

Dwelling in/on the Drive

Life Writing in a Mixed and Mixing Commons

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Start a relationship with the land where you live. Ask that land what it needs from you. Because the truth is the land is the basis for everything...[T]he only measure by which we will be judged by the people who come after is the health of the land base, because that is what is going to support them...What they are going to care about is whether they can drink the water, whether they can breathe the air, whether the land can support them. One of the important questions is to ask: What does the land need from you?

—Derrick Jensen, *Tearing Down the Master's House*

Learning to know a community or landscape is a homemaking.

—bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*

In a time when memory, history, and imagination are degraded, whose task is it to remind us of those ideas and events that offer human and earthly continuity?

—Stan Persky, *Then We Take Berlin*

Opening: Life Writing, Literacy and a Curriculum of Place

FOR ALMOST THREE YEARS NOW, the Prado Café has been our meeting place and, at times, collaborative working home. The small, unassuming café on the corner of Commercial Drive and East 4th Avenue is the site where we have come together regularly to plan, review, and critically assess our research activities in this Vancouver, British Columbia neighbourhood; at times, we have affectionately referred to it as “The Office,” acknowledging it as a popular place where community members come with their lap top to work on projects, join others over coffee and conversation to discuss what matters to them in their professional and personal lives. Other times, often serendipitously, sometimes deliberately, the Prado has

functioned as a networking point for us to gain further insights from others into our study of literacy and life writing in Canadian cosmopolitan sites.¹ And finally, with its lively mix of familial presences—mothers and fathers and their children gathering in between errands and walks to and from school—the café has kept us visually and viscerally connected to our other respective homes. It has become a place for us to tell our stories, to articulate what matters to us most beyond our professional *raison d'être* for being there: our own families, and our daughters, in particular, who have grown up and gone to school in and around this neighbourhood. With both of us being im/migrants to this place—our original homes located across the country and on another continent, respectively—Toronto, Ontario, and Saarbrücken, Germany—we have become more keenly aware of the multitude of mixing and mixed origins from other places in the generations of mothers, daughters, and families who dwell in this urban location.

Walking from the Prado along the Drive—as the street is called in the local lingo—we pass other cafés, cappuccino bars, produce and bookshops, music stores, and, more recently, clothing boutiques line Commercial Drive. We reminisce how when we first came to East Vancouver the atmosphere in the neighbourhood was one of expectancy, as if things could and did happen here. It was a place that groups marginalized elsewhere in the city had found a home. Artists, activists, bike riders, original Italian immigrants now turned into grandmas and grandpas, recent Ethiopian immigrants, a significant First Nations population and lesbian and transgendered community were and still are present in the neighbourhood.

Walking further south, crossing Broadway, we come to Trout Lake Park, where a local artist group called Public Dreams Society² co-creates within the community large festivals such as the mid-summer Illuminares. This is a nighttime lantern procession around the lake, with large exquisite homemade lanterns in fantastical designs set up throughout the park. In the fall season Halloween is celebrated with The Parade of Lost Souls, featuring costumed stilt-walkers, candle-lit public altars and shrines, and the European fairy story of Baba Yaga. This event originates at Grandview Park situated near Commercial Drive; led by musicians and drummers we circulate the neighbourhood streets in another magical procession.

Through our sojourns along the Drive, we have both witnessed and become part of the many past and present movements that make up the topography of this place. Vancouver-based urban planner Leonie Sandercook (2003) sees movement and migration “among the defining socio-historical conditions of humanity” (p. 1). She argues that a central question for our time is how, with all of our differences, we can be at home in the “mongrel cities of the 21st century” that are characterized by increasingly mixed multiethnic and multicultural identities. With this question in mind, we have traced our own and our participants’ ways of dwelling in one of these mongrel urban sites and attempted to, at least partially, answer our own related question(s): What are the (educational) experiences of being and becoming literate in such sites? What constitutes ‘home’ and ‘not-home’ in our global cosmopolitan educational contexts (Hasebe-Ludt, 2004; Pinar, 2006; Sandercook, 2003) and, more specifically, in language and literacy contexts in the microcosm of Vancouver and the Commercial Drive neighbourhood? How are these processes influenced by the local and the global movements and migrations of the people living in this place? What is the role of artful and aesthetic living and dwelling and learning here?

