Memory and Métissage: Three Creation Stories

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Creation Stories: In the Beginning

Erika          I Grew up in a City with Bridges

Creation Stories: When the World Was New

Erika          Roman Ruins

Creation Stories: Transformations

Erika          Berlin: Grenzüberschreibung

Creation Stories: Memory and Métissage

Erika          Vancouver: New Border Crossings
I grew up in a city with bridges --Saarbrücken/“Saar bridges” across the Saar river-- a place that derives its name from its location by a river with two large bridges and a few smaller ones. I remember crossings from one bank to the other to go to school, to the Mädchengymnasium, the secondary girls’ school I went to from grade six to thirteen. Close by, the river flowed into another country, into France/Frankreich/France, across a border dissolved by water. I remember Sunday outings with my parents and brothers, crossing the bridge to Strasbourg and its surroundings, visiting small villages and country inns for long drawn out suppers and walks in the countryside. The border crossings, the Grenzstationen, in those sleepy little places where we had to stop and have our passports checked, at the will and whim of the custom officers, became weekly routines and rituals, as familiar as going to school on the other days of the week. German was the language of my home, the language I felt at home in and, within it, even more so in my home town's dialect, thoroughly infused with French, the language from across the border, especially the local Alsace Lorraine dialect. I lived with layers of languaging that ignored national borders and made meaning beyond the political boundaries. I spoke German at home and in school and learned standard Parisian French from the early grades on, and when we went across the border, we switched to the local Alsace speech, easy to understand with its mixed German and French sounds.

Like Helène Cixous, the French German Algerian writer, I grew up "in the middle of language" (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997). I remember the place and the sound and the look and the texture of my mother tongue, that lived body of language, from the
beginning of be(com)ing in/to my world. Like Helène Cixous, in my writing, living, and teaching, my aim is to not lock up meaning but to give meaning/myself over to the chance of linguistic and textual crossing, to (re)imagine and to listen to different languages speak, to let language speak. Thus my living in the middle of language becomes a métissage of mother tongue and other tongues that are part of my memory and many of my students' backgrounds and realities in Western Canadian classrooms where English, most often, is the only language of instruction.

So this is how I begin: with a beginning that starts somewhere in the middle, in the middle of languages, picks up the poetry in between the generations and lives among worlds and words. I try to remember what it felt like to grow up in the middle of languages reminiscent of the ancient tongues of Latin, of Old French and Old Germanic sounds, articulated by the Roman alphabet—first language, Deutsch/German, then a Romance language, Français/Französisch/French, layered with yet another Germanic one, in the same Roman alphabet, English/Englisch /Anglais, in grade six, taught by a teacher from England with a definite Queen's English accent, the sounds, their pronunciations similar and yet so different, easy to mix up—der Wind—le vent—the wind—and my memory of my mother tongue is like the wind, fleeting, hard to hold on to, hard to catch, a trickster that twists my tongue and confuses the sounds.

I remember my mother reciting the German poems she was taught by her mother, in the days of her childhood and growing years, loving those poems, loving the language. In my memory, the beginnings of language emerge from that poetic place. There was my mother, reciting lines by Goethe, Schiller, Hesse, Rilke, and many other German poets, lines passed on through generations. To this day, in her eighties, my mother still knows
those lines by heart, performs them at family gatherings, her seniors’ group, over trans-
continental telephone lines at her daughter’s and granddaughter's request. What a
remarkable memory my mother has for those old verses. I remember when I once asked
her how she came to be so good at memorizing all these words for such a long time, she
told me about a memory that still lingers with her: as a young child she used to practice
these poems at night under her bed covers, with a flashlight, “borrowing” her sister’s
school texts, which she was magically attracted to and was not allowed to touch during
the day. My mother never had a chance to go to the same Mädchengymnasium, the only
school of higher learning for girls; a war happened, her sister died, and most of the poetry
books were destroyed. But my mother kept all those poems in her heart and in her head
until years later when she could once again find her way back to them. She found those
poems in new collections and carefully and lovingly arranged them in the big family
armoire with the sliding glass doors.

