

# The Visceral Imagination

## A Fertile Space for Non-Textual Knowing

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### Invitation

**I**N THIS TEXT, we have been invited to consider non-text based understandings of curriculum. Multiple art forms as “visceral” variables have been part of our understanding and presentation of our work, particularly in the live/d space when our art is speaking with the interstices *in* and intertwining *of* our curriculum theorizing. Considering these visceral variables disrupts the comprehensible, creating space to re-imagine culturally bound knowledge processes. As an attempt to familiarize the reader with this visceral space, in this essay we have included two videos to make some sense we looked for those partial patterns and correspondences which offer hope for a visceral imagination.

With a poet’s ear, the similarity in rhythm between *non text* and *nonsense* is too humorous to pass notice. Given that we have set out here to foreground our sensual understanding, it is with additional irony that definitive understandings of nonsense have in an historical twist betrayed empiricist conceptions of knowledge that were meant to privilege a heady, sharp-minded, capital truth. Growing interest in the work of French philosopher Alain Badiou underscores this irony. As den Heyer (2010) explains, Badiou’s work “freshly affronts the doxa...and more popular media-ated interpretations” (p. 151–152) of sense-making and argues for truth processes in our overly relativistic theorizing. These truths are connected to “material traces” of a “becoming subject” (p. 153). Like Badiou, we are careful when invoking a word like truth, pointing to the ever-ongoing processes and situated nature of our material knowing. den Heyer, (2010) draws our attention to the possible “fidelity” between a becoming subject and the instigating events of time and place which make up our sensing and sense-making of the world. The point, to extend den Heyer (2010), is to be vigilant regarding the potential dangers in making too much sense (the inevitable distortions and betrayals of desire), while simultaneously not denying the affirmative

of our sensuality. Something akin to Badiou's notion of an "encounter" we thus arrive in this moment *with* sense, in sensuality, and partly incensed to deeply, politically, and personally investigate a fertile space for understanding non-textual understanding. In Lacanian terms, the non-textual endeavour is one of getting beyond the imaginary.

Gallop (1985) rightly notes the implied dualistic pitfalls that arise in expending effort to get beyond the imaginary to the symbolic. The non text/text dyad if treated conceptually as the traditional axis of X and Y leaves one in a curricular quagmire. Gallop (1985) writes: "[T]o accede to the symbolic and vigilantly to resist the imaginary is mired in the imaginary" (p. 60). We propose that getting beyond the imaginary (Gallop, 1985, p. 59), when it comes to pushing the conceptual boundaries of how curriculum can be felt deeply with the senses, is not so much a pragmatic, or even a critical imperative, but a willed energy to live differently, to live in ways that exceed present limitations.

How often, however, is this energy expended within limitations that appear so fundamental to the educational process? So much so, for example, that even the good intention exposing those limitations (early work in critical pedagogy comes to mind), further subjects our being-deeply-human *in our senses* to a straight jacket of controlled experience. De Lissovoy (2010) explains that the current educational emphasis on critique oversimplifies "the central route to liberation" (p. 208) and makes human beings subject to further power by defining them within "particular forms of reason" (p. 208). De Lissovoy (2010) argues that "to create a human situation—and discover a moment of human being—is to challenge the essence of power" (p. 208). Feeling the import of Badiou, Gallop, and De Lissovoy, we arrive here with our sensuality and an awareness that it will be the mode of our sense-making.

I (Celeste) have spent many years researching, writing and teaching from and with the senses in connection to embodied knowing (Snowber, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010). We have been fortunate within the field of Curriculum Studies, which has roots in phenomenological ways of being, that there is room for a continued discourse and history of connections to the body and knowing. This history continues to forge bodily connections to the importance of being what I call "embodied intellectuals," and curriculum scholars have a continued legacy to forge these intersections with depth and wonder (Blumenfeld-Jones, 2004, 2006; Cancienne 2001, 2003, 2008; Lloyd & Smith, 2006; Springgay, 2004, 2008; Springgay & Freedman, 2007; Milloy, 2007, Smith, 2006, 2007). Bodily ways of perceiving the world and expression are central to the graduate course I teach on "Embodiment and Curriculum Inquiry." Here we not only talk of the body politic and deconstruct the body, culture, and learning, but the class is invited into what it means to write from feeling and tasting a strawberry, or walking in silence in the damp cool earth, or what the water says to us when we kayak, or how our writing can come alive after we dance. This opens up the space for the visceral imagination, and in this place wonder is born.