Reflecting and bringing together these multi- worlds, we framed our interpretive hermeneutic inquiry around life writing as one of the contemporary literacies of the global and local commons (Hasebe-Ludt, 2008). We believe that the way we use this praxis in our work can be an appropriate and vibrant method as well as a theoretical approach. It is, for us, a way of theorizing from our praxis, to investigate and interpret the lived curriculum or *currere* (Aoki, 2005; Pinar,

2004) of educators and their students in and outside of schools in particular sites and to attend to the importance of place stories (Blood, Chambers, Donald, & Hasebe-Ludt, 2009). More specifically, by paying attention to the small details and relational components of what goes on in the daily lives of children, their parents, their teachers, and others that are part of their life worlds, narratives that are indicative of this place and the time emerge—narratives that empower the writer and speaker to become literate in meaningful ways, and to become the kind of truth tellers that our time urgently needs (Smith, 2006).

In our thinking and doing, we understand literacy as a collective, social as well as individual dialogical capacity and activity (Bakhtin, 1981; Gadamer, 1985), one that not only spreads across internal cognitive, psycholinguistic domains but also, most importantly, resides in the relational social, emotional, and visceral or somatic parts of our identities. In addition, the importance of place, and how humans come to dwell in particular places in relation to these places and others who live and work there (Chambers, 2006; Heidegger, 1975; Ingold, 2000) has become a crucial framing of our inquiry in hermeneutical ways.

In this conceptualization around place, we are mindful of Heidegger's distinction between notions of dwelling ("wohnen") and building ("bauen"), the latter referring to the relentless preoccupation of colonial and modernist enterprises of constructing new and better living spaces, whereas the former, original meaning of dwelling refers to a way of (already) being present in a place, of being aware of what already is present in this place, an attunement that is necessary for any kind of new knowledge to emerge: "Only if are capable of dwelling, only then can we build" (1975, p. 160). In the Canadian colonized space we inhabit, in the many other colonized places that are part of our global heritage (Chambers, 2009), in the curriculum we work with and which these narratives are part of, it seems evermore urgent to consider these notions of dwelling.

The place we dwell in/on is Vancouver, the west coast metropolis that sits much in the global media these days as the most expensive and highly sought-out location of upscale urban building(s) in a magnificent natural landscape. It is also centre of drug trading and using of global proportions, and the city with the highest poverty rate in Canada, with devastating effects on the urban aboriginal population in particular (Helin, 2008; Maté, 2008). To add to the complexity, it is the greenest city in Canada with the cleanest environmental record and at the same time a place where urban dwelling has become utterly unaffordable for the middle class young and old, resulting in a suburban congestion of unprecedented dimension in both pollution and people counts (Ross, 2010). With continued migration out of the urban core into the suburbs from Surrey to Abbotsford, and migration into the high-priced downtown core of billionaire entrepreneurs who can afford a penthouse in the Shangri La Stanley Park vicinity, Vancouver has evolved into a juxtaposition of the ultra-rich and the utterly poor, of those without any home and those with monster homes—an ideal and idea of mixed blessings and mixing races, cultures, and languages, but hardly ever of shared land or real estate (Demers, 2009). Vancouver today, into the second decade of the twenty-first century, is labeled both "Canada's most promising city" (Ross, 2010) and an unfulfilled ideal of a place where ideologies of multiplicity dwell harmoniously side by side (Stanley, 2009). It is a city "as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, and nightmare" (Raban, as cited in Ross, 2010, p. 22). It is against this background that we offer our memories, ideas, and imaginations, and dreams about dwelling in this "mongrel city."

We have framed our narratives and images in the form of a *métissage*, a braiding of two writers' stories, juxtaposed with their digital photos, in three strands. Elsewhere, we have conceptualized *métissage* as a collaborative research approach and method, a pedagogical and

political praxis, and an aesthetic and artful writerly strategy (Chambers & Hasebe-Ludt, with Donald, Hurren, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008). *Métissage*, based on Lionnet (1989), encourages and enables writers and researchers to attend to their own stories juxtaposed with those of others in the social, cultural, and political commons they share. It is an active literacy and literary stance that advocates for discourses that have been marginalized and that need to be heard in the racial, gendered, cultural, and political mix of our society. Through *métissage*, we aim for a *rapprochement* between the differences that are part of the local microcosms of the classrooms and communities we live in and also part of their global histories and mythologies.



