

Waiting to Be Found: Research Questions and Canadian National Identity in the Borderland

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“Ready or not. Here I come!”

The seeker walks past my hiding spot, and I pull myself smaller against the base of a maple tree. I love this place—a forest oasis not far from my suburban house in London, Ontario. With my sisters and other neighbourhood children, I often sneak across suburban backyards to break into this forest—the borderland that separates the city and our suburb from open fields and apple orchards. Laced with swamps and maple trees, the forest is a place of rich adventure: a tree house built from shipping pallets and inhabited by alien beer-drinking teenagers, a swamp full of putrid, stagnant water that we dare ourselves to cross, games of hide-and-seek among the softly chattering leaves.

Sitting as still as I can, I’m quickly lost in the space of waiting. My hands sift through the loamy dirt of the forest floor; a cicada’s buzz presses up against the distant drone of a lawnmower and the shrieks of children playing in a backyard swimming pool. I breathe in the green forest air, and stories of this place float down to me on dappled light and spinning maple keys.

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This world—my childhood world—is named for other places and other people’s heroes: our house stands on Chaucer Road in London, Ontario; I play in a park next to the Thames River; and my mother buys my sisters and me lollipops in the Covent Garden Market. The books on the shelves of our local library tell tales of pioneering families carving out homesteads in unforgiving American landscapes, British children searching for the Holy Grail in modern day England, and American children chasing after their lost father on dark planets. The best stories, it seems, happen elsewhere. My own world is a soft echo, unworthy of original names, its own heroes, and the colourful, shiny hard covers of a library book.

But these are not the stories that I imagine now, waiting among the dancing trees. My hands on the dirt, my back against cool grey bark, I see an Iroquoian child, quiet and attentive, watching a doe and her fawn step carefully through the forest. I see a European surveyor, mosquito-stung and sweat-laden, leaning against my maple tree to carve a blaze into its bark, a sign for the next European who stumbles through this forest. I see a farmer’s wife, hungry and cold, pushing her way through driving wet snow to the small house whose foundation we found on the far side of the trees.

My imagined stories thrill me, but they are unsettled and unsettling. I do not understand my connection to this place. I do not know its other names, its heroes, or its stories. These stories have been flattened, bulldozed over, wiped clean, when my suburb was built. My house, my friends’ houses, the streets, my school: they do not come from this soil. This forest has no name in my world.

“Olly, olly. All come free,” the seeker calls.

The forest breaks open: children appear between trees and cheer jubilantly for their success. Like me, they have not been found. I stand, shake off the untold stories, and run to join the others, the forest floor crackling beneath my feet.

Where do our research questions come from? How do they find us? How do we find them? How does the peculiar alchemy of our personal calling, our time, and our place set us upon our intellectual quests as academics?

It seems generous to call my intellectual work a quest: my academic career path meanders like the mud-tinted Thames River that ran through my childhood. I have three university degrees in three disciplines (a BA in Linguistics and German, an MA in Comparative Literature, and an MA in Communication and Technology), and now, in my late forties, I'm working on my fourth: a PhD in Education and Writing Studies. I have written academically on the acquisition of relative clauses by English-speaking children, the feminine sublime in East German and Canadian literature, the relationship between Internet genealogy and motherhood, and my son's struggle to learn how to write using a pencil. I suspect that there is no obvious plot running through this work beyond a lack of perseverance, a deficit that pulls me between devastating boredom and all-consuming fascination. And yet I'd like to write another story here. In this story, these disparate scenes of my work orbit around a single theme, a theme often explored by thinkers who share my lifetime and my life place. Like so many Canadians—particularly white settler Canadians—I have a deeply uncertain relationship with the place in which I live, and this uncertainty is woven throughout my intellectual work.

Several important Canadian scholars have commented on this troubled relationship to place. Northrup Frye, the well-known Canadian literary critic, muses that our national sensibility “is less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some such riddle as ‘Where is here?’” (23). Our national novelist Margaret Atwood picks up this theme, writing that settler Canadians are effectively lost in our own country:

[W]hen you are here and don't know where you are because you've misplaced your landmarks or bearings, then you need not be an exile or madman: you are simply lost ... Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it ...

I'm talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost. (18)

More recently, philosopher John Ralston Saul suggests that “many Canadians—francophone, anglophone—across the country are confused about their direction, uncertain of the meaning of their place in this place” (loc. 483).

