9
Beyond These Iron Bars
An Emergent (and Writerly) Inquiry into the Public Sphere
JASON MICHAEL LUKASIK

With two utterances in my forethought, I begin to write:

A lone college student stands in front of the gorilla enclosure at a local zoo, reciting a poem. It is winter, and so she is heard by only a few visitors who brave the cold, and the gorillas who listen on, attentively. Her choice words relate the irony found within these iron bars: isolation, control, domination—all in the name of “conservation.” Her words contrast with the magnificent and new structure in which we all found ourselves that day—people and gorillas, cousins save a few genes, separated by glass, three inches thick, and a knowledge (perhaps misinformed) that we are each, deservedly, on the appropriate side of the pane.

Somewhere in my imagination, Sam, a bear, talks to me about his experiences, first in the circus, and then as an inmate in an American zoo. He questions human intention, but he understands, perhaps better than I do, the predicament in which we have all enclosed ourselves. Through my conversations with Sam, I also find Silas—a curriculum scholar who helps me to make sense of the learning that happens in zoos. I meet other animals and people along a journey that is somewhat real, somewhat made up, completely reflective, and all-consuming of my energies, my creative tendencies, and my insight into the public sphere.

I sit up late into the night, capturing my words carefully on the page. I am writing my first novel—which happens to also be my dissertation. I translate experiences into words, and seek out the meaning of my inquiry through writing. I have come to realize that “writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is a…method of discovery” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 967). As many writers do, I continually question the worth of my work—who will read it? What will it mean to those who read it? Will it convey, effectively, the story I wish to tell? And like many scholars, I continually question my ability to meaningfully communicate to audiences beyond the limits of academe. After all, if we hope that our work will inspire dialogue and generate conversation about the subject of our inquiry, can we be satisfied with readership that is limited only to other academics? I aspire to be a public intellectual, one who engages conversation in the
public sphere about public phenomena. But the task of such a cause is worthy of discussion apart from performing the task.

How do we inquire into the public sphere and what is the work of the public intellectual? I am particularly interested in the ways in which both scholars and citizens alike inquire into the public spaces and the ways in which this inquiry is shared with others as part of an emergent and participatory dialogue. Inquiry into the public sphere is a process engaged by a diverse and rich network of meaning-makers; the researcher is but one contributor to the dialogue. I write here toward the merits of the use of fiction and other creative applications of scholarship—arguing for an artful inquiry into our lives and the public sphere—a writerly understanding of situation.

Inquiring into Public Spaces: The Work of the Intellectual

Methods of inquiry into the public sphere are diverse, often involving a “montage” of approaches that entail the search for meaning of phenomenon. Denzin and Lincoln (2005), while discussing methods of qualitative inquiry, likened the qualitative researcher to a *bricoleur*, a quilt-maker, who pieces together parts of a whole (p. 4). Similarly, the public intellectual, inquiring into the public sphere, engages parts of a whole, crafting narratives and counter-narratives that seek to explain the political, social, and individual components of a particular phenomenon. In my own work, I seek to explore the meaning experienced during a visit to the zoo, exploring the dominant narrative articulated through the textual representation of zoo exhibits.

We may frame our understanding of the public intellectual as one who learns to “use imagination in a search for openings without which our lives narrow” (Greene, 2000, p. 17). We may also draw from Jane Addams, the early 20th century reformer who was once described by biographer Jean Beth Elshtain as being a “public intellectual,” one who is charged with the task of “keeping nuances alive” (in Joslin, 2004, p. 3). Public intellectualism is a foundation for scholarly pursuit. But the question of how we keep nuances alive—how we preserve the life of the data we represent—remains a constant struggle within academe. A. N. Whitehead (1929) argued that scholarship should “preserve the connection between knowledge and the zest of life” by celebrating the “imaginative consideration of learning” (p. 93). How might we draw upon particular knowledges to expand upon the dialogue and experiences found in the public sphere? I argue that there is an obligation on the part of the scholar engaged in the public sphere to render their work *alive*, to engage the reader through stories that invite dialogue and debate.

