We washed our hands under the hose and ate with our fingers. The parakeet fish lived up to its appearance and was perfectly complemented by the salt, fresh lime juice and cold beer.

After dinner, Tete drove us back to our hostel. We slept like babies in our little yellow tent. Then next morning, the Jeep barreled up the driveway and Tete jumped out.

“You guys want to come fishing? You want the best Rapanui fishermen to show you how we catch fish? Pack a bag, my friends.”

Tete and Tovi took us to their fishing spot, the cove just behind Ahu Tongariki, the largest restored platform on the island, lined with fifteen moai. They outfitted us with wetsuits, flippers and masks and gave us a speargun to share. We swam around taking aim at fish that would become our supper. It was difficult for me to stay in the moment because of the dream-like quality of what was going on. I could barely believe our luck. Tete and Tovi were not looking for money from us. They were giving us part of themselves simply for company, laughs and friendship.

Our last day on the island, an Austrian woman arrived at our hostel. She was on a two-day stopover on her way from Tahiti to Chile. She said,

“I just want to get a picture of one of those statue things and get out of here.”

I wrote a poem about our stay:

## Rapa Nui

The omnipresent vast Pacific bathes  
and batters the rocky coast  
of the porous triangular block  
that sits on the sea with its caverns and caves  
that cup secret ancient lineage  
remembered in dreams, swirled into song  
carved into stone, framing  
a past that pulls  
into the future

rugged roads dissect, rough  
fields littered with old volcanic stones  
bowling ball lava drops thrown through time  
protecting the soil

pretty girls with long black hair  
blaze by noisily on dirt bikes, red dust  
flies and tints every surface, ruins the mood a bit

like tourism that makes commodity  
of a history  
that outshines a current existence  
caught between worlds, between value  
and currency, between the livable and the sellable

but there is a secret freedom  
in the forest lodge of fishermen  
no paperwork or pretense  
no interference and little consequence, they've found  
what's good in isolation and what isolation is left in this world

a dark green watermelon the size of two babies  
sucks in the sun red  
and ripens extra sweet with watery crunches  
and the freshest fish, fire roasted rich  
white meat under rainbow skin  
to nourish patient bone pickers.

Hitchhiking itself is somewhat dicey, but the more subtle risk for me was not planning exactly how we would see Rano Raraku and other important historical sites around the island. I left some ends loose and everything ended up fine, probably better than if I had tried to control everything.

The openness to adventure I developed manifested itself in my reading and writing. I read from a variety of genres, not knowing if the author's voice would resonate with me. I didn't have very high hopes for Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* but once Farmer Oak was entangled in a tragic love triangle, I was hooked. Even the title is relevant since I was reading it in a bungalow in the Marquesas, about as far from the madding crowd as I could ever get. In terms of writing, poetry especially gave me an open-ended itinerary. It was the literacy equivalent to surprise and risk-taking. I would start writing snippets, phrases, half-developed observations and have no idea where I would end up. I was often pleased with what I wrote and the insight it provided me with retrospectively, insight into where I was at the time -- emotionally, intellectually, spiritually.

## Part Three: Implications for teaching

### 3.1 Introduction

After my research into the connection between travel and literacy learning, I am considering how my experiences as a traveler and literacy learner can affect my practice as a teacher. How can I create opportunities for stillness, make students aware of how mediation affects their experiences, give them the chance to mediate experiences in ways that are comfortable for them, and provide opportunities for risk-taking and surprise?

*Resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world, I spent the rest of my youth traveling.*

Descartes, Discourse on the Method, Part I

Descartes' comment speaks to the aims of this thesis. As a long time reader and writer and teacher of English, and as someone who took several months to travel the world and learn about new cultures, I now see more clearly the connections between literacy and travel.

### 3.2 Literacy

Traditionally, the term *literacy* has signified the ability to read and write written text. Increasingly, we are starting to view the word 'text' as more than words; the text available to us is the world. Freire's statement (1987) that reading the word implies reading the world became truly apparent to me after my months of traveling. When we

read and when we write, we create meaning. Literacy, then, can equally be understood as a process of learning to understand the world, to act in it in ways that can make a difference, and to create our understanding of it and of ourselves in the process.

During my trip, I realized how important three elements were to both my travel and my own literate behaviour: the opportunity for stillness; the consciousness of mediation; and the value of taking risks and being open to surprise. These elements are equally important in the literacy classroom. In the following commentary, I discuss stillness, mediation and the value of risk-taking and openness to surprise by describing my experience and insights, the realities of the classes I teach and the ways I apply my research and travel experience to benefit my teaching practice.