Leggo (2005) speaks vibrantly of the poetic as a pause and provocation for wonder. It is a combination of his call to live poetically (Leggo, 2005) and Greene's (1995) imperative of foregrounding the imagination, that we together turn to the poetry in our lives *that is* our lives so that we might get beyond the imaginary by living in it. Gallop (1985) writes: "[T]he imaginary as the imaginary constitutes the symbolic" (Gallop, 1985, p. 62).

I (Sean) find a similar sense of wonder in the sense-making value poetry, whether as a mode of inquiry, truth-telling, or self-expression, poems speak of our various sensuous connections to the world (Wiebe, 2009, 2010a, 2010b). As an indirect means to representation, poetry relies on both metaphor and metonym, while at the same time not being in opposition to precision, detail, analysis, and other forms of critical investigation. Together we continue to write poetry, to think

and be with poetry, and to sense our environment through poetry because the processes involved bring us closer to the finely nuanced textures of our experience.

**Body Wise**

Wild roses bloomed  
inside my belly  
announcing daffodils  
running down my  
spine, growing  
taller, all the  
same time a heart  
enlarging to the sky.

Body wise – the  
cell’s knowing,  
To dance I break  
open to being human  
re/minded – re/bodied  
to ancient story.

Wisdom of the flesh  
in the soil of loosening  
the muscles and joints  
where light splits  
from within  
and a season  
of spring bursts  
earth and heaven  
from the inside out.

Delicious beyond the  
text: this is the  
text of the body  
dancing torsos  
back to the  
vowels of the heart  
and syllables of  
radiant hips.  
Pelvic inquiry at  
its best, dance  
us back to  
wonder, and  
there the truth  
will be told.

### **Personal**

It gets to be a darkening stain,  
our inbox expanding and deepening  
every day, like a secret that can't be told,  
but must be told.

There's no end to good companions gone  
the Facebook route, who post pictures  
of drunken parties with little captions  
that signal the move to superficiality.

The deepest horror is the oblivion,  
that in this steady sound of rain,  
there is no author to speak of grief  
or joy, or any need for a reader at all.

For each of us, it is in the processes of what we see in our experiences that both becomes poetry but is our way of being in poetry. Our "seeing" is not a privileging of sight, but a way of saying that we also hear rhythms in the landscapes of our experience; it is the way we return to places and people and moments because of how we remember and are drawn to smell; it is the way we learn to know through touch, all of our senses inherently together, our exploration of what it means to know through and with the body as our sensory relations and interactions weave through, intertwine, and come to form a rich and sensuous fabric of experience.

Curriculum theorists thus do well to consider the senses deeply since we cannot make sense apart from the body. If we truly teach who we are, then it is through our bodies that we are teaching. We don't have bodies, we are bodies. In my graduate education classes (Celeste) we befriend our bodies and learn once again as children the delight of knowledge through our senses. In this safe container, the embodied classroom, we are beckoned to magic, and education that is transformative at the heart. This beckoning of the senses is a call to be present. And when the words come through the body, they announce the bone beauty of having a lived curriculum through the senses.

## Sensuality in Inquiry

### **Tides**

Swells of navy blue  
gray ice water  
unyielding to fullness  
of brown seaweed.  
One protruding rock  
pronounced your tides high  
I fell in love with your swell  
a constant presence in girlhood -  
even though I left you Atlantic  
I have other shores:

Pacific Northwest, Gulf Islands, Burrard Inlet

You, cold blue will always  
be my first love, a tidal lover  
who shaped me by the wash  
of your retreating and forwarding.  
Heart tides pulse with  
joy and loss.  
Perhaps it is not high or low tide  
that is important but  
the space in between  
which moves.