There are a plethora of methods that have been employed to both explore and explain the public sphere. These methods include, but are not limited to, ethnography (Denzin, 1997; Tedlock, 2000), portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997), and narrative (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelley, 2000). Regardless of the methodology, though, it is important to also consider both the meaning found in the form of the representation of inquiry, as well as the audience of research. Giroux (2003) argued that “academic work matters in its relationship to wider public practices and policies” (p. 12), and so the researcher should also consider the interpretive relationship that exists between the audience and the work. Said (1994b) reminds us that “intellectuals are individuals with a vocation for representing” (p. 13) and so the task of the writer/intellectual is not just to tell a story, but to draw the reader into a search, through story, for meaning.

My current work draws from my time as a zoo educator, where I witnessed, first hand, the intersection of diverse narratives and interpretations in a public space. Recognizing that learning happens beyond the walls of the traditional classroom (Schultz, Baricovich, & McSurley, this volume), I framed my work through the “out of school curriculum” or “outside curriculum”
(Schubert, 1981, 2008a). Questioning “what is worthwhile” (Schubert, 1986) becomes an endeavor embarked by everyone, but is notably important to the work of the public intellectual—looking to learning in society as a place from which to begin our inquiry. As Schubert (1981) suggests, we may render the world curricular, that is to say that we may view all experiences, thoughts, utterances, and articulations in the world around us as educative, akin to the concept of a lived curriculum, or “currere,” developed by Pinar and Grumet (1976). As one considers curriculum as that which is experienced and lived, then the question of who or what guides (teaches) these experiences becomes worthy of discussion.

While reading foundational work in public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000, 2003) and cultural studies (Grossberg, 1996; Hall, 1997) I questioned the institutional authority of zoos. Giroux’s (2004) critiques of neoliberal narratives suggest the nature in which authority is awarded to particular individuals or institutions and taken from others. This is evident in many schools: the teacher is the center of the classroom, the textbook the center of the subject, the school the center of education. And so in the public sphere, we look to other institutions that provide instruction about what knowledge is worth knowing. The natural history museum maintains an authoritative narrative over the way we view the natural world and “othered” peoples. The zoo maintains an authoritative narrative over what we “know” about animals, plants, and the relationships among living things in nature. Government agencies and state universities (often underwritten by corporate funding) instruct our lives in areas of agriculture, diet, and medicine. Our lives are enclosed by these numerous narratives that operate under the auspices of centers of knowledge (Berry, 2005, p. 114).

Public institutions and issues/subjects/people/places in the public domain are, indeed, pedagogues. Imbued with the dominant narrative, we come to learn from them. But the dominant narrative is always incomplete (Gramsci, 1971); it must be interpreted by individuals who mitigate it through their own unique experience and history. Lyotard (1979) taught us that there are always subaltern narratives that discredit, challenge, and refuse the dominant narrative. In order to fully embrace the public dialogue, it is important to recognize these alternative perspectives as part of a “multilogue” (Schubert, 2008b), where different narratives all intersect within the public sphere.

Engrossed with public interest, curiosities, and languages, the intellectual places herself in a position to critique with both humility and assertion, aware of self and subject, and the relationship between the two. Reading the dominant narrative found in public institutions leads to our own construction and sense-making of that institution and its relationship to us. This is the context in which the intellectual walks.

Colonial Prowess: The Zoo as a Public Pedagogue

Fulfilling their institutional role, zoos serve a colonial pedagogy, maintaining a narrative of conquest, division, and exhibition. Many zoos carry architectural remnants of its early history as a Parisian inspired garden and taxonomic collection combined with modern zoological superstructures accented by naturalistic habitats and large enclosures. They also exhibit modernistic representations of nature in complex and expansive ‘habitats’ that boast waterfalls, living plants, and climate control. Despite these changes, zoos maintain their colonial history in their architecture and design. Exhibit design is premised upon the zoo visitor being able to maintain an “omnipresent eye” (Willinsky, 1998, p. 57) on the collection.

The early zoos were visual tales of the exploits of global travel and exploration (Malamud, 1998). Many of these zoos were simply private collections of exotic species collected by naturalists while others were princely estates that exhibited representations of the conquered lands of
the empire (Crocke, 1997, p. 137). The colonial menageries of the 18th and early 19th century would eventually become public zoological gardens in the late 19th century. Informed with a scientific narrative, the early public zoos began to focus on educating visitors, while at the same time, entertaining them. These early modern zoos “showcased the optimism, power, and ambitions of the new bourgeois elite, just as the princely menageries showcased the optimism, power and ambitions of an older aristocracy” (Rothfels, 2002, p. 37).