### 3.3 Stillness

My first narrative was about the importance of reflection. As a traveler, I learned the value of being still and the quality that relaxed awareness affords learning. As a teacher, I consider how I can create opportunities for stillness and reflection in the classroom.

Without stillness, there is little opportunity for reflection, and without reflection, readers and writers often fail to make the kinds of connections that come when the mind is free of distractions, interruptions, trivial matters, and others' agendas. To reflect patiently can lead to clarity of thought and help us, as people or readers and writers, avoid impulsive or quick judgments. It can make understanding and creation more meaningful and, I would argue, can make learning more long-standing and memorable. Australian educator Maggie Dent (2003) claims that more silence and stillness in the school lives of

young people reduces sensory overload, cortisol levels, and feelings of heightened stress and as a result, allows students an opportunity for relaxed awareness, being present in learning (rather than worrying about past or futures demands or actions), and rethinking, reevaluating, and refining thought.

The travel experience I had in Paris (three days, rushed, seeing a list of landmarks and must-sees) is analogous to cramming for a test. As a contrast, the travel experience I had in the Marquesas, (three weeks, slow paced, having time for reflection and exploration) is analogous to working on an open-ended research project. The difference is the idea of covering the material (seeing Paris landmarks) as opposed to learning something (about Marquesan life). Both experiences were interesting, but the meaning I created from the time in spent in the Marquesas is more long-standing and memorable because of the opportunities for reflection it afforded. For me, the conditions for reflection are characterized by a sense of peace, or stillness. I have to clear my head and relax before I can appreciate a text or engage with it, as I did in the Marquesas much more so than in Paris.

While working on my undergraduate degrees, I often felt rushed having to read chapters from textbooks, articles, poems and novels for five or six courses at once. I often felt as though I was skimming the surface as opposed to creating much meaning for myself. The problem wasn't only a lack of time. Other circumstances such as my emotional and cognitive readiness, and my social priorities distracted me from engaging as well. Equally, I saw assignments as tasks for acquiring marks rather than learning. It was neither a still nor reflective time. These experiences have revealed themselves in the fabric of who I am as a teacher.

My workday consists of teaching three different classes at the high school level. I am with each group of about thirty students for eighty minutes per day, four or five days per week (considering holidays and professional development days) for five months. Therefore, any one course or single credit is a sample platter. There is so much information and there are so many possibilities that what I can provide as a teacher are overviews, introductions, and invitations to my students to practice thinking, create meaning and sharing of their ideas. It is a tremendous opportunity. In English class in particular, the content is very flexible and the learning outcomes in the curriculum are often nebulous, falling under the four umbrellas of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

I remind myself to create opportunities for stillness for my students and for me. Stillness is not generally cultivated in society, and certainly not cultivated in the school system. In the school where I teach, students and teachers are on the move constantly—to and from class, to basketball practice, to the photocopy room, to the back of the room to sharpen a pencil, or to their hip pockets to send clandestine text messages. Just as we're reading a poignant scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, the announcements pierce the moment: "Turn, thee, Benvolio, and look upon thy death," – "Please excuse the interruption. Could the girls rugby team make their way to the old gym. Girls rugby to the old gym." Movement and noise are part of the fabric of an environment where students and teachers hope to work on the development of literacy. In a pro-multi-tasking age, I'm trying to counter with the promotion of focus.

My travel experience tells me that a seeming abundance of time creates the conditions for stillness, which lends itself to reflection, so I grapple with the limitations



of time. I am conscious of the opportunities I create for students to be able to sit with texts long enough to clarify and contemplate their thoughts. Some practical questions I ask myself throughout the semester include: Do I plow through a novel study or literary circle project so I can make sure to "do" a play, a poetry unit and a media study before the exam? Is three weeks enough for a student to understand a Shakespearean play? Is a twenty-minute block adequate time to write page-long journal entry? How reflective can a journal entry be in twenty minutes? Can I book the computer labs for a few days so all students have the opportunity to type their essays?

I try to achieve balance by reading my classes. I observe students' apparent emotions as much as possible and pace the activities to keep students' interests without rushing. I try to figure out whether the unit of study is generally engaging, challenging, frustrating, or satisfying.