There I began my childhood reading journeys, amongst volumes with richly textured
spines, their pages once again stained and torn from use, always inviting me into their
treasured words, my eyes and ears and hands relishing the textures of the words and
words they revealed on their pages, growing into reading, growing into the middle of
language.
Here is a memory, fragile and in danger of being lost, a dream of a mother and her poetry, learned by heart. It evokes the old stories and legends and landscapes of home on a different continent and in a different tongue—mother tongue—ears and eyes of sounds and images of words, language like the mother’s body, that is larger than the self, that carries me with it, bears me and re-births me and sings to me a bittersweet lullaby…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schlaflied</th>
<th>Lullaby</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Einmal wenn ich dich verlier,</td>
<td>Someday if I lose you,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wirst du schlafen können, ohne</td>
<td>How will you sleep without</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dass ich wie eine Lindenkrone</td>
<td>My whispering above you</td>
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<td>Mich verflüstre über dir?</td>
<td>Like the linden’s branches?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ohne dass ich hier wache und</td>
<td>Without my lying here</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worte, beinahe wie Augenlider,</td>
<td>Awke and placing words, almost</td>
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<tr>
<td>Auf deine Brüste, auf deine Glieder</td>
<td>Like eyelids, on your breasts,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Niederlege, auf deinen Mund.</td>
<td>Your limbs, your lips.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ohne dass ich dich verschliess</td>
<td>Without my closing you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Und dich allein mit deinem lasse</td>
<td>And leaving you alone with what is yours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wie einen Garten mit einer Masse</td>
<td>Like a garden with a mass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Von Melissen und Stern-Anis.</td>
<td>Of mint-balm and star-anise.</td>
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Rainer Maria Rilke
I remember the old words and the old world, and through memory, I re-position myself to create new worlds, to "dream of a common language," … "…from all the lost collections" (Rich, 1978; 1981).

Here is a picture from those childhood days: a photograph of a mother and a daughter, sitting side by side on an ancient stone wall, in front of the ruins of a Roman settlement, famous for its mosaics discovered and unearthed in the vicinity of their home town. I remember sun-drenched landscape, summer dresses with flower patterned fabric in favourite colours, elegant and airy, playful. There were just the two of us, my mother and I, in the middle of a landscape littered with ruins and mosaics, in the middle of history, stepping onto the delicate stones, retracing the patterns of the tiles, evoking names from the ancient legends I was reading about in school: Homer’s Iliad and the Odyssey, and so many others. I was fascinated with the myths of the gods and goddesses of ancient Rome and Greece, and I asked my mother to tell me more; I went to the library to find more books, I couldn’t wait to learn the epic poems about Psyche and Eros, Aphrodite and Hermes, the winged god who brought the gift of language to the human world. I loved those outings into past worlds, made real by the mosaics, mixing the ruins and the reading, the stones and the stories. The colours of those summer dresses seem faded now in the photograph, impossible to keep alive, but I want them to remain, preserve them like the crumbling architecture and mosaics before they return to the earth. Writing these memories, I journey to familiar sites/sights to see what remains, reconstruct my world in order to build a new one.
Erika: Berlin: Grenzüberschreibung

Here is another story about a border, a picture from that part of the world where I grew, where I began another life. "How I grew" is the title of one of American writer Mary McCarthy's autobiographical works, a memoir that speaks to the ways in which the author's writing was shaped by place, by where her childhood, adolescence and beginning life as a student and writer were formed. Written many years later in locations far away from her hometown Seattle, these life stories inform the reader about the importance of place in connection with personal narratives.

My journey away from home began in a place that brought together many strands of cosmopolitan living. Berlin, a city in the heart of Europe, surrounded by borders and split by a wall that separated East and West, cosmopolitan only on the latter side, and I was a student of language and literature, writing a thesis about Mary McCarthy's and other women writers' lives. "How I grew" and where I wrote this thesis shaped my life profoundly. Berlin was in the North of Germany, far from Saarbrücken, my hometown in the southwestern part of the country—but these are two border places I still call home, saturated with different dialects of a language I recall as my mother tongue. Ever since then I have often experienced a bittersweet longing, a homesickness for the comfort of my mother tongue and for these cities I used to knew so well.