Zoos began to de-emphasize the imperial relationships over animals, exhibiting them in more naturalistic settings. A study of the history of zoos reveals how they “began...to renarrate the captive lives of animals” (Rothfels, 2002, p. 199). Just as the zoo manufactures the exhibits that contain the animals, they, too, manufacture the narrative we come to accept as being truth for the animal.

When people come to the zoo, what do they see? How authentic can such a relationship be with the land, when the land is represented through the lens of an historically colonial institution? Or when the land is viewed through a colonized perspective? Willinsky (1998) has discussed the danger of “exhibitionary pedagogy” (p. 85). Not only do we learn a narrative about the subjects being exhibited, we also learn about the nature of exhibition itself. What meaning might be learned from a zoo, and its exhibited nature?

When we walk through the zoo, we encounter other life forms that are set aside from us; however, we are engaged in the construction of this divide. The public space of the zoo is a co-constructed narrative, informed by the authoritative narrative of the institution, re-articulated through the experience of the participant. The dominant narrative of the zoo is a fiction—it is a suggestion that is not always accepted by the participant. We must recognize that the authoritative narrative articulated by the zoo is not always interpreted as it is written, told, performed, and exhibited. How does the narrative of a zoo change when PETA protestors are seen next to an enclosure containing an elephant? What happens when a student reads a poem, protesting the act of enclosing beautiful creatures that have no business being caged? How does this experience impact the perception of the zoo narrative? How has this performance disrupted the narrative of the zoo? Public pedagogy entails the discussion of these disruptions of power in addition to the critiques of the power relationships in the first place. The zoo is a contested space, and so the understanding of the pedagogy employed in a zoological park entails a consideration of the complex interactions among the visitor, the animals, and the text written by both the institution (signage in front of zoo exhibits, “expert knowledge” on the part of animal keepers, and exhibit design) and the experience of visiting the zoo (observing, or “reading,” the exhibits through the eyes of a living, breathing being who brings to the zoo their own history, context, and presuppositions). Stories are always incomplete, in need of an additional telling and re-telling.

An example of such a disruption is found in the performance critique of Coco Fusco and Guillermo Lopez-Pena (Argueta, Fusco, & Heredia, 1993) who exhibited themselves as “Indo-americans” in several museums and town squares. The purpose of their performance was to critique the problematic historical (and contemporary) practice of exhibiting humans in natural history museums. Despite many people understanding the critique, to the surprise of both Fusco and Pena, some spectators thought the critique was an authentic exhibit. Even those who may have known the performance was a critique of museums still played along and paid money to have their picture taken with the Indoamericans because they knew the rules of the game (Argueta, Fusco, & Heredia, 1993).

We should not be surprised, then, that many people who come to the zoo do not think twice about the colonial game in which they play a part. For Said (1994a), the construction of the Orient came as part of a “willed human work” (p. 15) that rendered the Oriental subject an objectified project of knowledge; such knowledge gives us “authority over it” (p. 32). However, this is where
the educative function of inquiry may begin—with the task of representing inquiry so that we may learn to read again (Willinsky, 1998) the narrative we have written about the world.

Similarly, the modern zoo maintains an authoritative narrative about animals, ecosystems, ‘native’ people, and related environmental issues. Maple, McManamon, and Stevens (1995) argue that a “good zoo” provides its animals enriching habitats so that visitors “will not see lethargic and psychotic animals,” behaviors brought on by inappropriate and sparse enclosures. “Instead,” they argue, visitors “will see active animals in a naturalistic habitat behaving much the same as their wild counterparts” (p. 231). This, of course, raises questions as to the “authenticity” of zoo animals—are they counterparts to cousins in the wild, or have they become something completely different, constructed in the eye of the human imaginary? Visitors to the zoo have expectations of the animals exhibited, based on prior stories and knowledge about wild animals and they way they are supposed to behave—active, hunting, or being hunted. Visitors to the zoo desire to construct the animal in the way they feel it should be constructed. And it is through this expectation assumptions may begin to be troubled.