Students work at different paces and require different amounts of time to read or write, so I plan accordingly and flexibly. For example, I may start a class with twenty minutes allocated for a one-page writing assignment, which students will then keep in a folder that remains in the class. Some students will write a page without much trouble while others will struggle. If someone has writer's block that day or simply runs out of time, there will be time allocated later for catching up. Absenteeism is also a common problem at the school where I teach, so I've had to become amenable to negotiating due dates and extensions.

To create conditions for reflection, I try to ask probing questions so students challenge their assumptions or clarify points of view. Sometimes they have to come up with their own topics. I also make sure to have periods of relative quiet in the classroom,

demanding silence during twenty minutes or a half an hour of reading or writing. The first few minutes are shifty, but eventually, students can reflect, daydream or ponder and, I hope, increase their understanding.

### 3.4 Mediation

My second narrative was about the mediation of experience, or what comes between the traveler and the text of the world. As a traveler I learned that I had a particular relationship with mediation – there were times I wanted some help, some framework through which to understand the experience, and other times I wanted to experience the event or culture or artifact completely unfiltered by my own or others' pre-conceived notions or beliefs. I realized that I needed to control the degree of mediation, and that the degree of mediation I needed was dependent upon my curiosity or desire to understand. As a teacher, I consider how I can create opportunities for my students to become increasingly aware and discerning about the mediation of experience they seek for themselves and the mediation imposed upon them.

Mediation is an inevitable filter between a reader or writer and a text, or similarly between a traveler and the world. Whether it's the mental cartoon image of lovers with heart-shaped eyes smooching under the Eiffel Tower or the list of must-see paintings your friend insists you follow, mediation can be an expectation or an imposed framework that can affect a traveler or student's experience.

When students are learning to read and write it is important to make connections independently. Simone Weil said (2005) the mind is enslaved when it has accepted connections it has not itself established. Making connections independently occurs when

a reader has time to learn for herself by transacting with a text, making up her own mind whether she will do additional research or look for ways to enter the material, by using a dictionary, searching via Google, asking questions or another route.

One connection can lead to another and the reader/traveler is on her way. Several students mention playing “follow-the-links” on Wikipedia when they are surfing the Internet. Surfing is an apt metaphor for describing the process of seeking mediation – surfing is for pleasure, a combination of opportunities (good waves, bad waves) and active engagement (pursuing and riding the waves). The satisfaction derived from seeking the desired degree of mediation is intertwined with a feeling of independence and freedom.

In the high school literacy classroom it is impossible to approach a text without mediation: the choice of reading text, for example, has been mediated by decisions of the school board and the approach to the reading of the text mediated by the teacher. Over-mediation of literacy experiences in schools may, in fact, be a common cause of adolescents’ disenchantment with learning and with reading. At an age where independent thought is highly prized they are asked to consume material and engage in experience that is highly mediated.

Although there is a shift towards increasing reading choices for students, sometimes I feel it is imperative for the class to share the experience of a text together so we can have class discussions about the content and students can learn the discourse of the subject. The challenges (and mediation) lie in choosing appropriate texts and pacing them accordingly, usually aimed at the middle level. For example, after we returned from our travels and were back at work, Michael, who teaches at the same high school as me,

noticed a book about nuclear testing on Bikini Atoll on the list of approved books we can order for class use. Since we had spent two weeks living on an atoll while traveling, we were particularly interested in the topic, so we had our department head order a class set. Because we were each teaching two sections of Grade Ten English, about a hundred and twenty students at our school read that novel throughout the school year. This was a highly mediated experience, but the hope was to share a text that we could be passionate about, about a place and time so intriguing that it would inspire questions, further research and rewarding meaning-making. I try to balance the mediation I impose upon my students with an open-minded approach to their meaning-making with that text, so whether or not they feel they liked the book, they had opportunities to create meaning from it.

The risk of too much imposed mediation is that the texts seem like products to be consumed rather than experienced or appreciated naturally. As a literacy learner and traveler, I found a level of control of the mediation of my experiences and reading that I did not enjoy as a student, so I try to provide opportunities for my students to use the texts as springboards for thoughts, research and understanding. Our class discussions go off topic and student responses to the same texts are eclectic. In Ancient History class, a large percentage of my evaluation is based on research-responses within each topic of study. For example, if we're studying the Incas, a student will choose to focus on a particular aspect of the culture – say architecture, diet, religion, technology, etc. – document research from a number of sources, then create a response that may take various forms – a menu, a map, a sculpture, a monologue, a rap, etc. That way, a student can follow her own path and research authentically, as she requires more information to

create a synthesis of her findings.