Sitting at The Office (Nané)

Erika: Transcontinental Illusions

I came to Vancouver in the late 1970s to spend a year at the University of British Columbia, as part of my graduate studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. For my thesis, I was to explore the language of Vancouverites as part of my interdisciplinary North American Studies degree. For the first couple of months, until I found something closer to UBC, I lived with my brother who had an apartment on the east side of town, in the Commercial Drive area. Coming from Berlin, a city with a reputation of cosmopolitan diversity, comprised of distinct neighbourhoods each with its own unique cultural, ethnic, and linguistic character, many Turkish and Italian "guest workers," refugees from East German and Eastern European provinces, territories, and nations, and a sizeable proportion of international students at the university, I began a whole new education into Vancouver's contrasting version of multicultural living.

The 1950s wood-siding house my brother lived in, with a spectacular view of the North Shore Mountains from his tiny top floor one-bedroom suite, was divided into several equally tiny units—a shocking contrast to my student digs in a nineteenth-century Berlin mansion divided into spacious two-bedroom apartments with high ornamental ceilings in old Moabit, the north eastern inner city district that was my student home after I left my original home town of Saarbrücken in southwest Germany.

At my brother's place, the neighbours were Russian, Chinese, and Italian. They worked all day, as cooks and caretakers, except for the grandmother who was always home, and who take

care of everybody in her family. She had lived in Vancouver for most of her life, and yet she didn't speak a word of English after all those years. My brother knew all his neighbours, some better than others, and through him I came to witness a different kind of cosmopolitan conversation, conducted in whatever language possible, mostly English mixed with fragments of other European and Asian tongues. This too was a stark contrast to the racial and linguistic diversity I was used to from Berlin: despite its much-lauded cosmopolitan flavour, in the Western part of the city, legacy of its status as the former capital of Prussia and the Weimar Republic before World War II, after the Wall went up Berlin was not a hospitable place for those immigrants and guest workers whose nations' political and religious histories did not fit in with new prosperity and nationalism of post-war Germany. They could live there and contribute to the rebuilding of the economic and, in the students' case, intellectual wealth, but they were not welcome to stay as permanent residents or citizens (Persky, 1995/1996). At first glance it seemed to me that Canada, with its groundbreaking multiculturalism policies much admired in Europe (Golz, 2005), had a different vision for its new immigrants.

I got to know the landmarks of this East Vancouver neighbourhood too: The Cultch, the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, with its home-grown and down-to-earth theatre and cultural events; the Uprising Bakery, a gathering point for near-by residents and health food advocates from across the city; and the most vibrant place of all, The Drive, Commercial Drive, the street that, in the late 1970s, had a distinct European cultural and ethnic character, particularly an Italian one, mixed with a vibrant Hippie political activist flavour of the North American variety that I had only read and heard about in my North American studies in the Berlin of my radical counterculture student movement days.



Viewing a window on the Drive (Nané)

Nané: The Call of the West Coast

I first moved to Vancouver before I was one year old, it was 1968. I've been told I learned to walk here, in view of these snow-capped mountains. My mom and dad made the trek west, packing up a car in Toronto with all their things including me, after Dad had completed

university. They felt the call of the west coast and had thoughts of staying more permanently. We settled into an apartment on the west side of Vancouver, the then hippie village of Kitsilano, and fit right in with the atmosphere. The move only lasted a few months before we returned to Toronto. My mom wanted to go to university, and they needed the help of my grandma in Toronto to care for me. I don't really remember anything of those few months living in Vancouver, but I recall vividly a train trip I took as a pre-schooler with my mother between Toronto and Vancouver. Sitting in the train for hours as the flat landscapes of the prairies rolled endlessly by, I had a pack of books in a bunny-shaped bag. Not having learned to read yet I was proud of pretending to know what the words were by making up stories that went along with the pictures.

