Memory and Métissage: Three Creation Stories

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**Creation Story One:**  
*Morning Star [Dwayne]*

one day pahtsipiss’ soowaahs was watching the people from the sky when he saw two young girls off by themselves admiring him if that star were a handsome man i’d marry it pahtsipiss’ soowaahs had overheard these girls talking about him so he caught them alone and took that girl up to the sky with him his father was the sun and his mother was the moon they didn’t know what had happened but they found out that he had a wife so they stayed together for a long time but he always made a point when they went out into the field to dig for turnips he always had these old ladies take care of her watching her every move and he told her there’s a big turnip out there that i don’t want you touching there’s no reason for you to know why you’re not supposed to i’m telling you don’t do it by that time she had gotten over the grief of losing her family on earth this one day she was determined to find out why she wasn’t supposed to pick that turnip so as usual they all sat down for lunch she finally told them i have to go out and take a leak the old lady was going to go with her but she said no just finish your lunch and i’ll be right back don’t worry about it so that one day she was able to get away by herself and she went straight for the turnip she used a stick to pull it out and tugging at it she fell and realized she had pulled that big turnip out she saw this light coming from that hole and she looked down and saw her people so then she started getting lonesome she went back home she had been crying a lot pahtsipiss’ soowaahs realized that she must have done something that she shouldn’t it was a long time and she was growing even more sad he finally thought i’m gonna ask her he took her aside when they got home and he said you pulled out that turnip didn’t you and he said now you know why i told you not to look down there told you not to pull it out so she just won’t get over it and eventually he went to his mother and father the sun and the moon you know this is what happened then his father the sun said well i didn’t like the idea of you taking that girl was wrong as any young girl will do she was just saying stupid things
but you took her literally now you took her up here and now she’s sad she has to go through all
this let her go just let her go first of all she’s been good to us and i want to be kind to her i care
for her and i think we should help her people because everybody is suffering so they gave her a
bundle they called it natawaki okawao that’s the lady sponsor of the sundance they gave her all
the societies ceremonies the sweats all the instructions they sent them back with her she came
down and performed all the things that she was supposed to do and continues to do to this day
Cynthia          I was Born into a Mixed Clan

Each of us is a creation of a family; each of us is created within and from a family; and that family has a story. I am born into a métissage, from the Latin mixticius, to braid together two different fibres to create a single strand. The clan into which I am born a racial métissage.

Instead, my ancestors weave coal dust with blue blood, Gaelic with English, “tomahtoes” with “tomaytoes,” Orange Men with Knights of Columbus, alcoholism with religious fervor, modernity with tradition, nomadicity with permanence, communism with monarchism and colonizer with colonized.

Even though my ancestoral clan is a mixed-texture métissage, I imagine tracing all the varied strands backward to a single source, the Celts. Over hundreds or thousands of years, this tribe migrated—or was pushed—westward across Europe until they could go no further. They claimed the Green Isles as their own. But for many, these Islands were not the final destination. Colonization, and famine brought on by colonization, spurred waves of migration westward. Shiploads of immigrants leaving what is now the British Isles and arriving in North America. The clans of my family were dispersed in varied topographies, but one clan—the Welsh-Irish Lumbs—landed on the cold and windy Canadian prairies. Such a flat land could not hold them for long and, like lemmings, they migrate westward again, toward the sea. Stopping in small towns such as Brandon, Manitoba and Canmore, Alberta they work and give birth to babies until they arrive at the western edge of this New World, the city of Vancouver, where my mother is born.

I imagine the compulsion to migrate is encoded in the DNA of my tribe. I imagine that the desire to move on is at least a recessive gene, if not a dominant one that manifests itself
repeatedly in each generation. Members of my clan become so overwhelmed with nomadic need that one-day they simply find themselves selling everything, packing up their curling trophies and old 78 records in cardboard boxes, hitching a ride with a truckdriver or a bushpilot, or buying an old car that might make the trip. I was born by the sea—oceans and oceans ago—where my mother was born before me. But I was only seven-week old when the cellular compulsion to move was upon my parents. By this time, Nana (my grandmother) and her two sisters (Auntie Kay and Auntie Margaret) had already left Vancouver for the North. At first my mother, father and I migrate from the mountains to the prairies, where I learn to walk on cement sidewalks and speak Standard English. But by the time I am five years old my mother and I are alone, running to the tree line, following Nana to the Yukon. In the north, I must learn to walk on trails with only the moon to light my way, I must learn to speak English as a métissage. I change schools twenty-one times in twelve years, and in each town, in each school the creation story must begin again.
Erika              I grew up in a city with bridges