Another significant way the school system mediates student experience is through marking for assessment and evaluation. In my second narrative, I explored the ideas of quantifying experience and perceiving travel as a series of tasks on a to-do list. The consumerist nature of this perspective translates somewhat into the practice of assessing student achievement using numbers, which imply value.

In high school, no matter what meaningful assessment I've done as a teacher, an individual student ends the year with a mark out of one hundred. As soon as I hear students ask each other "What did you get?" I implore them to modify the question to "How did you do?" so the students asked can answer in a word rather than a number, if they feel they must answer. I'm trying to teach the value of quality over quantity.

A high school student's final mark in a course represents an average percentage score on a variety of assignments, sometimes a dozen, sometimes thirty or more. Assignments vary in length and complexity. Curriculum documents list learning-outcomes as opposed to tasks, so the theoretical focus is on learning, but there is some degree of difficulty in measuring it. In elementary or junior high school, current report cards list outcomes, and teachers indicate to what degree they feel a student met them. However, at the end of a semester at the high school level, a student finishes with a number to represent the degree of their success in a course.

Success and failure is numerically measured and used to help teachers teach students what they don't know, but also to sort students. Although this marking system can be frustrating, I cannot simply choose to round off marks to multiples of ten or five and assign letter grades while my colleagues have to use numbers and post-secondary

institutions and other organizations use the numerical marks to differentiate amongst students who will or will not receive scholarships. The system I adopt must gel with the systems adopted by the schools, school board and scholarship patrons. Sometime this system measures learning, but there are limitations. Perhaps a student understands key concepts but skips class, misses evaluations or doesn't submit work to be assessed. How can that student's learning be measured? Perhaps the student could communicate her learning through conversation but that doesn't meet enough of the learning outcomes, nor work with the measuring and sorting system.

What I can do to counter these challenges is provide a wide variety and substantial number of opportunities for students to demonstrate learning, and to engage with students as individual learners to help them find their paths. I feel as though I have had plenty of time to consider my own background and become conscious of the types of biases I tend to have. I therefore encourage my students to ask discerning questions, to become aware and to develop the ability to question and evaluate imposed mediation, to get to know themselves as learners. I feel as though I'm always learning about why I think what I think. I call upon my students to ask critical questions about social issues, to consider the influences in their lives, to wonder about expectations. My experiences in travel have helped me to better look at a topic with an unassuming perspective. I try to share this attitude by deconstructing ideas with students and having them engage in thoughtful discussion and reflective writing.

### 3.5 Risk-taking and surprise

My third narrative was about relinquishing my tendency to over-plan or prepare

for an experience. As a traveler, I learned the value of taking some risks and being open to surprise – more opportunities to learn about the world and grow when faced with unforeseen experiences. As a teacher, I consider how I can create opportunities for safe risks in the classroom so students can become more and more comfortable with trusting themselves and other people.

When faced with the unknown, a traveler or reader must gain or use her literacy skills to function. Again, literate-ness is akin to independence. Am I able to read and write on my own? Can I understand and create on my own? Do I dare go off the beaten track? As I traveled, I became aware that trusting my own abilities and those of the people around me enabled me to take risks. I was more and more comfortable approaching new experiences with the confidence I had gained through a steady itinerary of new experiences. Sensible risk-taking invites more risk-taking; this capacity for risk-taking and the confidence it creates has been well-documented in studies of literacy learning.

In the literacy classroom, especially at the secondary level, the demands of the curriculum along with evaluation, assessment, homogeneity in assignments and expectation often work against risk-taking for student and teacher. Teachers must keep assessment equitable amongst students, so too big an academic risk poses a challenge to the teacher's evaluation scheme. As well, students arrive with expectations of themselves within the school system and often act accordingly – a student who has felt successful before high school usually assumes they will continue to do well in high school, while a student who has not met much success might assume that path will continue. As opposed to taking risks, it is natural for students to continue doing what they've been doing,

whether it is working for them or not.

From my experiences in teaching, travel and research, I see conversation and writing as important processes by which I create meaning. I am most comfortable with writing as meaning-making, but value other forms of meaning-making in creative fields such as visual art, dance, music and sport to an extent. This insight allows me to take risks as a teacher and encourage my students to take risks as well, to surprise themselves. I facilitate opportunities for my students to learn and express themselves in different ways so they can have some choices in their learning experiences, as I had in my travel.

