As every doctoral student knows, each new graduate course begins with a round of introductions. The teacher usually says: Why don’t we go around the class and each say something about ourselves, about who we are? But one day several years ago I began a graduate course where the professor, Ted Aoki (1999), started the first class, not by asking, ‘Who are you?’ but rather ‘What conditions make it possible for us to ask the question ‘Who are you?’’

Ted’s question fascinated me when I began to explore my family’s history as part of my doctoral research. I discovered that Ted’s question allows for the possibility of an anti-essentialist view of identity. It turns the concept of ethnicity ‘but of its anti-racist paradigm, where it connotes the immutable difference of minority experience, and into a term, which addresses the historical positions, cultural conditions and political conjectures through which all identity is constructed’ (Papastergiadis, 2000, p. 190). Rather than locating identity in those all-too-familiar, fixed binaries—the polarities of black and white, Jew and gentile, hetero- and homosexual, etc.—identity may be conceived as an ongoing process of hybridity, in which one’s sense of self is continuously made and re-made. In such a paradigm, each person’s particular, subjective understanding of their ethnic, cultural, gender, and class locations provide a narrative wellspring of stories of self, which flow into and constitute the vast delta of broader cultural narrative.

My family’s stories weave a complex dance around the colonial axis of English and Irish identity. There are the ‘British narratives’ of propriety and gentility, of middle class status, and modest inherited wealth, which
were much beloved, and oft repeated, by both my parents. And then there are “Irish narratives” of immigration and hardship, of struggle, oppression, marginalization, and social upward mobility born out of prudence, cultural adaptation and hard work. My mother and father, preferring to think of themselves as British, chose to disregard their Irishness.

Yet, the “Irish narratives” that they tried to conceal from my sister and me, simply would not fade away. They were revealed to us in throw away snippets of conversation, in unguarded asides, in papers that were stashed away secretly for years, in tall tales my father would tell us when drunk, and in the mutters of one parent maligning the behaviour of the other, blaming their spouse’s failings on bad breeding and “that damned Irish blood.” My parents’ marriage reflected the clash of two incommensurable cultures. Often seemingly contrary, their actions in everyday life were a vital embodiment of the inner struggles of their hybrid identities. Their conflictive belief systems were those of colonizer and colonized, citizen and immigrant, Roman Catholic and Protestant.

Introduced by Ted to the work of Aritha van Herk (1991), I was able to employ her notion of the doubleness of “overt” and “covert” stories, in particular the doubleness of immigrant family narratives, when exploring my family’s stories. In seeking the truths of my identity in the overt and covert stories of my family history, I came to recognize that our stories had been told and retold in ways that changed and reshaped the meaning of events. These repeated tellings thrust certain characters, themes, family triumphs and sufferings to the fore, while pushing others out of sight. Indeed, I discovered many broken places in these ancestral lifelines, and wondered how they could ever be mended. My family story is not a narrative of love flowing gently and steadily from one generation to the next—although this is how I would like to tell the story and have it be known. It is more a story of interrupted love and unknown love, early death and tragic death, abandoned hope and abandoned children, a succession of orphaned generations.

The word orphan has more than one meaning. My dictionary (Pearsall & Trumble (Eds.), 1995) reads: orphan . . . “1. a child bereaved of a parent or usually both parents. 2. a person bereft of previous protection, advantages, etc. 3. the first line of a paragraph at the foot of a page or column.” (p. 1026). A narrative orphan is a story that is left hanging at the bottom of the page. A narrative orphan is a fragmented or erased story, a story that is too horrible, shameful or sad to tell, a story that is incommensurable with the public face of the family, or the expectations of a community, nation or church.

The limited dualistic polarities of my Anglo-Irish family history, the overt and covert narratives that struggled to hold themselves together despite incoherences and inconsistencies, could not contain one further dangerous
chaotic element . . . that of Jewishness. In my family’s narratives of binarized identity this third element seemed untenable, dangerous even, and would have acted as an explosive counternarrative to the tales that had been carefully spun by my family members over generations. In continuing the narrative suppression of the reality of our Jewish relatives, my family members chose not to know, did not seek to ask, and decided never to tell.

Ted also introduced our class to the work of Homi Bhabha (1990) who reminds us: Different forms of culture do not fit together well, and do not easily coexist. I now understand that in order to construct a coherent, consistent, less chaotic sense of family identity in solidarity with the myths of nationhood and empire that constitute England, my family had to actively “disappear” many narrative strands, rendering certain “untouchable” family members invisible.

The remaining traces and tiny fragments of orphaned family narratives pull me into the realm of the ambivalent, the imaginary, the speculative, and the desired, drawing attention to the fictional, chaotic, problematic qualities of my understandings of self and hybrid identity. I am left with the dissatisfying understanding that my ancestors—their motives, actions, choices, thoughts, battles, and dreams—remain foreign to me, known only partially through incomplete glimpses and within silences. So how can I come to know these ancestors who seem such a vital part of my identity? In Ted’s class I learnt that in seeking to know my family, I must change my conception of what it is to know: Is knowing an act of seizing, fixing, defining, or pinning down? Or is knowing more of a gentle movement towards a stranger, a slow opening up towards that which is always necessarily foreign and unknowable?

My relationship towards my ancestors changes whenever I do, whenever I discover another snippet of family history about “how things were,” thereby triggering a myriad of subjective memories, associations and responses. This recognition permits an identity that is “a continual process of assemblage, of location, relocation and recollection, rather than as something fixed and self-evident” (Solie, 1998, p. 3). Clearly, the quest for the origin of the self, the longed-for immaculate, singular “I,” is futile.

Perhaps my family’s orphaned stories do not constitute a narrative failure. With Ted’s help, I can now re-read these orphaned stories as mysterious catalysts that create sparks of narrative energy through their very absence. I now see that the narrative friction created by the clash of hybrid cultures can be used to thrust future generations towards alternative possibilities for living and loving.

References


**About the Author**

**Alison Pryer** has taught in German and Japanese public schools, as well as in the Teacher Education Program at the University of British Columbia. A recent doctoral graduate of UBC, the focus of her research is non-dual pedagogy and the embodied self. In the last four years she has also been conducting research on the Canada-wide "Learning through the Arts" project.

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