I never really thought of these early experiences when I moved back to Vancouver in my 20s after a summer of tree planting in BC. In hindsight, those were the times that my parents were still together and we were a family. In the Toronto years hence, my parents' lives and mine became focused through the discord between them, my mother's at times volatile emotions, and their eventual separation and divorce. The reverberations of their divorce continued in my life, in the burden of independence I began to carry, and the emotional effects of my mother's temperament. I moved among my parents' new love partnerships, shifting homes, creative projects, my dad's remarriage, and the births of my half-sister and -brother when I was a teenager, until it became as if there was not a time that my mom and dad were really together at all. I became an eager and adaptive student of this new family life of separate homes. The divorce became an unspoken past, though I was what remained of it. Only photos confirmed what was and it became a family taboo to look at them. I had little access to such images except for sightings in my grandmother's photo collections.

In this vein of un-memory, upon my return to Vancouver from Toronto I found myself walking up and down Commercial Drive. I had the distinct feeling or knowing that I would live here, that here was the place, the neighbourhood in fact, in which I wanted to have my own babies. At the time there was at least one café that was 'kid-friendly' and I had never heard of such a thing in Toronto or elsewhere. A little table was set with toys and hard cover books for toddlers' amusement while their parents ate and talked, the din of children's voices apparently welcome in this place. Within just a few years, I become one of these parents, enjoying breakfast or coffee with other mothers while our children toddled and played among us. We would often wander to the co-op or organic food stores, or one of the familiar playgrounds and parks off the Drive. These playgrounds were an almost daily activity of my young mothering life so that I could barely stand to walk by them some days if I was in a hurry. As soon as one of my toddlers saw the swings we had to make the stop. Yet this much-needed public socializing and the visibility of children everywhere was a constant boon within the daily invisible rigors of raising small children.

Parents, mother and fathers, wearing babies in happy-sacs, slings, or pushing strollers are a constant feature of the walk down the Drive. Our family life on the Drive is marked by this 'walk' as we daily move up and down the street to various produce shops, health and organic food stores, cafés, the bank, the library and community centre where our children take swimming and gymnastics on the weekends with other local children. They have all grown up with each other in these various ways through play-gym, parks, daycare, school or community centre programs. We are always seeing familiar faces of other people, and stopping to chat or say hello. Now rooted within my own marriage and children, echoes of growing up within divorce and multiple Toronto homes catch me at times in stray grief mixed with joy. That I maintain and love

a family of my own is a kind of wonder. What does it mean to stay with all this? I am faced with gratitude, as well as hard work as I learn to put my children and myself at the centre of my life. I am re-made into a mother, raising my children so far from what was home. At such a distance from Toronto, I miss my family connections there, though we visit when we can. Home is now this busy, eclectic West Coast neighbourhood in view of the mountains that have held us for all these years. Walking up and down and saying “hello” is a way of life here.



Resting in Grandview Park (Nané)

Erika: Cultural Quandaries in and out of Place

After my initial glimpse, I decided that I needed to learn more about Vancouver, and especially about this city’s education system, since I had become a parent by that time. So I changed direction and this, in turn, changed my identity, my sense of place, and my sense of home. Instead of returning home to Germany and finishing my linguistics degree in Berlin, I went back to school, got an education degree, and became a teacher in Vancouver. Eventually I documented my changing professional and personal identity and my learning about my new immigrant home, in and outside of my classroom, in the form of thesis about the intertexts of culture and community in the East Vancouver neighbourhood school I taught (Hasebe-Ludt, 1995). Then I became another kind of academic and finally had the chance to return to this place with another research study that picked up some of the themes and threads from my lived curriculum in Vancouver schools. I once again posed questions I was still living with after all this time and that had resurfaced in my new academic home across the Rockies, in Alberta, with colleagues and students who were also living the realities and effects of Canada’s multicultural and indigenous policies and politics (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008).

