Writing One's Way Home

"Writing will be a tool, a spiritual tool, a political tool with which I will clear my path," Cynthia Chambers tells us.[1] Not writing in general, but autobiographical writing, life writing as it's sometimes termed. Chambers starts at the end: "I have simply spent much, if not all, of my life living with and nearby, aboriginal people," explaining that while "at first I was thrown into these communities, eventually I would choose to join a native family through marriage," her children "direct descendants of the First Nations of Canada."[2] Her son and his partner (a member of the Kwakiutl nation of the Northwest) have a son.[3] Self-reflexively Chambers registers her experience of recording these facts: "Yes, I think my writing is much closer to who I am, so much closer that it is very hard for me to write. It is very hard to find the right voice when there are so many voices speaking to me. I am temporarily paralyzed by the cacophony."[4]

That cacophony includes "teacher education, language, feminism, Aboriginal peoples, ecology, spirituality, and the list goes on," admitting that she bears no "single-minded dedication to any one of these topics," preferring to make "connections between questions."[5] Likewise, Chambers finds that she belongs nowhere in particular, including where she works: "Ironically, I find I am homeless in the very place I had hoped to find a home – in the academy."[6] She suggests that "I am … a multiplicity of subjectivities that cannot be captured by any single identity," so it is "not my uniqueness I am trying to speak of but rather a resistance to labels."[7] What she seeks is "a way of becoming," a way of working "that I can become, a place with others who are becoming."[8]

Chambers recalls her own becoming: she was married as a teenager in Yellowknife to "a young, bright, and very ambitious Dene man," with whom she had two sons, the four of them living in "a small shack devoid of such amenities as sewer, running water, or central heating."[9] In Yellowknife she worked full-time "at what was then euphemistically called 'community development'[10] by organizing housing associations, Indian band councils, and alternative schools in and around the city of Yellowknife," eventually working "with others in organizing broader-based political groups such as the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories."[11] During the "politically charged" 1970s, "this organization was radicalized into the Dene Nation – a loose political alliance of five or six Dene bands or tribes – with a deep commitment to sovereignty based on inherent, collective aboriginal rights predating the treaties."[12] Such shared commitments, however, failed to erase "traces" of the tensions between settlers and First Peoples that had antedated and accompanied husband and wife; "eventually" [they] spelled the dissolution of a marriage," emphasizing "that the political could be personal," and the "personal … political."[13]

Moving from the personal to the public, Chambers recounts that before World War II Whitehorse had been a "small northern town of 750; in 1947 it was "reeling"

from the effects of 30,000 American and Canadian military and civilian workers having been brought there during the War to build the "Alaska Highway as well as pipelines, airports, oil refineries."[14] Local residents - Canadians and Aboriginal peoples - had not been consulted concerning these projects.[15] The American army had surveyed and built the Alaska Highway and the pipeline with "no regard for people in their path," and native peoples could not only watch as "caterpillars and trucks swathed the boreal forest like a combine harvesting prairie wheat."[16] Not only forests but communities were cut through, as the U.S. military occupation "left mixed-blood families: African-American, Euro-American, and even Japanese," and "identities were thrown into question."[17]

"There are almost too many pieces to a story of a life," Chambers reflects, "to be called a story."[18] Not only the number but their unconnected character make interlocking them into a life story challenging: "They lie there on the screen facing me, passively defying me to see their pattern. It is the connection between the pieces – not the pieces themselves – that is the real story, the story that need to be voiced. But it is the story that remains defiantly silent."[19] If you read the original, the connection among the pieces is discernible, if not conceptually then certainly emotionally.

In 1957, Conservative leader John Diefenbaker's landslide victory, Chambers suggests, "was based primarily on his 'Northern Vision,' a vast northern development policy that saw a tremendous influx of government capital for the creation of a massive infrastructure intended to pave the way for northern resource development."[20] She notes that, as a result, "some native people found seasonal employment," offsetting "dropping fur prices."[21] "Whites began migrating north in greater numbers," she writes, and "my family was part of that migration."[22] From the panoramic to the particular Chambers moves, wondering if her mother had cared for her, admitting she might not have believed so then, or even on through graduate school: "But now I am not so sure," as the very question seems "simplistic."[23] From home she turns to school, which Chambers attended with both native children and the children of government administrators: "Actually we didn't go to school together at all; we went apart and stayed part."[24] After school Chambers became "a government worker, too, not an administrator but an employee … a curriculum developer hired as a 'specialist in Dene languages'."[25] She comments: "The ironies begin to pile up"[26] she reflects.