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
*Mädchensternasium*, 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 by 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 on 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.
I started out my life washing dishes. At least that is my earliest memory. We - my three older brothers, my parents and our family dog - lived in a three bedroom home on the south side of Edmonton. As the baby of the family by over three years, I have always felt strangely different from my brothers in the interests and feelings I hold towards life, other people and identity. I think it has something to do with my physical appearance.

You see, I am darker than they are. My skin is much darker, so is my hair and so are my eyes. In fact, I am so much darker than them that my brothers used to hold their girlfriends spellbound with stories of my former life in Bangladesh and how I came to be adopted by the family.

I still find this story funny in some ways, but it is also very revealing. When your own family notices and comments on your physical appearance, it tends to have an impact on your self image. I don’t think that my brothers and their trickstering scarred me in any way. But I do believe that it is part of what has caused me to feel and act differently from them. Take the dishes as an example. I can remember waking up early on weekend mornings well before anyone else in the house even thought about getting out of bed. Many children would have preferred to have watched television or played with toys. I washed dishes. My routine was always the same: Don’t turn the light on because it might wake someone, be quiet, clean the gunk from the drain thoroughly, apply dish soap and then slowly begin filling the sink with water that is so hot that you can barely put your hands in it. First cutlery was washed, next glasses, and finally plates
and pots. I don’t know if I did a very good job of it. I do know that I washed the dishes because I wanted to help my mother.

Mom was tired from the effort required to attend to the needs and demands of four growing boys, and she looked it. Tired and probably feeling the stress of being alone with her boys most of the time. You see, my Dad is a truck driver and back then he drove the Alaska Highway and was away from home for weeks on end. My mother was left to take care of us—and all the other family related business—on her own. We never suffered as children but I know she did as a mother and wife. Many people found it scandalous and sad that a pretty young woman from a successful, white, church-going family would marry an Indian. Several times during my childhood, my mother received anonymous phone calls from people who told her that she and her dirty, rotten Indian brats were not welcome in the neighborhood. Many said nothing good would ever come of her marriage to my Dad, and there were predictions that all four of their boys would end in jail - especially with their father absent most of the time. It was lucky for my brothers and I that our maternal grandmother did not see things that way. Grandma Peterson had a stern nature and always believed in doing the right thing. She supported my mother in the choices she made.

I think that Mom was proud of the physical appearance of her boys, especially me. Not that she loved me any more than the others, but I do believe that she saw her children as symbols of her success in raising us, in spite of all of the negative attitudes. My mother and I were drawn closer together because I was the youngest and perhaps the one most vulnerable to bad experiences because I looked the most like Dad. She babied me, spent free time with me, cuddled me, read to me and protected me from my older
brothers. My mother was able to devote so much more time to me than to my brothers because they were all in school by the time I was three years old. Part of the way that I returned those feelings of affection to my mother was through washing the dishes. It was the least that I could do.
Creation Story Two: Yamožha Kills the Giant Beaver [Cynthia]

In the beginning when the world was new, a giant named Yamožha wandered the earth. He carried a big stick with him and wherever he walked, he touched the ground and the end of the stick left an impression that filled with water. This was how all the lakes in the great boreal forest were formed.

Some people say that Yamožha got his name because he walked the circumference of the earth’s horizon; others say Yamožha got his name because he was so tall that his head brushed the sky. Either way, Yamožha was very big, a giant, and so he was always very hungry. It is good thing that Yamožha was good hunter because feeding his giant appetite required skill, stamina, cunning and perseverance and luck.

One day, Yamožha travelled to a giant beaver lodge what we call Tsáko- (Beaverlodge Mountain near Norman Wells) and he chopped at the beaver’s house with a huge axe until the giant mother beaver and her two babies escaped and swam down the Great River. Yamožha chased the beaver for many miles but he finally killed them with his giant spear made out of a spruce tree with a spear point made from copper. At the fork of the Dehcho and Great Bear River, below where Fort Norman (Tulita) is today, Yamožha skinned the three beavers and nailed the round pelts to the side of the mountain. To this day, three white circles—the impression that those giant beaver hides left—can be still seen on the side of that mountain.