What had amazed me when I had first come to Vancouver, was the apparent ease and appealing conviviality of this scene, the liveliness of the mixing of multiple layers of all those cultural and ethnic identities on the Drive, and in my excursions just beyond The Drive, on the streets of Chinatown that bordered this European immigrant neighbourhood, as well as in my own neighbourhood of The Heights, just north of the Kootenay Loop and East Hastings. Only

slowly, after living in Vancouver for a few years, getting to know a few of its inhabitants more intimately, and starting my life as a teacher in inner city schools and eventually settling in a classroom in one of the urban neighbourhoods not far off the Drive, did I wake up to the darker truths that lay beneath the light surface of official multicultural harmony. The racist legacies that shaped the lives of many of my students, and of their immigrant and aboriginal families, still linger and cast their shadows here today: the discrimination against many of the working class European immigrants based on language, ethnic, religious, and national origin—German, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Bosnian, Serbian, and more (Knowles, 2007); the racism against Chinese immigrants in the form of a head tax (Stanley, 2009), the evacuation of Japanese Canadians from their west coast homes (Miki, 1998), the attempt to prevent immigration of Indo-Canadians from the Punjab (Davis, in press), the displacement of aboriginal Canadians from their centuries-old homes into residential schools (Haig Brown, 2006)—the list seems endless against the official success stories of diversity and multiculturalism, and these harsh truths have been documented in poignant and evocative ways, particularly through the arts (Grenville, 2003; Steinberg, 2009).

And when I married my sansei (third-generation Canadian Japanese) husband and became the mother of a mixed-race Canadian daughter, when I enrolled her in school and experienced the lived realities of children in East Vancouver's schools as a parent and an immigrant, I started yet another new education about the mosaic of Canadian multicultural lived curriculum.



Hanging out at the school wall, a children's tile mosaic (Nané)

Nané: Birthing Home

I initially made the move west after completing my undergraduate degree, in order to start a graduate program at Simon Fraser University. But I was also deeply drawn to the land here, to this particular landscape of mountains, coastal forests, beaches and Pacific Ocean tang that I had experienced on my summer work trips as a tree planter in BC clear-cuts. I had always thought I would leave the city and live closer to this land. There is a feeling to it that my spirit adores and is nourished by. I did leave formal education for a time, staying in the city to study lay midwifery

in its pre-regulation days, attend home water births with a local midwife, and do postpartum care for mothers and babies. During my studies and work of birth I met my husband Chris, a high school teacher. He is the reason I became the Commercial Drive mother I had so strongly intuited and imagined. We now have two daughters of our own and have been in this neighbourhood ever since; moving out of it to anywhere else in the city never really seemed an option.

Chris grew up in East Vancouver. He is a second-generation teacher in his family, his father having passed from working-towards-middle-class through obtaining higher education and a career in the classroom, later becoming an elementary school counselor. Chris's grandfather was an Italian immigrant, working as a salmon fisher on the Fraser River, raising a very large family right on its banks up the Fraser Valley. Chris's parents were active in the trade union and peace movements when he was growing up, and he maintains a strong adherence to working class values and pride of place in East Vancouver. I was raised maybe more 'hippie' than he was, as members of my family were back-to-the-land, are vegetarians, and as a child in Toronto I lived for many years in shared housing with my mother's artist friends. My mother, father and stepmother studied and still work within the arts. In addition to my non-formal study of midwifery, my formal education is in visual and textile arts. I am a practicing artist, and a teaching assistant within art education in the context of doing my PhD in education. Growing up within these familial values and our own cultivations of such, Chris and I are engaged in current notions and practices of sustainability, living simple non-consumer life styles, and ideals of social and environmental justice. Many of the home births I attended were in this neighbourhood, and Chris taught within a local alternate school program for youth who would not otherwise finish high school. We appreciate and contribute to the abundance of earthy culture, consciousness and community art of East Vancouver with its mix of peoples.

My art and research practice grows from my lay midwifery work, my graduate studies in women's spirituality and education, and my sensual experience of living on the West Coast - a love of this place. I engage in a critical, spiritual, ecofeminist art practice, working towards an Earth-based aesthetic, attending to experiences of this land with its deep green forests and Ocean coastline. Creating woven installations, and literally weaving myself into the forest with red thread, I move beyond simple environmentalism, yearning to commune with re-turning Wisdom traditions and indigenous understandings of the land as sacred. I revere Earth of cosmological origins whose stories move across cultures. I create rituals, imagery and research that stems from my sense of human inter-connection and inter-being to the Earth as Mother (Jordan, 2010). My understanding of this is cultivated and nurtured in this very neighbourhood, as well as through my academic travels across communities of scholars concerned with topics such as mothering, the gift economy, and women's spirituality. Beyond 'pioneer days' and defined as we are in this city by patriarchal Empire in the divisions between indigenous people here on this land for eons, and the mixing of newcomers from far away, how can we collectively de-colonize our shared and varied experiences of this land and co-create a truth-full, ecologically sensitive place of inhabitation for all?

