

# *Awakening Connections: Living in Literacy*

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There is danger in thinking about one's poems. There are those who would say that looking closely at one's creation can make one falter in her writing. Or, they suggest that it is too solipsistic a process. The latter is an argument often made against those who write about emotion and the body. While I agree that there are boundaries necessary between the written and the lived, a poem long finished does not fall into the category of a personal confession quickly told and later regretted. The former argument—the faltering—seems more valid to me because it runs the risk of bringing to the surface those processes that have become automatic and work best when one's attention is not upon them. Nevertheless, I do not harbour such fears with poems that are no longer in process. Instead, I find that poetry—my own and that of other poets—continues to offer insight into my academic work and without such consideration that work would be poorer.

The two poems in this paper are ones that were published several years ago and so offer the distance I desire when bringing my poetry into an academic context. The first takes me into a consideration of the deeply embodied rhythms of language and its roots in nature. The second moves me from the self and body to the threads of connection that take us into the world and shape the sense of who we are. From these two poems, I want to think more broadly about how, through our consciousness of being in the world, language enables us to interpret and then create new possibilities for understanding.

A number of years ago I read Marilyn Cooper's essay "The Ecology of Writing," developed from her understanding that writing engaged the individual in a variety of socially constituted and interacting systems. She noted that an ecologist would explore how writers interact to form systems of ideas, purposes, interpersonal interactions, cultural norms and textual forms. This idea of writing as an ecology attracted me because it articulated my experience as a writer and a teacher of writing.

The word ecology comes from the Greek *oikos* for household and refers to the study of relationships that interlink members of the Earth. When I think of a household, I envision a gathering place, a central location, somewhere to come from and to go back to; somewhere where we remain connected. When thinking of language, the place I come from and go back to is the body.

*Proceedings of the 2007 Complexity Science and Educational Research Conference*  
Feb 18–20 • Vancouver, British Columbia • pp. 157–163 • [www.complexityandeducation.ca](http://www.complexityandeducation.ca)



I wrote this poem as a way to explore an image I had from my childhood: a brief flash of being in my mother's bedroom and asking her about dying. Beginning with that image, I created a scene that could illustrate the solemnity of that moment as well as the security of being well-mothered. What I thought most about in the writing was what the listener could envision. But playing just a line below that conception was the rhythm unfolding in the interaction. Much of my response to that quality was somatic and not intellectual, and it is only through my oral readings of this piece that I can feel the quality of that space as I experienced it.

Meaning is rooted in our bodies and thus language not only shapes thought but is a call to our senses. David Abram described language as something living that is continually being remade, woven from the silence that rises from "our perceptual immersion in the depths of an animate, expressive world" (1996, p. 84). He traced the roots of oral language to our responses to the natural sounds about us and then related the development of the alphabet (and thus written language) to original representations of animals and other natural forms. While language and the processes of writing may seem distanced from lived experience, the written word has potency and a history with the natural world. We are reminded of this through the rhythms of our speech, through the sounds of our language, and with the sensory attention we can access through writing. As Abram noted: "A genuinely ecological approach does not work to attain a mentally envisioned future, but strives to enter, ever more deeply, into the sensorial present" (p. 272).

When we listen to poetry, its sound comes into our bodies and its ancient markers nestle into our minds as we respond to its rhythms. We remember with bones—the bones of our bodies and the bones of our language.

Before the development of writing, there was a particular quality to the words that needed to be remembered and that we still find in language today. All of these forms draw on rhythm. One of these qualities is repetition within variation often accomplished through meter and rhyme. (Think of the childhood mnemonic: 30 days hath September, April, June, and November). And through other structures like lists or patterns of words (think of "once upon a time") or alliteration (She sells seashells . . .) among others.

These qualities are small markers that we can easily discover, but there are more complex structures of remembrance. In the 1920s, Milman Parry recognized that early poetry, the poetry of Homer and the Greeks, was shaped by the requirements of the hexameter line—a structure of oral composition. Working with such a pattern, the teller could stitch her or his tale appropriately for the occasion and the audience so that the "threads of memory [were] spun of the sounds and structures of individual lines" (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 181).