Then Yamožha travelled further upriver and he roasted the three giant beavers over a huge bonfire. The beavers were so fat that as they were roasted
the grease dripped onto ground and caught fire. To this day, the ground
smoulders and smokes at that very spot. The People— which is what the Dene
People called themselves— always knew that the giant beavers were sacrificed
for the fuel that they created. And the People knew that place of smoking ground
was a place of oil and grease/. Thousands, maybe more, years later, Imperial Oil
Co. discovered oil in 1921 at the spot where Yamozha roasted the beavers. Oil
has been in production at Norman Wells ever since.

When we see these things, when we hear these stories, we remember the
time when the world was new.
Erika Roman Ruins

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>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Einmal wenn ich dich verlier,</td>
<td>Someday if I lose you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wirst du schlafen können, ohne</td>
<td>How will you sleep without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dass ich wie eine Lindenkrone</td>
<td>My whispering above you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mich verflüstre über dir?</td>
<td>Like the linden’s branches?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohne dass ich hier wache und</td>
<td>Without my lying here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worte, beinah wie Augenlider,</td>
<td>Awke and placing words, almost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auf deine Brüste, auf deine Glieder</td>
<td>Like eyelids, on your breasts,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niederlege, auf deinen Mund.</td>
<td>Your limbs, your lips.</td>
</tr>
<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>
</tr>
<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 sundrenched 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.
Dwayne: Chocolate Bars

My Dad always brought chocolate bars home with him after being on the road for several weeks. They were usually the kind with nuts or coconut in them. Not that it mattered; the important thing was that he came home. We had an old brown polyester couch with light brown feet that sat against the wall in our living room. It was my favorite place to sit, mostly because the dog always sat there. She, like me, was waiting for Dad to come home and chose the couch because it was directly opposite the front door. Sunlight would often shine through the window in the front door, especially in the winter months when the sun was low in the sky, and Peanut and I would warm ourselves in it while we waited patiently on the couch for the door to open. She was very tolerant with children and I would often lay my head on her back as we waited. I would sniff the scent from the pads of her paws and feel the texture of her nose made dry from sitting in the sunlight. Often, I would gently bite her ears, growling the whole time and hoping to get a reaction out of her. She just sat, patiently, waiting. She knew Dad would be home soon.

Finally, Dad would walk in the door. He had his work clothes on and wore cowboy boots on his feet. With him he carried a suitcase and his shaving kit. I always remember my Dad being very neat and tidy. Even while at work, he wore clean clothes, shined boots and kept his hair neatly combed and face clean-shaven. He rarely looked disheveled. Clothes tucked in, socks pulled up, sleeves neatly rolled up, and hands and nails scrubbed clean. The standards he set for himself surely had something to do with the image of a man that he wanted his sons to see. It did not go unnoticed.
I was always glad when he came home because our family seemed to regroup around him. He kept the older boys in line and made sure that we all continued to help Mom around the house. But, he also brought the chocolate bars. After greeting Dad at the door, I would grab his suitcase from his hand and rustle through it as fast as I could. He always hid them, and part of our greeting ritual involved me frantically searching for them. Once I found mine as well as the ones three for my brothers, I would help him take off his boots while asking him question about where he had been. This special time with my Dad would sustain me until the next time he would come home from a long trip. I know that it sustained him too.
Creation happens more than once. In our lifetimes, we are re-created over and over again. The land we live with is re-created over and over again. Our families are re-created over and over again. Each recreation braids the old and the new, the métissage of memory and creation.

Here is one such story:

…in the beginning was the darkness, the snow and cold.

When I was eight years old, the world was new, once again, and I was recreated in it. My mother and I left the Yukon for Aklavik, Northwest Territories: she was a twenty-seven-year old divorcée and I was her only child. My grandparents had moved to Aklavik the previous summer so that my grandfather could live out his dream of flying bush planes. Mother and I followed them to the arctic, just as we had followed them to the Yukon.

We arrived in Aklavik on eve of the winter solstice. So when Mother and I climbed out of the bush plane onto the river ice, we stepped into darkness. For the next two months, the night sky was an endless black, lit only by the stars and the cycles of the moon. Each day faded darkness to a sliver of dusk to an increasing arc of muted bluegray or pinkyellow only to collapse back into darkness tired of the endless struggle between dark and light.