Representing Inquiry: Narrative Fiction and the Birth of a Talking Bear

My turn towards narrative fiction as a methodological orientation for my inquiry into zoos was a gradual one. Born out of experience, and grounded in the literature, I sought to examine the zoo on philosophical and ideological bases. I questioned my purpose in writing. Do I seek to explain? Do I show? Do I inspire, contemplate, and generate dialogue? How do I do these things? I seek to move beyond the iron bars of traditional academic writing, a journey that parallels my critical perspective of the iron bars in the zoo. I gravitate toward methods that reveal meaning about our subject of study and ourselves. As such, I sought a methodological orientation that provided the opportunity for transformation—a transformation of my own experience and knowledge into a meaningful representation of my philosophical inquiry as well as a story that may provide a catharsis for my readers.

I recognized the importance of the space into which I was inquiring: the zoo as a public space; the zoo as a contested space; the zoo as an authoritative text on animals, nature, and human beings. I drew upon Bruno Latour (2000), who argued that social scientists should render the subjects we study “able to object to what is told about them” (p. 118). I considered my work with the zoo and the importance of allowing my phenomenon to strike back at the dominant narratives that I observed. Such guidance informs our approach in engaging public sphere: how do we converse with phenomena so that they are able to tell us more about our selves and situation? How can one negotiate the power relationship between academic writing and the subjects studied? Recalling Spivak’s (1988) work, “Can the subaltern speak?,” I asked myself, regarding zoos and the stories we tell, to what would a non-human animal object?

And in these moments, we find that our imaginative thoughts get the better of us. A bear named Sam walks in the room as I write, and sits beside me. He is a large bear, but he has a gentle demeanor. He has been summoned through my inquiry “To what would a non-human animal object?”

“We speak, but rarely do humans listen,” the bear grumbles.

“What is it you wish to say?” I ask.

“The correct question to ask,” he says, as he lifts his snout, taking account of his surroundings, “is what has already been said? We escape, we attack, we bite and we yell. What have you already heard, and what will you now do?”

Sometimes I feel that I have dug myself into a hole. How can I represent the non-human voice? I listen to Sam, or at least I try to. I am not a bear, nor will I ever be. Sam
is my character, but I owe it to him, and what he has come to represent in my inquiry, to do the discourse justice.

“I worry, Sam,” I begin to confess, “that my representation of you, as a non-human animal, might not be good or true enough. It is fiction, after all.”

“Maybe fiction is all you ever have,” Sam responded. He is an insightful bear.

I came to realize that zoos are, themselves, a fiction—they have created a story about animals, humans, and the relationships within the so-called natural world. I then chose to interpret and critique zoos (and represent this interpretation and criticism) through fiction, as it was true to the nature of the fictions told by zoos, and true for me. I chose to mitigate the fiction of zoos with a fiction of my own—a constructed narrative through which I might explore the philosophical and curricular critiques I have developed about zoos, in a way that might engage a dialogue with my readers. I have drawn in my work from Clough (2002) who has suggested the goal of research in education is the “articulation of a persuasive voice which will challenge readers’ interests, privileges and prejudices” (p. 68). I have invented voices as part of my inquiry. Sam, the bear, represents for me, and in me, a critical dialogue about zoos. Silas, the curriculum scholar, represents my analytical lens of curriculum studies as a method toward understanding (and deconstructing) the meaning found in the experience of zoos. But I should not present myself as being certain in my approach. I write cautiously and carefully; I try to listen to what my characters say to me, and how they emerge through the tip of my pen into representations of both my conscious and subconscious thoughts. Part of my data collection has been reading. In literature I find Sam’s voice, enhanced by critiques of the colonial legacy of the zoo, brought to life through my call to question the injustices found in the problematic narratives of the zoo. I study how animals have been given voice in other narratives. The graphic novel, *The Pride of Baghdad* (Vaughan & Henrichon, 2006) portrays a critique of the war in Iraq from the perspective of a pride of lions who have been “liberated” from the Baghdad Zoo after a U.S. missile strike destroyed their cages. The film *Babe* (Miller & Noonan, 1995) characterizes the emotions and thoughts of farm animals. Such narratives contribute to the public knowledge of animals.