Living in West Berlin during the 70s, becoming a student of interdisciplinary North American Studies in language, literature and culture, was an unsettling daily exercise; it challenged my evolving understanding of otherness--political, academic, and linguistic. I learned to speak American English and listen to the rhetoric that filled the halls of the highly politicized John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at
the Freie Universität Berlin, the hotbed of the radical student movement. There, unfamiliar accents from California and the East Coast intermingled with foreign accents in German and native tongues from Japan, Iran and other world nations--visiting professors and international students engaged in conversations about language and literature and identity. Berlin, surrounded as it was by a wall of political and human travesties, has deeply shaped me, left me with memories of difficult and yet vibrant readings of the world and my place within it, in interdisciplinary ways, and has given me the courage to move out into a larger world, across continents, to continue my search for other languages, to find a different home and to live other/wise.

Living in these border regions, always aware of the forced political lines that artificially separated the nations into imposed linguistic and cultural identities, has marked my shifting identity as an individual within these lines. I now consciously appreciate the ambiguity of my heritage–and I long for the constant back and forth between geographic, cultural and linguistic spaces, which was such an unconscious commonplace experience then. I marvel at the memories of easily slipping into another tongue, and how, every time I go back home now, that ease seems so difficult to regain. With my departure and venture into multilingual situations of a different kind, the need to find a home in language and in the world has left me with an unending yearning for the places where I grew, places so distant from the classrooms where I am the teacher now and that full of students from all over the world.
I came to live in Vancouver—on the West Coast of British Columbia—another city with bridges. For a long time, I did not feel at home in this salt water city and its mixed tongues in between British and American English and other variables of the lingua franca of this globe, and even more so in the cacophony of Asian and other foreign and native tongues that come together in this multilingual place. I misinterpreted Canadian English colloquialisms and idioms, experienced pragmatic failure over and over again, was “lost in translation” (Hoffman, 1989). I wrote home about these experiences a lot, to my parents, my family and friends, finding comfort in the written familiarity of epistolary exchanges in my mother tongue. These letters became home and formed and informed my subsequent texts, my trying to make sense of my Diaspora.

I married a Sansei, a third generation Japanese Canadian, and soon my daughter’s world began.

Re-reading Charlotte: a family name, my grandmother's and now my daughter's, old and new, re-surfacing in print around me: many a dedication on the front page of a book, reading aloud from Charlotte's Web in classrooms where I am a student and a teacher, coming across an article in a German magazine on Charlotte: Ein Name macht Karriere: "Suddenly, an almost forgotten name is on everybody's tongue -- a name that gets on well with/in the world"-- and a daughter who lives the promise of her name. Other Charlottes' lives: In Berlin, writing my thesis about women writers, among them the Brontë sisters, Charlotte and Emily, who, in the isolation of the windswept Yorkshire moors, spent their short lives struggling with the difficulty of being women writers in a male-dominated world,
yet whose passionate literary endeavours inspired generations to come. Years later, visiting Charlottenburg, the palatial residence of Charlotte, Queen of Prussia, with my Charlotte, six years old and a writer in her own right. Other Charlottes ...remembering yet another queen from another historical landscape, the British Queen Charlotte, and islands bearing her name—Haida Gwaii—inhabited by generations of aboriginal people who have been denied their own naming and history for centuries...Charlotte has a serious resonance, and a beautiful one too—and it is at the same time suitable for famous spiders and a friend’s irreverent basset hound puppy.

A wise man I know told me that remembering well does not mean just remembering happy times, that is, suppressing the fire by which we might be refined. “Remembering well means remembering how each of us might struggle through life's bittersweetness with the kind of courage that enables life to go on” (Smith, 1999, p. 135). And so the lines intersect, old and new. And this is what my daughter Charlotte wrote in school about her family:

*The story of my family is filled with many different cultures and many different countries. When people ask me, “What are you?” I like to describe myself as “a mixture of the antagonists of World War II.” My mother is German and my father of Japanese ancestry. Sometimes it takes people a few minutes to think about this. My grandparents grew up in Japan, in a small town near Hiroshima called Miorae After they were married, they decided to move to Canada in the late 1920s in search of a better life with more opportunities for the family they wanted to raise. They bought a house in Vancouver. Leaving their home country*
and all of their family was very difficult, but in Canada, they saw the promise of a better chance. They soon had three young children.