I had to find my way in this new world. So though it was dark and cold, I ventured out-of-doors and trotted around the small town, like a lone wolf pup sniffing out new territory. One night—very soon after we arrived in town—as I travelled around town alone following the hard-packed human trails that criss-crossed the village. In the dark
the trail took me to the back of a shack, and I came upon a husky staked behind the house. When I approached—my boots crunched in the snow, alerting the dog. He lifted his big head as if it were a great effort and stared directly at me without blinking. On the other side of the dog, a raven jumps around and cackles. Picking at the ground with his beak, he dances closer to the dog. I creep forward and offer my mittened-hand, just like Nana, who raised Doberman Pinschers, had taught me. Nana always said:

—Never be afraid of strange dogs. Hold out your hand. Offer your smell.

But her advice came from in a different world, a different time, one where dogs were pets and Myna birds were kept in cages. Here in Aklavik, Raven is free to talk and tease whomever he pleases, especially the huskies. Here in Aklavik I am an unsuspecting pup wanting to play. My potential companion is curled in a circle; his bony back rimming a small depression in the snow, his wolf tail cloaking his paws and legs folded in conserving precious belly heat. When I come close enough to reach out and offer my hand, the husky snubs my hand. Instead, he curls his lips, and Raven cackles and dances around again.

Then the husky jumps up and grabs my outstretched hand, as if to greet me. At first, I think this is a game of Tug-a-War, like the ones we played at the Dominion Day picnics on the 1st of July. I pull one direction, the husky pulls harder in the other. Then with his massive paws splayed in the snow, he braces himself and pulls back with all his power. He jerks his head—with my hand in it—left and right, back and forth, trying to take me down. He clenches his teeth harder, and the top incisor penetrates the mittens. He grinds further, and the incisor reaches the soft flesh of my palm. The flesh is tearing, the hand shakes from the wrist, the arm swings in the socket. My young, southern city self is
being transformed. In the microsecond before the husky can overturn me, I give up a self
and past I didn’t even know I had. In a split second, I abandon my southern manners, the
protocols I—like all southern suburban children—learned at great cost in childhood: play
fair, take turns, and be nice to animals. In this moment, I am recreated as a young girl
who can survive here in this place, alone, under the aurora borealis, with only Raven as
my witness.

With my one-free hand and both legs, I punch and kick at fur, head, ribs and back.
Any part of the dog I can reach. Through the tears and the snot and the fur of my parka
hood, my screams register a note of human power, a pitch typically accompanied by the
crack of a whip. The husky’s jaw relaxes momentarily and I scramble backwards—just
far enough. He leaps at me, but a short chain jerks his head back, and his body follows.
The commotion rouses other dogs staked nearby. In an instant, the entire team is leaping
and lurching for me but their chains snap them back to their wooden stake and the piss-
crusted snow around it.

As I scramble away from the edge of this tight circle, the dogs continue to snarl
and curse, their stinky fish breath frozen in the air with nowhere to go. They lift their
heads in a cosmic howl for freedom, for the loss of the hunt and the kill of the pack. I turn
away and start the walk back to Nana’s house, my new home in this new world. Tears on
my eyelashes crystallize, and through them the path ahead glitters. Behind me, Raven
lifts off from the snow and is gone. The crunch of my boots on the snow is a comfort
now.

No one in my family remembers this time, when the world was new and I was re-
created in it. Or maybe they just don’t believe me. Maybe I just never told them. Perhaps
I too would doubt this memory, if I could not reach out, right this moment, and touch the palm of my left hand. If I could not feel the white tooth scar paralleling my lifeline, severing my heart line.
Creation Story Three: Two Coyotes [Dwayne]

two coyotes were out investigating the world both coyotes were strangers to each other for they had never met just as they were about to introduce themselves they heard someone yell there's a coyote over there the first coyote turned to the other and told him to run they both started to run for the trees when they heard the man yell and there goes another one finally both coyotes made it to the cover of the trees and they started to introduce themselves i never saw you before i am wanderer i am a coyote like you the other coyote looked at him oddly and said i am sleek but i am not a coyote like you yes you are said wanderer oh no i am not replied sleek look my friend you are confused you have ears like mine you have a tail like mine our fur is the same our snouts are the same everything is the same you are just like me and we are both coyotes wanderer tried to explain listen lets run out in the open again and you will see challenged sleek so off they ran first went wanderer and again the man yelled there goes that darn coyote then sleek took off and the man yelled and there goes another one again when the two coyotes reached the other side of the field they ducked into the woods wanderer turned to sleek and said there didn’t you hear the man he called us both coyotes sleek looked disappointed with his new confused friend and said yes i heard the man he called you a coyote but i am an another 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.
Dwayne: Curtains