My fictional work with Sam and Silas helps me to construct a narrative that is not complete, but partial—a possible way of seeing the world and its relationships. The challenge is for the public intellectual to construct a story that can disrupt the meta-narrative without didactic and limiting categorization of variables and factors. Complexity is a quality that should be valued and sought in the representation of inquiry.

Silas joins as I sit, writing this article. Silas is a curriculum scholar, and so he prods me about my curricular journey.

“I see you are writing,” Silas adjusts his glasses and glances at the computer screen. “A piece on public pedagogy...ah, yes, I recall you mentioning this the last time we spoke. A ‘writerly’ form of inquiry, hmmm. Do you think you are neglecting the importance of the readerly? Curriculum is experienced by everyone, a rich tapestry of inquirers into the public sphere, not just through the eyes of the writer or researcher.”

“Well, I think I have acknowledged the readerly, but I am focusing here on the writerly, as one dynamic of inquiry into the public sphere,” I respond defensively.

Sam interjects, “You humans only know how to create cages.”

“What do you mean, Sam?” I ask.

“You create these things—writerly, readerly—and you become caged by them. Why can you not just be? Just write? Just inquire?”

“Perhaps some cages are necessary, Sam,” adds Silas. “It is good to know our limits. These categories help us to discern the complexities of our world.”

“A world you have created for yourself,” snaps Sam.
“Maybe without cages we have no concept of liberation,” I add.  
“From what, exactly, should we be trying to escape?” Silas asks.

The use of fiction is not just a means of reporting inquiry; it is also a process of inquiry. Joyce Cary (1958) has suggested that the process of writing fiction is “one of exploration as well as expression” (p. 86). Writing is, itself, a form of curriculum, as is any discussion of the public sphere. The writer explores reality, as a “moral experience,” the “vital quality of the novelist’s art, by which intuition into the real” (p. 152) is received. The use of fiction and dialogue allows the author to explore the tension that exists between essentializing and particularizing a character, phenomenon, or situation, while also imagining toward possibility—considering those things that ‘could be.’ Lynne Tillman (1991) said it well: “I write in the hope and spirit that each of us can think beyond our limits, while acknowledging limits” (p. 102).

Narrative fiction as research is often challenged on the grounds of validity (or lack thereof). Others who have attempted alternative forms of research are often already tenured faculty with an established publication record of more traditional inquiry. However, we should encourage scholarship to be a form of activism. The activist learns quickly that change is dependent upon risk—that the pursuit of social and human justice can often entail consequence. Researchers who are interested in pushing scholarship toward deeper meaning and a more holistic insight must also take risks. Even the traditional positivistic research methodology is dependent upon risky claims. To seek out radical possibilities is what has driven society to seek deeper and greater meaning found in the complex phenomena that frame our everyday lives. Deeper meaning, greater meaning, the promise of possibility—all risks to be taken; all reasons for my entrée into the writing of fiction as research.

The writing of fiction reveals a tension that exists between creative writing and traditional academic writing. Traditional academic writing, while always subject to reader interpretation, aims to be clear and direct, ensuring that the intention and narrative are not misinterpreted. Creative writing and fiction can provide, as a matter of artistic expression, some room for interpretation on the part of the reader. While not all works of fiction present this possibility, works of fiction involving animals often are works of metaphor, the meaning found within the story’s representation of other phenomena as well as the interpretive liberties taken by the reader. Metaphor can be discovered through both reading and writing, and so the burden of discovery is rendered much more democratic, the process of inquiring into the subject matter experienced by both the author of the text as well as those who critically read and engage with it. Writing through story renders our work accessible as we “frame new information in terms of experience” and “make sense of it in terms of a ‘story’” (Schaafsma, 1993, p. 35).

Framing Inquiry as Art: Methodological Considerations for the Public Intellectual

My inquiry into the meaning of the zoo and its colonial history has yielded critiques beyond the iron bars of the institution itself. Inquiring into public spaces entails a discussion of both the real and the metaphorical, and our representation of that inquiry should also consider this relationship. So too, my writing process yields an inquiry into not only the subject of a public institution, but a discussion about how such an institution is represented—in narrative, in critique, in experience.