The uncertainty of place that has shaped my intellectual quest is most often expressed as a worried distrust of linguistic representation. When you grow up in a world where foreign names and stories are imposed on your home, you learn to suspect any simple notion of the relationship between language and nature. You come to understand that the space between the fundamental elements of the linguistic sign—the signifier and the signified—is a rich borderland like the unnamed forest of my childhood. It holds untold stories, stories lost through colonization, class, culture, and power struggles, and the unspeakable work of survival in a place where nature is formidable.

Seen through this lens, my intellectual quest comes into focus. My academic work coalesces around some key questions: How do words and stories connect us to the world? Whose stories get told? What happens when we tell untold stories? What stories are untellable? My early undergraduate work in linguistics set the stage for this inquiry: it was there that I learned to see linguistic representation as an act to be dismantled for study. The linguistic sign undone, the importance of the boundary between spoken and unspoken became clear, and I moved towards a closer examination of what wasn't said. Understanding nationhood against the darkness of the unsaid drew me to post-war German authors like Christa Wolf. As a Canadian, I recognized the problem of defining a society primarily by what cannot or should not be said. Negotiating the unspeakable—the sublime—was the common ground upon which I could compare works of post-modern German and Canadian literature in my first Master's thesis.

In contrast to this theoretical work, my second Master's project was an attempt to resurrect the stories that might bind me to this place: to speak aloud what had been lost. I connected my experiences as a new mother to finding the lost story of a mother in my family tree, a woman who died young and whose own daughter knew nothing about her life or her pioneer roots in Canada. Uncovering and articulating this story was a struggle much like my son's experience of learning to write his own name; I recounted this journey in a later paper that explored how our material world—our writing tools in particular—shapes the process of writing our stories. These exercises in storytelling led me to consider how telling forgotten, lost, or ignored stories—the borderland stories—empowers connection and how narrative might act as a bridge between the academy and other communities.

The potential of narrative to reconfigure and draw out the relevance of knowledge produced at the university steered me to my current PhD work. My dissertation explores how knowledge of climate change is communicated in the public sphere; in particular, I am looking at how narrative and personal experience might play a role in this communication. There is growing evidence that we must find new ways to talk about climate change; research has shown that explaining climate change with facts and data does not convince people of its potential threats. Climate change scientists are beginning to acknowledge that narrative may be an important mode for speaking about climate change, a mode in which we can reforge the bond between humans and our natural world (Chess and Johnson; Hulme).

However, the story of climate change is a difficult one to tell. Climate change makes explicit our complicated connection to this place, to the Earth. It forces us to acknowledge our humility—our place as only one species on the planet—and our importance—our power as a species to damage and destroy nature. Communicating climate change exposes the

frailty of imposed stories that have no foundation in the soil, and it asks us to acknowledge the borderland stories of our civilization: the cost of our lifestyles, the potential penalties for refusing to change.

The fierce debate about climate change in North America pits those who want to tell this story against those who don't. These competing stories push forward against each other, always striving for what Graham Smart labels "discursive hegemony" (loc. 3925). Rhetorician Jim Corder argues that when we are confronted by narratives that challenge our own, our very being is threatened. Corder asks, "How can we expect another to change when we are ourselves that other's contending narrative" (19)? Telling stories about climate change, particularly in North America, is very much a battle of contending narratives about our place in this world.

How then can we approach these competing stories about climate change without an either-or, all-or-nothing duel for dominance? How can we discuss our relationship to nature and explore the threats of climate change without zealous dogmatism and automated talking points? It is upon these questions that my dissertation work turns, and I would like to think that these questions—as entangled with hope and idealism as they are—are inextricably tied to my lifetime and life place, to my experience as a Canadian in the 21st century.

My Canadian identity can never be just one story: the borderland between the stories that I tell and the place in which I live is inherently generative. It points not only to our insignificance—the weight of stories not told—but also to our potential—new stories that might be told. John Ralston Saul offers us one such new story, suggesting that Canadians must acknowledge that the philosophical foundations of our society come from Indigenous cultures: "[Our nation] is a non-racial idea of civilization, and non-linear, even non-rational. It is based on the idea of an inclusive circle that expands and gradually adapts as new people join us," he writes (loc. 172). This is a new way of thinking about Canada, but it also hints at a new way of thinking of the borderland that I have written about here. Perhaps it is not the space between—between suburbs and open fields, between the silent

north and the screaming south, between nature and language—but it is a space within. It is the space within our circle where the work of expansion and adaptation take place. Perhaps it is not so much that we are lost in this place, as Margaret Atwood suggests, but rather that we perpetually reaching into ourselves and into this place for new orientation. We cannot be found because we have not settled. And it is by dwelling here, in this unsettled place, that I hope that I might find new ways to tell stories about climate change and our relationship to the world around us.

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