As relative newcomers to Canada, Chris and I share the life of being second and third generation Canadian immigrant children of European descent. Our childhoods are bonded in memories of time spent with grandparents who were often our caregivers, in their respective urban East End homes; their various recipes, accents and terminologies from the 'old' countries are among our favorite stories. My Irish grandma raised me on wheaten and soda bread,

delicious potato pancakes with lots of butter, and stories of her Irish village home. I learned that ‘home’ was a relative term, one not always applied to Canada itself.

When Chris and I first lived together, we were able to spend time with each other’s grandmothers. I stood many times with Chris’s maternal Hungarian grandma in the backyard of her small bungalow home. This home stood right next to his parents’ house, sold to them by Grandma herself when Chris was a child, at what would now be a bargain price in the vestiges of a long gone affordable economy. On this land of Chris’s childhood, and under the shade of Grandma’s vibrant plum tree, we many times admired her huge vegetable garden that dominated half the yard with its abundance of potatoes. In this garden’s last years, Chris tilled the soil himself for his grandmother’s plantings. This land is now paved over; the house was sold outside of the family after her death, torn down to build something bigger.



Stopping by the Peace Garden (Nané)

Erika: Neighbourhood at the Edge of Hope

Just east from the Downtown Eastside, and west of the Drive, you find a mid-sized elementary School, with its Coast Salish name prominently displayed on one of the concrete walls by the school yard. Nané and I have been spending some time there, dwelling there as part of our life writing and literacy project in schools such as this. We have been teaching courses on life writing, inviting teachers and students to document their lives and their relationships with their surroundings and with the larger world, through life writing and dialogues with each other and with us, their colleagues from the university (Buchan, 2009; Leahy, 2009). This urban city block where the school sits is located just off the vibrant hub of former Little Italy and Commercial Drive, now one of Vancouver’s many gentrified mixed neighbourhoods, with an eclectic mosaic of savvy youth, middle-class upwardly mobile and young families, middle-aged hippies, edgy artists of all ages practicing aesthetic art-full lifestyles, and older working-class men and women with zesty European accents in their English. The Drive, however, is also divided from east to west by socio-economic status and race. The west side, where this school sits, with its First Nations co-op housing, is on the “wrong side” of The Drive, the less

prosperous one. The school's statistics reflect the poverty many of the children and parents live with. One of the teachers who was doing a life writing and photography project with her grade one and two students (Leahy, 2009), told me that the school, with its large aboriginal student population, is losing three teachers due to the latest budget cuts, teachers the school cannot afford to lose, "with 67 identified special needs out of a total of 168 students, and 12 more pending. The school board is treating all of the schools equally, but we know that equal is not fair" (M. Leahy, personal communication, May 2009). In light of the school board's Aboriginal Enhancement policy this seems even less acceptable. But the parents organized a protest march, called it "Mothers for Education," and had a big turnout, with people marching in solidarity along both sides of The Drive against the cuts that affect their children. Marguerite told me:

We had about 70 people carrying signs and chanting with drums. The trustees said that they were blindsided and did not know the effect of all the number crunching and changes in the Aboriginal weighting formula. The superintendent said that he would review the proposed changes in light of the ramifications for schools like [this]. We'll see. At least they came out on Mother's Day. (M. Leahy, personal communication, May 2009)

More recently, with another Mother's Day just around the corner, more changes are in the works for the school; this time, it is the threat of actual closure of the school as the school board plans to amalgamate schools in the area to cope with provincial government funding cuts and budget shortfalls at the local level. This closure would also affect its annex school on the other side of the Drive, only two blocks away. Another protest march and more petitions are continuing the cycle of trying to save the school and the students from the grassroots level.