The public intellectual is in a position to ponder the meaning of public phenomena and its relevance to the everyday while also taking stock of the context of power relationships and their impact on our understanding of phenomena. In particular, the public intellectual is charged with “maintaining a state of constant alertness of a perpetual willingness to not let half-truths or received ideas steer one along” (Said, 1994b, p. 23). The ability to do such a task, and to do it
with both meaning and conviction, entails a consideration of both the space we engage and the audience we hope to reach.

**Engaging Space: Placing Inquiry**

We engage in conversation with the space we study by reinterpreting and re-storying it in the terms of our own experience and location. Public pedagogy is a process—a question. How might we interpret the world as a source of learning, a place of ponder? How might that place be reinterpreted metaphorically, helping us to better understand its complexity of meaning? The zoo emerged to be both a subject of inquiry as well as a metaphor through which to comprehend the meaning of institutionalized space and knowledge. My work about zoos was no longer just about the zoo itself. It became an inquiry into other spaces that can be likened to a zoo. As a writer, I remain open to the phenomenon, allowing it to speak back to me, and incorporating this into my analysis.

Data are found in the phenomena we study, as well as the representations of the phenomena in literature of all forms. Fictional stories that incorporate zoos, whether metaphorically or literally, are antithetical to the simplistic signage that is found outside modern zoo exhibits within the space of the zoo. Kafka's (1983) short story of Red Peter, the gorilla who learned to talk as a human and then speaks from his previous experience as a caged animal, draws upon public knowledge about zoos to question where in society we may find cages. Edward Albee's (1997) first play, *The Zoo Story* takes place near New York's Central Park Zoo. The zoo is a referential point in the plot—while it is referenced throughout the play, the significance of its use is not direct. The reader (or viewer) is then left to consider connections between the metaphorical meaning of the zoo and the exchange between the two main characters. Such stories can weave together complexities that are too easily dismissed in a more direct attempt to explain phenomenon. Fictional works evoke emotion, relationships, and connections.

In practice, most research involves characters in the form of differing points of view, contradictory knowledges and experiences, and literature. In fiction, those characters are given names. Regardless of the writing form chosen by the researcher, there remains an obligation to the reader to remain open to their subject—to approach the topic with conviction yet embrace the journey that will ensue. To this end, Apple (1996) argued that “educational researchers…assemble within their research craft an integrity of language with which to express the moral positions…of their inquiry” (cited in Clough, 2002, p. 86). Novels reflect lives lived, and so they provide a means to analyze a topic both literally and metaphorically. *The Little Prince* (de Saint-Exupery, 2000) explores the difference between adult and children’s thinking. Hesse’s (1956) *The Journey to the East* vivifies the journeys we take through life, across time, and in memory. Novels provide the researcher another tool to “give us insight into the real” (Cary, 1958, p. 152), or at least our perceptions of the real.

**Engaging Audience: Rendering Our Work Public**

Scholars can learn a great deal from the process of writing fiction. Fictional works are a form of generative inquiry—they generate conversation and dialogue. The challenge is to represent inquiry in a language that is both meaningful and accessible. For example, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* (Haddon, 2003) represents to the reader a compelling and realistic portrayal of events from the perspective of a young boy with Asperger’s Syndrome. Written by an educator who has experience working with autistic children, the fictional story is not meant to serve as an authoritative narrative on autism, but, instead, helps to generate an appreciation of a different perspective, an alternative narrative on autism.
The public intellectual is left to engage the meaning that belies plot. Plot, whether real or imagined, serves as a vehicle to communicate a consideration of reality. It is helpful to remember, “language is constitutive of reality, not reflective of it” (Schaafsma, 1993, p. 31), and so the process of writing is, itself, a means of engaging meaning. Recall that research is representation, much like the exhibits in a zoo. The question we must ask, then, is what meaning is conveyed, captured, and exhibited through our representation of inquiry. Chambers (1984) contends that narrative authority “implies an act of seduction” (p. 51). Fiction, or any artistic representation, for that matter, entails both the literal and the metaphorical. There is the plot, the description, the happening, and then there is the way in which these things are interpreted, by both the reader and the artist—a disruption of the authoritative narrative.