The structures that enable such remembrance depend on acoustic rhythm, which Eric Havelock (1986) suggests is a component of our nervous system's reflexes, a pleasurable biological force reinforced through our musical chants, melodies, and dances. Susanne Langer (1953/1967) supports this perspective when she explains that the rhythm of language is a "mysterious trait that probably bespeaks biological unities of thought and feeling" (p. 258) and that the rhythms of life, organic, emotional and mental, compose a dynamic pattern of feeling. Language resonates with our embodied presence in the world.

## *Language and Identity*

### **Dark Moon**

I don't know sometimes where I end and you begin.

I watch you writing notes in your sketchbook,  
become poem of your seeing as my fingers soften  
into brushes painting seasalt rainforest.

Last night I wrote about working with my mother in  
her kitchen until it was you slicing apples instead  
of me, asking for the chicken pie recipe that baked  
in the woodstove, steam misting double-hung windows  
clouding the raspberry patch beyond the  
garden thick with summer flowers.

The squat fridge hummed to the thump of the rolling  
pin smoothing my mother's arms into dough as she  
invited you for supper clearing a place at the grey  
formica table for fresh fruit and Jersey cream.

My flesh heavy with your longing, I don't recognize the  
turn of ankle or curve of hips. I wonder where you  
are waiting, listen for your fading voice. In my eyes  
are landscapes condensed in a Claude glass  
chiaroscuro for a raspberry moon.

(Luce-Kapler, 2003, p. 25)

I like to think of this poem as a "microworld." According to Francisco Varela, within a microworld, we exhibit a particular "readiness-for-action," or a "microidentity," revealing that at any given moment, who we are cannot be separated from our embodiment in the world and our relationship with others. Over time, our "pervasive mode of living consists of *already* constituted microworlds" (1999, p. 10) shaping a history of action and understanding, which influences emerging responses.

In remembering how "Dark Moon" came to be, I returned to my journal from that time. Within those pages, I listed daily life notes that one might find in a planner interspersed with research notes and juxtaposed with failed starts to poems about my mother. Writing such as this:

I have this scene of standing outside with my mother and  
. . . an old star limps over the roof and lights the night.  
The darkness dances between coloured lights in the warm  
current rising from the houses and our bodies. There is an  
electric thread of tinsel between us only visible when we tug.

And then, on the occasional page, are entries about my struggles to shape my poems about Emily Carr into a collection. Two years earlier, I had embarked on a project of reading works by and about Carr as well as visiting archives and galler-

ies where her art and writing were housed. By the time of the journal entry, I was in a process of ordering and rewriting earlier poems even as new ones continued to emerge. Those pages reveal how I was caught up in questions of art, identity, writing, and daily life.

In March of that year, the first draft of “Dark Moon” appeared, much longer than the version in this paper, but with the key images already in place. When I think about that poem as a microworld, as a response to a particular time in my life, I can see the threads of attention that appeared first in my journal and then as an interpretation in the poem. I was writing about my entangled identifications with Emily Carr; I was writing about my entangled relationship with my mother; and I was writing about the issues of identity and embodiment that arose from the adolescent girls in my research group as they wrote about their entangled relationships with their mothers, their friends and their bodies.

When I wrote “Dark Moon,” I recognized that it brought together questions that I had been grappling with in several aspects of my life and in doing so I could begin to conceptualize some of the themes I sensed were emerging. The boundaries around and between my interpretive practices, whether writing poetry or engaging in research, were fluid and sometimes illusory as my work as a writer, my life as a teacher, my role as a daughter—an entire history of microworlds—influenced this poem.

Common images of writers show them seated at a desk, their fingers flying over a keyboard in front of a backdrop of bookshelves. Or they are illustrated dreamily gazing at a notebook, pencil in hand. These images and many like them have depicted writers. What is often implied in such representations is that writing is mostly individual and mostly internal. It is not for others to see or understand the mysterious process that creates a rich tapestry of characters and situations.

While there certainly is some truth to those images, they do not portray the awareness writers bring to the fictional lives they are creating. They often attend to detail and are close observers of the world and other human beings; they draw from and frequently revise the texts and textual traditions that have come before, and they are part of a literate community who reads and writes. This connection to the life of textual production embeds the writer in the systems that have influenced and continue to influence writing. Like all literacy practices, it is a complex process connected to the historical, cultural, and biological world as well as our individual and collective identities.