The relationship between the inner landscape of our lives and the outer landscape of the natural world continues to be a place of deep curiosity. This inquiry is situated in ocean shores and my poetics and site-specific dance has spilled over to video. Following is “Thirst”—a dance/video collaboration (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB32cGt0Wak>), which explores these intersections of site-specific work with videographer and musician Gary Bandzmer. This is filmed on location in the Oceanside town Nahant, Massachusetts where I grew up in New England, and becomes a context to explore the knowledge of the senses in its connection to the inner longing of the heart.

### **The Sunday Morning after Hurricane Earl**

No one cares about the broken branches  
the assumption being they were old  
and rotten, there is nothing left  
but to drag them to the garden shed  
and buzz them into little pieces  
with my chainsaw, like the memories  
that go on rattling in my sleep, loud  
enough you’d think the choke was left  
wide open just to spite the neighbours.

It’s not unlike the time when the basement  
flooded, also after a hurricane whose  
name was just as forgettable and unassuming  
as Earl, and what kept plaguing me then  
was a memory of the short  
spiky-haired girl who’d said yes  
to a second date until I talked  
about all the talent in my little finger.

Most of what I said back then would spill  
out and soak just about anyone  
who hadn’t taken precautions  
for such a flood. What I needed  
was a shopvac to suck back my words

before they escaped, a tool so perfect  
for clearing up the four inches  
of water in the basement.

I've always admired my father  
whose had the right tool  
for any kind of weather.  
He woke up early enough to repair  
his dreams, where I'm certain  
he didn't have to imagine us disappearing  
into the eye of the storm.

Experienced haiku poet, Philomene Kocher (2009) speaks of her work with the data of life experience. The collection and analysis of this data is “a distillation” and a “connection-building” opportunity. Poetry is particularly suited to our storied lives, to bringing connections into our understandings of those stories. Such “distillations” as Kocher describes, are often born out of discovery, out of keen observation of our moment by moment circumstances. She writes: “I still wondered about the alchemy of turning experience into a poem. I knew that this distillation was a key to discovering the connection-building capacity of haiku” (Kocher, 2009, para. 5). Like many working in poetic inquiry, Kocher (2009) is careful to explain that the process of haiku writing is more than simply understanding, more than sense-making or truth telling. It is those things, but it is also a long lingering with the senses. Juxtaposed with sensory details, such awareness is temporary and fragmented, leaving a trace of felt experience to be connected with one's other life experiences. Understanding thus becomes more alive, itself growing in complex and varied ways. Its process is ever ongoing, and in need of further exploratory and clarifying life data. Kocher (2009) explains: “[A]mbiguity creates a gap between the words of a haiku and...the whole of the experience...In this way, the gap provides both an absence (it does not appear in words) and presence (it is suggested) of connection” (Kocher, 2009, para. 12).

These gaps Kocher refers to are the spaces in between where we are invited to notice the sensuous details of the everyday world where the landscape speaks to us in a language which is rooted in the smell of the earth, the scent of rain and the feeling of our skin. The in between place, the going from here and to there, these places and movements one could say are non/sense—not sensible—for we are in transit, and in transit we are offered the opportunity for the senses to split open and illuminate ways of being which cultivate awe. This is the erotics of the everyday, the engagement with sensuous knowledge (Snowber, 1998).

### **Distances**

Two months into her absence  
they start again, whether leaning  
against the railing, looking out  
over the Atlantic, or resting,  
hands folded over the handle  
of his spade, like morning crows  
sheen, from an all night rain,  
there is no ignoring them,  
on wire, on pole, on branch

on eaves, they wake into every  
thought and memory, they slip  
under the day's plans, and add  
another layer of grief.  
What he has recognized is brief:  
Is this the beginning?  
Or is there yet another depth?