I provide a framework for assignments, but encourage students to pursue their personal areas of interest as much as possible and to take academic risks by which to learn and empower themselves. For example, if I'm assigning a journal entry in English class, I'll give a topic but allow students to go off on tangents or write in poetic form. I remove the concern about evaluation and grades and invite them to respond to texts or create meaning in forms that make sense. The student knows that he or she can take intellectual or creative risks and I will evaluate the assignment fairly. Sam's Ancient-Egyptian-Pumpkin-Walnut-Candy comes to mind. She walked into Ancient History class the day the assignment was due with a large tray of orange blobs, explaining that the candy hadn't quite congealed as she had hoped. "It looks gross and it's pretty gooey, but it still tastes good," she explained, passing them around to her perpetually hungry teenaged peers. She knew she would still be evaluated on what counts – her research and her effort. She had indeed learned about Ancient Egypt.

It is also a priority of mine to be open-minded and patient while waiting for students to share their learning (Kind, 2008). As I promote risk-taking from my students,



I model risk-taking as a teacher. I listen to my students with respect and consider my affect on their learning experience and adapt my practice when what I'm doing doesn't seem to be cultivating student learning.

### 3.6 Conclusion

As an English Language Arts teacher, I work to have students develop the skills of reading and writing texts – to have them leave my class with the capacity and desire to travel through text, to see novels, plays, poems, articles and their own writing as journeys, as ways of expanding their experience in the world. I want them to understand and create meaning. I want to promote the appreciation of stillness for reflection, the awareness of the effects of mediation and the openness that leads to growth and independence.

As a teacher who is a traveler, I share my love of literal travel with my students by telling stories and showing photos and artefacts from my travels. I show equal enthusiasm for the type of travel possible within the pages of a book or the texts we create for ourselves. It is rewarding to see students growing in curiosity and proficiency, in their desire and ability to read and write the world. I try to be a good travel guide, providing possibilities for exploration and being open to learning experiences for my students and myself. In Pema Chodron's words, "We work on ourselves in order to help others, but also we help others in order to work on ourselves" (2008: 159). The insights I have gained about literacy and travel by seeing each through the lens of the other have influenced me to be more thoughtful as a reader, writer, teacher and traveler.

## Appendix A

Flights and overland travel between October 2006 and June 2007:

- Flight from Halifax (via Toronto) to Mexico City
- Flight from Mexico City to San José, Costa Rica
- Flight from San José to Lima
- Flight from Lima to Iquitos, Peru
- Flight from Iquitos to Lima
  - Two and a half months spent in South America, traveling by bus and train
- Flight from Santiago, Chile to Hanga Roa, Rapa Nui
- Flight from Hanga Roa to Tahiti
- Flight from Tahiti to Hiva Oa, Marquesas
- Flight from Hiva Oa to Tahiti
  - Seven days spent traveling by cargo boat in the Tuamotus archipelago to the atoll of Raroia, where we spent two weeks
- Flight from Raroia to Tahiti
- Flight from Tahiti to Auckland
  - Three weeks spent traveling by bus and rented car through New Zealand

- Flight from Christchurch to Sydney
  - Two weeks traveling along the east coast of Australia with a friend
- Flight from Sydney to Perth
  - Epic two-day bus journey to Monkey Mia and back by bus that broke down eight times
- Flight from Perth to Bangkok
  - One week spent in Chiang Mai, traveling by train
- Flight from Bangkok to Rome
  - A few weeks spent traveling by train in Italy and the south of France, then to Barcelona
- Flight from Gerona, Spain to Beauvais, France
  - Train from Beauvais to Paris and back, then to Cologne, Germany
- Flight from Cologne to Ennis, Ireland
- Flight from Ennis to London
- Flight from London to Halifax

## Appendix B

Books read during the trip:

- *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt
- *Running With Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs
- *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver
- *The Motorcycle Diaries* by Che Guevara
- *Tortilla Flat* by John Steinbeck
- *Jennie Gearhart* by Theodore Dreiser
- *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley
- *Far From the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy
- *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
- *The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger
- *Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck
- *The Robber Bride* by Margaret Atwood
- *Lonely Planet: Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile & Easter Island, Western Europe*
- *Lady Oracle* by Margaret Atwood
- *Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck
- *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry
- *Sweet Thursday* by John Steinbeck
- *The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories* by Margaret Laurence
- *A Bird in the House* by Margaret Laurence
- *Half a Life* by V. S. Naipaul

- *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver
- *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini
- *Burning Bright* by John Steinbeck
- *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* by John Steinbeck
- *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood

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