When I finish a poem, I might consider it to be part of a larger collection or a singular creation. In writing it, I attend to the relationship among images, rhythms and lines. As it takes form, the responses from other poets bring new considerations to my attention. And in that shaping, I, too, am shaped. While poetic unfolding is never predictable, I can nevertheless trace the pattern in my evolution as a writer and notice some of the connections even as this web of relations goes beyond the poem, beyond the poet, and into the complex and intricate systems of language.

### *Meaning Making*

So what do these stories about poems have to do with understanding literacy as an ecology? For me, these stories are reminders that engaging in activities of lit-

eracy are never discrete events that exist in isolation. No matter how personal the experience, I still draw from the complex world of which I am a part. The poems remind me that while I am making sense of my individual experiences through poetic form, I am also entirely dependent on being part of a rich and diverse world to realize their meaning.

I would like to draw your memory back to what I said about ecology: The household is a gathering place, a central location, somewhere to come from and to go back to. It is this movement of coming from and going back to that I would like to focus on. In order to create meaning—and is not all literacy about meaning making?—we need to attend to our bodily responses and the language welling up inside us and we need to reach beyond ourselves to interpret that experience and shape the language. Attention and interpretation for creation.

Neuropsychologist, Merlin Donald, in his examination of consciousness, explains that embodiment is what grounds our consciousness, our sense of personal reality. It is through our bodies that we enjoy the rhythms of existence, those perceptual templates that express temporal relations originating in sound, feeling or sight (Donald, 2001). And it is through our bodies in relation to others that we develop mimetic skills.

Mimesis is the body language we learn and enact in the company of others—those attitudes, gestures, postures, stances and unspoken nuances woven through our communications. Mimesis is not mindless repetition but an intentional act in a public dimension that defines us personally, socially and culturally. It is the aspect that troubles communication in a foreign context because it is often subtle and nuanced, easily escaping our specific notice.

From this reaching out and responding to the world, including vocal mimesis, language evolves and we learn words by relating them to our experience, to the “mimetic fabric of action” (Donald, p. 288) within community. As Donald explains, “Language is a powerful means of constructing autobiographical memories, but our sense of self takes on meaning only within shared oral traditions” (p. 321). Donald goes on to argue further that we develop our consciousness, our sense of self, through what he calls “mindreading practices.” That is, we learn to understand our sense of consciousness by observing that others also have minds. Because our minds are hybrid—that is, they are an emergence of the cognitive processes of brain-based activity and the networked representation systems that exist outside our individual biological bodies—human beings have a sense of an ever-evolving and yet coherent sense of self-identity that is paradoxically both public and private. Donald remarks that “the ultimate irony of human existence is that we are supreme individualists, whose individualism depends almost entirely on culture for its realization” (p. 12).

The range and scope of consciousness is small. Take a moment to focus on or listen to the noises around you or think about what happened today. See how long you can maintain that awareness. While our ability to focus on one thing for long or on a number of things at once is limited, we are able to extend the range of consciousness through a number of activities that humans collectively have developed. Think back to the hexameter lines I mentioned earlier. Think about the difference being able to write makes. Think about how conversing with a friend helps you think through your ideas that seem only to be emerging.

This quality of consciousness suggests that we need to help focus it and then extend its breadth through reaching outward and interpreting these conscious moments through practices of literacy. Attention and interpretation.

When I think about focusing attention in literacy practices, I follow a principle that colleagues and I have called “enabling constraints.” Enabling constraints are structures meant to limit the choice and range of focus while still leaving much room for exploration—what Brent Davis and Dennis Sumara characterize as a balance between randomness and coherence (Davis & Sumara, 2006). For instance, the enabling constraint I developed for the Milky Way poem was simply that remembered moment in my parent’s bedroom.

Once the first writing of a poem is over, I challenge that interpretation in order to move outwards from the personal experience to identify the emerging integrity of the poem itself. For the poem *Dark Moon*, once I had written about the memory of my mother in her kitchen, I imagined what would have happened if Emily Carr had been present. That imagining brought my research into play, including much of what other people observed and Carr’s status as an icon of Canadian art. The poem moved from a personal experience to explore a broader consideration of women’s identity. The moving outward enabled me to see the poem as an integral object in the world—something that arose from my experience but ultimately gathered a life of its own.

We awake with the rhythms of our household, our embodied presence in the world; we move out to develop a consciousness of our selves, to connect and create the larger world with others; and we return more deeply attuned to those rhythms, more aware of their significance as we prepare to move outward again in our search for meaning.

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