December 7, 1941. The day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. At the time, no single person could have predicted the heartbreak and loss that the Japanese community, and my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and father would endure from the events that happened on this one single day. When the Americans bombed Hiroshima in 1942, Sumiyo and Yukio lost all the records of their family history, not only on paper, but also in memory, as they lost all of their family in Japan.

In Canada, the Federal Cabinet ordered the expulsion of 22,000 Japanese Canadians residing on the Pacific coast and declared war on Japan almost immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbour. This marked the beginning of a process that saw Canada’s Japanese minority uprooted from their homes, confined in detention camps, stripped of their property, and forcibly dispersed across Canada or back to a starving Japan. Japanese Canadians were now seen as “traitors” to the Crown, and as “enemies,” regardless of their place of birth or loyalty and commitment to a Canadian way of life.

My grandparents had to move from their house in East Vancouver to the crowded confines of Hastings Park, a temporary shelter for thousands of evacuees. The conditions were appalling, not much more than beds in an old livestock barn. Privacy was non-existent. They then moved to the isolated village of Greenwood, in the interior of British Columbia. The conditions there were bad, cramped quarters with uninsulated damp floors, almost no heat, and little food during the harsh winters. Yet one would never know from looking at family
pictures from the late 40s. Always smiling, always happy. Regardless of all the hardships, my grandparents knew that one day they would be able to move back to Vancouver. They survived, and my father was born in Greenwood in 1947. Eventually the family did get a chance to move back to the coast and start their life all over again.

Sadly, my grandparents died before I was born in 1980. I would have loved to hear their stories and their opinions, but I will never get that chance. It saddens me to know that I will never know the lives of my grandparents and ancestors, as all records were destroyed in Hiroshima and memory can only last so long before it forgets. It saddens me that I will probably never know much more about the evacuation than I do now, as it is such a difficult subject among my family. More than anything though, it saddens me to think that such wonderful, proud people were put through such terrible, shameful, humiliating situations.

These memories, lost and found, and the stories of our daughters and sons and students and their generation, speak to the identity crisis of a world view whose centre no longer holds. As a teacher, a mother, a daughter, an immigrant, I see my life work as continually crossing and transgressing borders of countries, continents, languages, cultures, genres and disciplines. I return to the images of my mother tongue and mix them with the layers of new ones, French, English, Japanese, and more, and this intertext refuses to place English and its western world view and sounds at the centre, unsettles its dominant discourse, its desirability as the lingua franca constructed by the colonizers.
I search for ways to keep my own and other mother tongues alive together with English in de-centred ways that encourage new understandings of self to emerge through reading and composing texts in response to our (dis)placement in new diasporic landscapes of language, culture and teaching. Affirming a new hybridity of backgrounds creates possibilities for living lives beyond borders of language, race and culture, for living with fragments of memory, and for generating knowledge out of situated life experiences and life-writing, where English has a place but not the centre place. Instead, as we are Writing Worlds (Barnes and Duncan, 1992), what is worth remembering is the notion of spaces in a landscape. The new geography of language, of curriculum, and of pedagogy is indeed re-writing earth (geo)--writing (graphing) that considers seriously the spaces of generative possibilities in between languages—a métissage of mother tongues.

Last year I returned home to Saarbrücken/Saarebrueck with my daughter. I knew that Germany and France were now part of the European Community, and I no longer needed a passport to cross the bridge connecting Germany and France. But still I was amazed: what I saw was so different from what I remembered. The custom guards, the Grenzstationen, and the border crossings had all disappeared. Instead, all along the bridge, an installation of texts by artists and writers from many different European countries and backgrounds invited us to a Lesespaziergang, a reading walk, on the theme of Grenzüberschreibung/ writing across borders /écrire les frontières (Council of Europe, 1998)--in all the different original languages, texts creating spaces on that bridge for people to walk in the middle of languages. I found myself in a city without borders.