Contemplating aboriginal art in the school foyer (Erika)

Nané: Parental Quandaries in Between Schools

When I re-arrived in Vancouver in 1992, the streets off the Drive held many old-style, west coast wood-frame homes in various states of repair. I loved the feel of the open streets, the large

wooden houses and blooming gardens that seemed so different from the brick city homes and streets I had occupied while growing up in Toronto. Compared to Toronto, there was then affordable and available rental housing or shared rooms in houses, often posted on the outside of Beckwoman's store on the Drive where people left their "For Rent" flyers. I lived and circulated within much of this East Vancouver housing as a low-income apprentice lay midwife. I gave birth at home to our first daughter within a rented main-floor apartment of one such a house. I loved being pregnant with my daughter and feeling the full growth of it all, after my few years of attending local births and bearing witness to women's mothering transformations. It was a joyous birth and pregnancy, surrounded as I was by midwifery community and support.

Less than 10 years ago, and before Chris and I were ready to buy our own home, housing prices soared. Home owning was the hallmark of our working parents generation's success, and our inability to do this marks the complexity of our lives in continuing to inhabit this expensive city with its growing sheen of development. My studies and low-income working life were not in step with the aims of the market and real estate economy. Creatively navigating such financial consequences is a challenge in raising our family here. Co-operative housing, social housing, and Native housing, in many locations off Commercial Drive, provide what little affordable dwelling there is left in the neighbourhood. All of these options were created through people's grassroots efforts and social movements to make them available. We now live in and are raising our girls in one such a co-op off the Drive. The co-op has the benefits of knowing your community combined with all its existing interpersonal challenges. It teaches our girls and us the lived meaning of shared life ways and worlds. This kind of urban housing is such a contrast to the atomized lifestyles and private property so highly valued within North American cities.

Around me on Commercial Drive, I feel and see sharp edges of local poverty. Beyond buying or renting homes is the issue of even having one at all. There is the visible situation of homelessness, drug abuse, mental health and joblessness, the despair of those we see sleeping on the street, adults and youth alike, sitting out front of all of this nourishing café-and-organic-foods culture of Commercial Drive. Our daughters are growing up here, and they live with us this curious mix of potential in diversity and artful ways of life, residing alongside the growing division of "haves" and "have-nots." One of the impacts of this divide in the neighbourhood has been within our choice of schools for our girls. In certain blocks, Commercial Drive has two sides-of-the-tracks. On one side resides the apartment housing, co-ops, and Native housing, which is the side we live on, while just across the Drive are single residential homes, many of which are beautifully renovated with lush flowering gardens and tree lined streets.

This class division affects the reputation and capacity of the school nearest us. Among the conversations of many parents I know, this school is understood to be a place of significant classroom challenges and hard knocks. Across the whole city in fact it is one of the poorest schools in Vancouver and thus most affected by funding cuts. I know this school works hard to support the children there and has many good programs. Though many children in our co-op have attended it and are seemingly fine, I didn't put my own girls there. Perhaps it is my class dint of education, mixed with my desire for my girls to have some kind of engaging school experience that was not challenged, as I then perceived it, by peer group relations and children with varying unmet needs that would affect the quality of classroom interactions. We sent them to a school just another block away, on the other side of the Drive, the annex of this closer school. This school, with its inviting playground and green park beyond, has a reputation for being very arts- and community-oriented, as being a small friendly place with many other artist and like-minded parents whose children I knew had gone there and thrived.

This school became a kind of haven for me, in being able to send my girls there as I returned to my working life, knowing they were content and flourishing in their own ways. I had always felt that the ‘contentment’ factor was important in children’s education, just as important as whatever level of curriculum they were studying. Being a small school, all the children know the children in other grades, and social awareness and responsibility is co-created among teachers, students and parents alike. My older daughter has now grown up within these classrooms of inner city, Commercial Drive kids, sheltered for now from the barrages of popular media culture and consumerism that Chris and I are so leery of. This school and its teachers reflect these kinds of social values and arts-based activities in, for example, school performances and other activities that reach into the larger community. It does not face the day-to-day challenges of education underfunding and poverty as directly as many children on its sister campus, only two blocks way, are living.³



Meandering in the community and school gardens (Erika)

Closing: Reflections on Dwelling and Dreaming

Returning to our Prado gathering point, dwelling on Heidegger’s evocation of dwelling/”bauen,” and an older meaning of the word that still resonates today in the English word “neighbour” (Chambers, 2009), we noticed that in our collaborative dwelling in and out of the schools, the cafés, the in-between home places we have inhabited, and in our life writing about dwelling here and there, a relational aesthetics of being with neighbours in this commons has emerged. We also remembered another Old English etymological root of this word, “dwellan,” meaning to make one’s home, to live, to keep the attention focused. It points to a lingering, a musing, a mulling over things that persist “in a place meant to be lived in” (Barber, 2005), a place that perplexes us and is more than one thing in its mixed contradictions and possibilities.