My Dad was raised by his Grandma. Madelaine Ward was seventy years old when he was placed into her strong, well-worn, yet gentle and welcoming hands. When I was young, I remember hearing that my Dad was raised separately from his brothers and sisters because his mother did not want him because she thought that he looked too Indian. Later, I learned that he was left to live with his Grandma because, as a baby, he cried constantly when he was not with her. This decision, whatever the reason, has had a profound impact on my life.

My Dad grew up in a tiny cabin in a small and isolated community beside Hastings Lake. While his parents and brothers and sisters lived in the city and seemed to have a comfortable life, at fourteen years old he was stuck on the farm and resented the burden of hard labour and heavy responsibility. But there was no other option for him or his Grandma. Through these hardships they bonded, and with the love of his Grandma my Dad grew into a young man who benefited from the many life lessons and values she taught him. Then, she died and he was alone in the world, and he was only sixteen years old. With a bag over his shoulder, he walked out of the cabin at Hastings Lake, hesitated, and then closed the door and walked to the train station. He boarded the train to Edmonton to join his family and to start a new life in the city. He soon discovered that he could not live with his parents and his family. If my Dad was not going to become the stereotypical Indian, he realized he must have the courage to leave and to start a life of his own. Then, he met my Mom.
One night, when my Mom was pregnant with my oldest brother, my parents decided to go out for dinner with friends to a restaurant on the south side of Edmonton. It was the winter of 1960 and my Mom was one month away from giving birth to her first son. There was a good amount of snow on the ground and the temperature was quite cold that evening. It was so cold that my Dad was concerned that his car would not start again if he shut off the engine. He decided to drop my Mom off at the front entrance to the restaurant first, and then he would find a place to park and figure out a way to keep the car running before heading inside to join the others. When my Dad parked the car, he opened the door, got out and kneeled down right beside the car and began to experiment with the gas pedal by placing a piece of wood against it. Finally, when he was satisfied that the pressure of the pedal would keep the car running, he decided that it was safe for him to leave the car and make his way into the restaurant. It was at this time that my Dad felt a presence behind him. Without warning, six men converged on him and proceeded to punch and kick him without mercy until they were satisfied that they had taught him, the so-called “dirty Indian,” a lesson. They tried to make him crawl like someone who is begging for mercy, a supplicant. He wouldn’t.

This experience and others like it, as well as my Dad’s experiences with his own family, caused him to draw a curtain across his past life that he hoped would hide the bitterness and pain of these memories from his four sons. He did not want us to be exposed to any of it. My brothers and I were not told any of these stories until we were grown men. As children, we did not see our relatives, my Dad’s family, more than once or twice a year even though we lived in the same city as them. I can remember traveling across town, usually around Christmas, to visit with our cousins, aunts, and my Dad’s
parents. The adults were usually drunk by the time we arrived and my brothers and I submitted to long hugs, wet kisses and tearful greetings from our relatives, some of whom we barely knew. The visit would almost always end with an argument between my Dad and his mother or one of his siblings. This was usually started when someone would accuse my Dad of thinking that he was better than the rest of his relatives because he hardly ever brought his family to visit with them. Sometimes, my brothers and I would complain about having to visit our relatives, but we never spoke about our feelings nor did we try to figure out why things were as uncomfortable as they were.