### **Rakeless Woman**

I am a rakeless woman  
burgundy and yellow  
is strewn over bubble  
concrete driveway  
unmowed grass  
clover green  
laced with flaming  
blood leaves.  
I don't have the heart  
to sweep away  
nature's collage  
random art  
on suburban lawn.

What we interpret from our senses becomes experience in relation to particular places and events. Poetic inquiry usefully considers the shifting and complex details of movement between people and places. What we sense finds pathways, often new ones, to a complicated understanding which is rarely a clear or consistent classification or cause and effect. We believe that *feeling* our experience is a less pathological, less distanced interaction with our day to day encounters as we struggle to navigate a changing and difficult terrain that is our relationship with our social environment. Our senses are both an interpretive aspect and experiential aspect of daily living, so, for example, it is possible that we come to multiple meanings of home, identity, and the public.

## The Visceral Imagination

### **An Intuitive Scent—The Stew of Our Lives**

They cooked with their bodies  
an intuitive scent in the fingers  
a little of this, a dash of that  
they knew just the right amount  
a cookbook was not meant for  
the mothers of the old country  
and many worlds are contained  
within this old country  
oceans of cultures and languages

but the dialect they all understood  
was the art of cooking for their families  
written in the recipe of the heart  
passed down from generation to generation.

My mother left this earth too early  
till I cared to archive the past  
I have been longing for all the flavors  
of my childhood in my adult life.  
The parts I remember and the  
recipes I follow still do not  
produce the exact combination of food  
Every Christmas I make the cheese boureg  
and I come closer to the cheese that melts  
in my mouth, but I know there is a language  
of Armenian cooking I have yet to live into.

Until I eat at my friend's Armenian family  
and the mothers and grandmothers create  
the flavors, tastes and textures of my youth –  
pine nuts and lamb, beans and tomato  
caressed in olive oil, dolma stuffed with  
filling that was my childhood revisited.  
I have not stopped thinking of those  
explosions of beauty bursting inside  
my palette since I left their home and I  
am now dreaming of every food that was  
stuffed in my household growing up –  
meatballs, peppers, tomatoes, and grapeleaves  
and I know I am lacking because my own children  
have not eaten anything stuffed except a bird

Recipes for the life are hidden in the body  
the knowing of the cells, whether  
they are meals to eat or wisdom to live by  
they are stored in the memory and marrow  
of mouths and tongues, noses and fingers  
and in these remembrance there is  
a storehouse of love waiting to be taken  
bite by bite into the stew of our lives.

The stew of our lives is the ability to live, breathe, and listen to the sensuous world within us and around us. This way of learning through our senses allows us to inhabit the small ordinary details with great import. We see that knowledge is stored in our tissues and marrow, and thus to honor how we were created as humans is to find a myriad of ways to bring the senses to learning. Coming to our senses has more meaning than we can imagine. It is the intuitive scent of our



lives; the wise body. A curriculum imbued with the senses is smelling out the paths in our lives. It is thinking on our feet and being so present to the bodily nuances within us that we cannot help be ushered into the place of deep aliveness that breathes with touch and smell, sound and sight. We are invited into the beauty of the deep orange of fall, the whispers of spring wind, and the crispness of a cold day. We are not only attuned to the physical weather, but the weather of our inner lives.

Living with and through our senses is the place for us to gently rock into ways of being which call us to attention, to mindful listening. And what we would suggest is that this is a bodyful listening; a listening with our bodies. The call to the poetic beckons us as creatures in this world to listen to all of life as a place for the echoes, silences, yawns and sighs to be a sacred space to embrace the curriculum of life. Our skin has a language unto itself, all we need to do is listen.