Lester Pearson, the Canadian Nobel Peace Prize politician, claimed that the well being of a civilization depends on its ability to respond creatively to human and environmental challenges (Mau, 2004). A perplexing challenge that remains for us within and across our creative and

critical dwelling in and out of places such as Commercial Drive is to figure out what this means for our children in their schools and homes today. Spending time at the schools and on the Drive brought home to us how difficult this figuring is in these neighbourhoods that live at the edge of hope. To creatively imagine and realistically create “massive change” for a better world (Mau, 2004), in the small, vulnerable places children dwell and seek refuge in, takes courage and wisdom on the part of adults. Helping children live and learn well in places where neglect lives and the official government policy seems not to care, at least not enough, is an urgent task for all of us. One of the ways to take care and to care is to document life in these places truthfully, to tell these stories to each other and to the people in the institutions responsible for the care of our young.

The teachers we have been working with are such truth tellers. Our collaboration resulted in the making of a video documentary, *Crossing Commercial* (Bekkattla, 2010), a testimony to the life writing work the teachers and students from the two schools on opposite sides of Commercial Drive did with us.⁴ In this project, students walked back and forth across the Drive and visited with each other—making art, taking photos of the neighbourhood, playing in the playground, writing stories, asking each other questions, singing together. They shared their dreams and their pains. They created their own curriculum and literature in an original way, by producing texts originating from their lived experiences. We believe that this is the kind of truthful and organic literacy that we need more of in our schools and that our commons needs more of in order for all of us to survive and to flourish; it is a literacy that originates from the storied ground or *humus* the children live and dwell in (Aoki, 2005). Thomas King (2008) reminds us that the truth about stories is that that’s all we are, and, in citing Laguna storyteller Leslie Silko’s words, warns us:

Don’t be fooled....
 You don’t have anything
 if you don’t have the stories. (Silko, as cited in King, 2008, p. 14)

It is our obligation, these poets tell us, to take care of the stories and to take care of the land where the stories are unraveling, as a matter of physical and spiritual survival, as part of “the webs of responsibilities that bind all things” (p. 23) that hold us in relationality.

Over double-shot lattes and oatmeal cookies at the Prado, we became newly aware that an ongoing challenge we face in our life writing is trying to take care of the truthful stories while living in what David G. Smith (2006) has called “a season of great untruth.” We hold firmly to a conviction that writing truthfully also has the potential to take care of us and of our endangered surroundings, that writing may help us to attend to our “pluriverse” (Prakash & Esteva, 1998/2005), our cosmos and commons, more lovingly, because as Gary Geddes (2007) reminds us, “the earth and its atmosphere and its peoples need nothing more, at this point in history, than the loving attention of the poet in each of you” (p. 1). We found poets among the young students who crossed Commercial, found new relations between each other, created illuminating images and words about their homes and about the commons they share and reimagined.

Heeding Geddes’ call, we continue to linger with our imperfect dwelling and dreaming through writing, poetically and otherwise, looking forward to the next life writing project with children and teachers in this commons, to the next Parade of Lost Souls, and to the next *Iluminares* festival of lights.

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Notes

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2. See: <http://www.publicdreams.org>
3. As researchers, we often dialogued about the tension between, and differing challenges of, these two schools in the community, and how to bridge such 'gaps.' These tensions were further experienced by the teachers we worked with in each school; these conversations became the impetus for co-creating the "Crossing Commercial" neighbourhood photography project which brought students from each school together.
4. We would also like to thank teacher Jacqui Norick, aboriginal support worker and film maker Suzie Bekkattla, classroom assistants, and the parent volunteers who were all an integral part of the "Crossing Commercial" photography project.

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