“We start from scratch, and words don’t,” said Eudora Welty (2007, p. 109). We are situated in a world that is given meaning through the words we use and the emotions and feelings associated with the stories we tell. We begin with something to say and find our way to say it through the words. “Reality” says Ayers (2008) “is always messier…than any particular story can honestly contain” (p. 50). Any narrative, continues Ayers, “by its nature, lies.” Inquiry into public phenomenon is an attempt to story what we see, to capture it, and contain it within the confines of momentary understanding. We engage in conversation with the space we study, reinterpreting it, re-storying it in the terms of our own experience and location. The question is how we choose to represent this story, and how we allow this interpretation to talk back to us in the process.

Silas turns to me, his eyes slightly squinting, “Why fiction?”

“Perhaps my desire to write fiction rests, in part, in its ability to preserve ambiguity,” I answer. “I am not completely certain, nor will I ever be. I write to capture my moments of inquiry, my thoughts in their most pure form—developing, contradicting, and incomplete. I have come to accept, with humility, that what I do not know always outweighs what I do know.” I looked at Silas, proud of my response.

Sam sits, intently looking. His nostrils flare as he lifts his snout. “But you humans, you still long for completion beyond your immediate need. Bears, we eat when we are hungry, we sleep when we are tired. We know our place. It is here. It is now. We learn from our world and live within it. You humans are always looking for something more, something farther, something greater.” Sam looks away, and grumbles a sigh.

“Perhaps this is our human condition,” Silas suggests. “We always long for something more, and so we push toward that end.”

But can we not learn from others and their experiences? Can we not listen to the bear? Can we long for incompleteness? For the moment? For here? Or must our inquiry thrust us beyond ourselves?

Fiction is a form of art, and all interpretations are a sort of fiction. “The mystery of fiction,” says Welty (2007), “lies in the use of language to express human life” (p. 112). When we write, we do it incompletely, representative of our momentary reflection on a broader journey. We are all writing toward longer novels, painting toward larger impressions, and longing toward more inclusive interpretations, constructed over the arduous course of our lives. Ayers (2008) likens writing to a “journey…by a pilgrim” (p. 54), not unlike St. Pierre’s (1997) characterization of her own ethnographic work as “nomadic inquiry.”

The public intellectual is challenged, then, to remain aware of her location within a life not yet completely lived, as well as the charge to suggest possibility and alternate ways of seeing the world with conviction. I find it important to remind myself that “what alternatives exist
depends in part on what new alternatives” are brought “into being” by the researcher (Talbott, 2008, p. 105). Our work, if we choose to acknowledge it as such, is a creative venture, it is art. Art interprets, art interrupts, art transcends—and we are left with remains of interpretations past to create those interpretations that will carry us through the morrow.

In scholarship, in intellectualism, we should view our charge as one to provoke debate and skepticism, for this is how we may seek meaning and encourage social action through contemplative critique and imaginative possibility. As we bridge the personal and the intellectual, we fuse the literature of the mind with the literature of the soul, the language of scholarship with the language of spirit. In consideration of the intellectual journey I continue to share with my characters, Silas and Sam, I revel in the promise of a good story.

Notes

1. This chapter references a novel in progress that seeks to explore the colonial curriculum of zoos—namely the themes of captivity that are learned and experienced. This piece will not reference the novel directly, but speak to the process in which I am engaged in writing it.

2. I draw this term from Perl, Counihan, McCormack, and Schnee (2007) who argue that storytelling is a “compelling and valid way to reveal the data they have gathered” (p. 306).

3. Ernest House wrote *Regression to the Mean: A novel of Evaluation Politics* as an Emeritus Professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He had already accrued an impressive publication record using more traditional methodologies before embarking on this project (Leggo & Sameshima, in press). Harold Benjamin developed *The Sabertooth Curriculum* (Peddiwell, 1939) as a pedagogical tool while an Associate Professor of Education and Psychology, but did not publish the work until several years later after first publishing more traditional works.

4. Diane Ketelle, who writes as Bree Michaels, has been utilizing fictionalized narrative in her scholarly work as a junior faculty. Her work serves as a good example of such efforts to advocate for alternative forms of scholarship.

References