### **Wittgenstein on Tap: Intoxication in Translation**

*Not I but the wind that blows through me*

~Robert Creeley

With a kind of innocent buoyancy  
 I look out at the yachts on English Bay  
 and try to see myself, arm linked with yours,  
 the energy of the sun on our skin.  
 I wish I had inspiration enough  
 to dream my own body into craft,  
 something like “Raging Beauty,” “Just for Pleasure,”  
 or “The Breaking Free.” When the wind  
 lifts the pages of my notebook  
 like white sails fluttering on the water,  
 I have to remember where I’ve come from  
 and gone, and should be.  
 Or inspiration enough in economy,  
 then marketing might have chosen me,  
 and I’d have started a brewery to craft  
 the academic taste for wit and hops,  
 whose tavern ballad is fueled in Freudian  
 slips, and grief from the parent’s knee.  
 Maybe I could reconceptualize  
 my curriculum of love [or drinking]  
 with *Pinar’s Pale Ale?* or buy *Heidegger’s*  
 Heineken and discover that the lager  
 is not quite being what it should be.  
 What *does* it mean, “to beer.”  
 The relationship between intoxication  
 and translation is (see Derrida) arbitrary  
 and elusive, between words and love, more so.  
 Better sip *Lacan’s Light slowly*,  
 avoid anything bitter or stout.

A beer in my grasp, not the boat in the harbor,  
still I cannot find my voice, it turns leeward  
as words hide inside a labyrinth  
of whys: why I cannot name my desire  
in your presence, why paper is nothing  
like sails at all.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAnbn8JOScg>

### **The Jellyfish Cure**

Having read recently the tale  
of a jellyfish that stings  
on command, I've woken up  
ungodly early to my *National Geographics*,  
and begin to learn all I can  
about their watery secrets.  
Not surprisingly, jellyfish are early risers,  
producing some of the fastest  
movements in the animal kingdom;  
their stinging cells discharge  
in seven hundred nanoseconds  
and strike with the force of a bullet.  
If only I could write poetry  
like the jellyfish, then my poisoned sting,  
would be a part of the miracle  
of a natural defense mechanism.  
It's the white glow that I want most,  
birthed between those magazine photos.  
Shaped into the figure of a man,  
it would pierce all memory beyond  
the darkest blues, and cast its light  
against the cold waters of existence.  
Like sunlight through shutters,  
this poem is their mystery  
in the world of my humdrum.  
If only I could write poetry  
like the jellyfish, you would still love me,  
my hand around your waist  
would feel desire warming  
the salt of your skin,  
love's sting measured  
in nanoseconds.

### With the Senses There is No Conclusion

What is normally focal to us, indeed those things that are common to us, perhaps even that understanding which is most dear, is what needs our ongoing poetic disruption. Along with

Gallop, others in the social sciences have called us to sense-enriched disruption of common experience: To name just a few there is thick description (Geertz, 1994), releasing the imagination (Greene, 1995), embodied knowing (Shapiro, 1999; Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Bresler, 2004; Snowber, 2005) and complicated conversation (Pinar, 2004). That is, *through* ongoing articulation of the imaginary we have access to the symbolic, however briefly, and only in glimpses, what Clifford (1986) has called *partial truths*. Poetic inquiries, along with arts-based/influenced research, because of their deep reliance on and acknowledgement of the senses, help access such glimpses of partial truths. After all, our foremost experience is embodied, as it is through our senses that we come to know, make claims, and represent social phenomenon in curriculum theory.

We began this paper in the fertile space between the sensible and non/sense/able. What is nonsense is to not acknowledge the senses and the sensuous as a place for embodied knowing. Here smells, texture, sight, nuances of bodily language that echo both expanse and contraction locate us in our deep knowing. This is knowledge that turns to wisdom, and works itself out in a lifetime. Our memory is located in our senses, and all one has to do is to re-inhabit a familiar smell of childhood, whether that is an apple tree or an apple pie, or the smell of salt or prairie to know a waft of memory breathes once again through the cells. How we make meaning is connected through the sensuous engagement with the natural world.

We invite you as the reader to delight in the language of your own skin, where the membrane of knowing resides in your cells. Here is a lifetime of wisdom, waiting to be tapped and honored for here is the lived curriculum of the senses. As humans we have been given the birthright of being a sensual people, a people with sense, and a world filled with the songs and smells of the earth. Let us reclaim our ancient knowing and call forth the poetic in each small breath.

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