Canada agreed to the construction of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line on the conditions that "the U.S. would build, man, and pay for it but they were to employ Canadian firms and native labour."[27] Chambers observes that "It was during the construction of the DEW Line sites in the Artic that Canadian sovereignty was most put into question," as it represented (recalling Whitehorse during World War II) "the second American army occupation."[28] "Just as the first had brought my family to Whitehorse," she writes, "the second brought my family to Aklavik."[29] At school she remembers "Miss Thomas … a missionary for southern standards of cleanliness and order in a wile and dirty northern world."[30] Ottawa bureaucrats would build a town

where the "engineers predicted that the permafrost would withstand the weight of an entire city," thereby erasing "Aklavik off the map," the new town to be called East Three; now everyone knows it as 'Inuvik'."[31] Chambers moved to Fort Good Hope.[32]

Despite the apparent precision of these facts, Chambers cautions us that "our" – and presumably her – "memories are always reconstructions, purposeful forgettings, partial truths. Writing them is a reconstruction as well."[33] Invoking a concept I associate with Aoki,[34] Chambers suggests that:

> Living the story of our lives is a bit like playing improvisational jazz. We are given the score but we play with the notes; it is the dance between structure and agency. Although my family made choices that were somewhat unique to them, their lives were not simply shaped by volition. Rather, each of their choices was made within structures or parameters rarely of their own making…. They lived out their heritage of British imperialism that allowed them to set up shop in another's homeland and to never question their own right to be there; a heritage of North American paternalism and racism towards aboriginal people that perpetually fanned tiny flames of smugness and self-righteousness, and blinded them to the possibility of seeing their native neighbours as anything other than overgrown children.[35]

Here Chambers crafts carefully the intertwined nature of the public and the private, History and life history. While she acknowledges that "these stories are part of my story, they are a part of who 'I am'," she asserts that "they are not only my story. Writing, like the life it follows from, cannot be personal."[36]

"I learned enough to migrate around back and forth between the margins of two cultures," Chambers tells us, "and after years of living in the north I became more at home in that place."[37] She concludes: "But years of living at the margins of several cultures has never eased the hunger to fully belong somewhere, to find a home. Only writing seems to be doing that."[38]

Commentary

Interspersed throughout this braiding of national and life history is Chambers' self-reflexive grappling with the experience of writing autobiographically, detailing key elements of her subjective formation as someone – an intellectual, a curriculum studies scholar, a person - living, as she puts it, in the "margins" of two cultures, Aboriginal and settler. This haunting essay foreshadows Chambers' call for a Canadian curriculum theory.[39]

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Endnotes

[1] Chambers 1994, 23. Writing is intertwined with reading, and reading, Bloom (2019, 471) points out, was for Augustine "the road for conversion to Christ." That spiritual antecedent of study – reading and writing - seems to me to echo in Chambers' secular sentence, if augmented (or is it complemented?) by the political.

[2] Chambers 1994, 24.

[3] Chambers 1994, 24.

[4] Chambers 1994, 24-25. A chorus, in Madeleine Grumet's (1990) memorable term.

[5] Chambers 1994, 25.

[6] Chambers 1994, 25.

[7] Chambers 1994, 25.

[8] Chambers 1994, 25. Becoming is a longstanding affirmation of progressive curriculum theorists: see, for instance, ASCD 1962.

[9] Chambers 1994, 26.

[10] See research brief #1.

[11] Chambers 1994, 26.

[12] Chambers 1994, 26.
[13] Chambers 1994, 27.
[14] Chambers 1994, 28.
[15] Chambers 1994, 29.
[16] Chambers 1994, 29.
[17] Chambers 1994, 29.
[18] Chambers 1994, 30.
[19] Chambers 1994, 30.
[20] Chambers 1994, 31.
[21] Chambers 1994, 31.
[22] Chambers 1994, 32.
[23] Chambers 1994, 32.
[24] Chambers 1994, 33.
[25] Chambers 1994, 33.
[26] Chambers 1994, 33.
[27] Chambers 1994, 34.
[28] Chambers 1994, 34. "It was 1957 when my mother and I left Whitehorse, Yukon, to join my grandparents in Aklavik" (1994, 35). While there, a "birthday party was the only time I recall native women being in our Aklavik home" (1994, 36).
[29] Chambers 1994, 34.
[30] Chambers 1994, 40.
[31] Chambers 1994, 43.
[32] Chambers 1994, 47.
[33] Chambers 1994, 43. While writing is indeed a construction and memories often misleading – as Freud famously documented – writing and memory are not only deceptive. Indeed, they can be truthful, as Chambers' candid account certainly seems to be.
[34] I am thinking of the Bobby Shew visit to the University of Alberta, after which Aoki (2005 [1990], 368) asks: "Could improvisation be a way to create spaces to allow differences to show through?"
[35] Chambers 1994, 47.
[36] Chambers 1994, 47. The fact that this story is Chambers' story makes it – to my mind – "personal." That a story is shared does not mean that it organizes, interprets, and even reconstructs what is shared into something singular and unique. That, it seems to me, Chambers has done here.
[37] Chambers 1994, 49.
[38] Chambers 1994, 49.
[39] See Chambers 1999; research brief #34.