_The affect these attitudes and experiences had on me is that I grew up knowing that I was part Aboriginal, but I did not understand how I should feel about that or what it could mean. My Dad never really encouraged those kinds of questions and we, as a family, rarely spoke about these kinds of issues. My Dad seems to have had the fear that his sons would suffer the same types of mistreatment as he because of the way that they looked. So, the curtain, the forgetting of the past, the denial of any Indian characteristics, even the way he dressed and performed at his job were all attempts to normalize himself and his family so that we could all fade into society and avoid being singled out or discriminated against for any reason. Of course, the irony of this is that Aboriginal people are now very popular all over the world and their way of life, their values, and especially their spirituality have become legitimate and vibrant topics of conversation in many different social circles around the world. Suddenly, it is hip to be an Indian. How should we expect an aging man to react to this situation after he has spent his whole adult life denying his Indian-ness? He doesn’t get it._
Cynthia          The Indians and the Cowgirl

The McNeely's. With a name like that anyone could tell they were not from Fort Good
Hope. Barney McNeely was white but he had married a Dene woman, Gwich’in I think, and they
had several children. Dickie was about my age—ten or eleven years old—and as much an outcast
as Wendy and I were. Wendy and I were the only white kids in town. Dickie was a mixed-blood,
but he looked white, and he wanted to be a priest.

"Priests do not lie, and I will never tell a lie," Dickie vowed.

I tried to use logic to trick him into hypocrisy and thus make apparent the foolishness of
his dream.

So you don't hurt people's feelings." I knew about these things. My family made quite fine
distinctions about lying. White lies were not only acceptable, they were a preferred mode of
discourse when the truth was invisible or painful, which was often.

"I will never lie," Dickie was digging in, becoming firmer in his resolution by the
moment. This wasn't going to be easy.

Well, I knew he was full of shit and I desperately wanted to prove it. This incident
foreshadowed my developing attitude toward life, particularly self-righteous people.

"What will you say if someone gives you something to eat and you don’t like it?" I
demanded.

Dickie says; "I won't say anything."

"But what if they ask you if you like it? You'll have to say something. You can't just sit
there with your mouth full and not say anything!"
"I will swallow the food," he said, his developing Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he demonstrated to us, "and then I'll say 'Thank you, but I've had better.'"

I knew the little prick was lying but what could I do? Being the only atheist kid in a Catholic town, I was having a hard time arguing with Catholicism and an even harder time arguing with Dickie McNeely. Dickie was a lot like me: fair-skinned, good at school and hated by all the other kids. At least Dickie was born in Fort Good Hope and his mother was Dene. That should have accounted for something, but it didn't seem to. Like me, Dickie couldn't speak Slavey and he wasn't born into a Good Hope family. He wasn't white but he wasn't Good Hope Dene either. Insider/outsider. At least, I was just plain outsider. No compromises. A clear position. For Dickie it was never so clear.

It was very cold, at least -40C, so cold that even the spruce trees complained, their thin black trunks snapping suddenly like a gunshot ringing out. But cold or not all the children played outside. Everyone in Fort Good Hope lived outside as much as possible. The houses were too small, the families too large, to do otherwise.

I wasn't there when it happened, but I know it did. The town kids were playing Cowboys and Indians and Dickie was the cowboy. The Indians attacked the cowboy and in the flush of their victory they tied their white captive to a tree, one of those thin black spruce, and they left him there in the bush. They left Dickie tied to a tree when it was 40 below and they all went home.

When my mother tell this story I am the one left tied to the tree. But I know it wasn't me. It was Dickie.
Canadian writer Margaret Laurence’s wrote a personal essay called “Where the world began.” My daughter Charlotte wrote a response to that essay and this is how she begins:

Home is where the world begins…We come into this world with eyelids shut, virgin pupils resting within our heads, waiting for their turn to experience the wonder and splendour that is the universe. Within the first few years of our lives, we reach many important milestones; not only sitting up, walking, and talking, but also learning, remembering, and recognizing all the things that become familiar to us, one of the most important being our home. “Home is where the heart is.” This is true. But home is also where the mind is, where the soul remains, and what the eyes remember.
Erika: Vancouver: New Border Crossings

I came to live in Vancouver—on the West Coast of British Columbia—another city with bridges 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-surfacings 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.
Dwayne:  Belly Buttes

The Belly Buttes hovered on the horizon as an ever-present illusion that day. Something that I just could not see quite clearly enough to feel satisfied. While I was driving to the site of the Sundance on the Blood Reserve that summer day, I was looking hard at the vision of teepees that I saw just beneath the buttes of the Belly River in southwestern Alberta. Looking hard because I was nervous. I had never been to a Sundance and I had been invited to attend this sacred and ancient gathering by members of the Blood Tribe, whom I had come to know as a teacher at Kainai High School on the Reserve. I had accepted their invitation because I wanted to show them that I really was a Native person and could and would appreciate the whole process. In reality, I knew nothing about Native spirituality and ceremonies, but I wanted to pretend that I did because I wanted to be viewed and accepted as “Indian” by my friends. As I approached the site I decided to observe the Sundance ceremonies from afar to try and understand their significance. Naively, I thought that I would “get it,” in anthropological terms, if I remained detached and simply observed the setting, the people, the proceedings and the reactions of the participants. I now know that the Sun - Napi Naato’si to the Blackfoot people - did not send the sacred ceremonies down to earth for my enjoyment, entertainment or analysis. Their purpose is much more significant and vital.

Still, I made my way to the Sundance and approached the teepees cautiously. I did not know where my friends were camped. Nor did I did not know how to behave. I cautiously approached a few teepees and quickly peeked inside in hopes of seeing someone I recognized. No one. My wife and I must have wandered aimlessly around the
circle of teepees for about an hour, hanging around and still hoping to see a familiar face.

No luck. Finally, feeling embarrassed and completely out of place, we left. I never told any of my friends that I had been there. I now know that I was drawn to that place because I was searching for something that could help me deal with feeling “like one who looks in the mirror and sees a blur over part of his own face” (Growing Up Native American, Bruchac, p.244). I wanted to identify myself with something because I felt like my identity had been lost to time and the elements, like a flag tattered by strong winds. But identity is more resilient than that. It continues to recreate itself in ways that cannot be predicted.
Cynthia: On Being a Nomad

Nomads don’t always leave; sometimes they follow. Sometimes you follow something in particular like the stars, the weather, migrating herds, or family who have already left. Sometimes you follow an inner, ingrained compulsion to cleanse the species, to seek new ground or simply to move on. And to be a nomad is to make your home where you are at that moment. Your home becomes a context rather than a place— a set of relations among yourselves as nomads, what you are following and where that following has led you, was well as what you have left behind. I have inherited the gene. My cells and my bones are inhabited by a deep and inexplicable need to move on, to migrate away from old names and places towards new ground, part of a thousand-year-old search for that place where I am finally at home.

After Fort Good Hope, Mum and I move to several other northern towns, places with names like Yellowknife, Hay River, Lac La Ronge, Uranium City and Inuvik, each place a métissage of language, race, religion and economies. With the big ears of an only child and the watchful eyes of a nomad I hear and see some of what it means to be Native and everything about what it meant to be an immigrant to these places that I cannot call home.

Métissage is a site of creation as well as disputation. The north—its people and landscape— and my memory of it all re-create and transform me into someone my family doesn’t recognize and must learn to love all over again.

In the north I begin my own clan, a more complex métissage, as I marry into a large Catholic Métis/Treaty family and have children of my own. Eventually like Mum and Nana before me, I too divorce and move on. With my small children, and a $250 Chrysler Saratoga, I leave the North for Saskatchewan, to become a teacher. Eventually the compulsion is upon me and I migrate north again. But the pull of education is strong and soon I find myself migrating
south again, back to my birthplace, to the Pacific Ocean where I learn to become a professor. When the caribou calves are still young, they follow the cow, just as I followed my mother, and she followed hers.

Eventually I migrate—or am exiled—to the desert. This time for a job. It is a dry, brown place, starved for moisture. Everything seems to blow past: the clouds, the rain and the wind. My calves have all grown now, migrated elsewhere, but I stay on. I’ve lived in this desert for more than a decade. Except for Auntie Kay who moved to Whitehorse after the war and never left, no one in my tribe has stayed anywhere this long, since they all left Vancouver fifty years ago.

I might yet learn to call this desert home. A decade has passed and I am still here, getting annual updates on my pension contributions. I still travel but there are differences. I travel less. I pack suitcases. I fly or I drive a car that makes the trip without breaking down. I travel alone instead of with my clan. I have a house from where I depart and to which I return. Perhaps now I am a nomad more in my memory, imagination and my writing than anywhere else. I travel back and forth through the overlapping territories of memory and present tense, like a caribou migrating to the calving grounds each spring—zigzagging thousands of extra miles to graze and flee from warble flies and other predators—only to turn around in the autumn and begin the journey all over again. In my sleep I can still hear the clicking of our hooves on the pre-Cambrian shield, the oldest rock on the planet.