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MA, I'M THINKING ABOUT NOTHING

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ma
the name of her
fills me with
missing
the fullness
of me
nothing
a hungry void
overflowing
wanting my mother

I am ma
she strokes my arm
inhales me slowly
wraps around my shoulders
warm skin, hair, lips
leaving absence
yearning ache
running through
my fingers, gone
calling out
ma
ma

This book adopts a theoretical framework from the Japanese concept of *ma* as a lens through which to investigate the materiality of teaching and learning. *Ma* refers to the interval between two markers; the space that is somatically constructed by a deliberate, attentive consciousness to what simultaneously is expressed, repressed, or suppressed between two structures. In educational research the concept of *ma* might be likened to descriptors such as the hidden curriculum, third space, liminality, the in-between, the backslash, or prosody, but it is more. It is a way of inquisitiveness, desire, imagining, learning, positioning, being, becoming. Attention in the book is given to how authors engage in notions of materiality, with specific attention to the lived experiences of teachers, in ways that embrace diversity over a singular definition.

Within the shifting paradigms of the academy, the authors in this book bring to the fore the central tension of *ma* as a site that generates innovative accounts and creative investigations addressing materiality through a host of contexts, as ‘thing-power,’ story-making, performance, the environment, and across all levels of learning, formal and informal. New materiality and material culture in teaching and learning is rendered in this book through a variety of methods: performative, literary, visual response, arts-integrated renderings, poetry, stories, collage, textile design, dance, as well as case studies and traditional chapters.

The breadth of data sources in this collection demonstrate how a conceptual framework can operate in practice with the needed elasticity to bring artful, sensory, divergent, and deconstructive processes to prompt creative engagement from a perspective of materiality which my coeditors and I argue gives a fuller and more flexible understanding of the phenomenon being queried. In these chapters, authors address questions such as: *What inquiry methods, practices, objects, designs, structures, and/or environments unveil features of, and influences upon, teaching and learning identities that lead to teacher or learner self-efficacy? How do we as educators work with objects/artefacts of teaching and learning and create new relationships for learning in the process? How is educational materiality enacted in education and to what ends? How is materiality changing/challenging our educational discourses?*

My Exploration

This book stems from a Social Sciences Humanities Council–funded project where Boyd White, Anita Sinner, and I explored the nature of pre-service teacher self-identity, which we attest is an essential component in teacher

preparation (and ultimately in-service practice). Our strategy was to use material culture as the vehicle for investigation.

Significant research in teaching and learning has been undertaken in the last decades, but the role of materiality and material culture, as formative in the development of teaching and learning identities, was a new site for epistemological understandings. The purpose of this project was to explore how materiality and material culture provide: (1) concrete artefacts available for empirical examination; (2) a reference point for symbolic interpretation; and (3) a lens, through which to de/reconstruct the sometimes problematic, frequently inchoate nature of teaching and learning. We sought to articulate refinements to improve the conditions, practices, products, and pedagogies of being a teacher/learner in contemporary contexts and expand the conceptualization and the practice of educating.

The team used the parallaxic praxis research model (Sameshima & Vandermause, 2008) to generate new understandings across three sites (Lakehead University, Concordia University, McGill University) using three modalities (identity cloaks, identity boxes, identity narratives).¹

At the Lakehead site, the graduate student team and I coded and analyzed a data set consisting of 90 textile identity cloaks made by pre-service teachers. I was particularly interested in *ma* because the concept raises detail-oriented nuances around attentive consciousness and it is explicitly used in textile fashion to reference the space between the body and the piece of clothing. *Ma* is that ever-shifting space between the self and cover, the space between the teacher's body and the cloak of the teacher persona.

In November 2014, I stumbled upon a fascinating exhibit called "Future Beauty: 30 Years of Japanese Fashion" on display at the Gallery of Modern Art/Queensland Art Gallery. The show displayed innovations by Japanese fashion designers from the early 1980s to 2014. Curated by Japanese fashion historian Akiko Fukai, the exhibit embodied the unique sensibilities of Japanese beauty and design, highlighting the revolutionary impact Japanese designers have had on world fashion in the late 20th century. Fukai (2010), in describing how European eyes may see the kimono or a loose-fitting piece of clothing as shapeless, says, "Yet to the Japanese, the superfluous 'space' between the garment and the body, referred to as *ma*, is more than simply a void: it is a rich space that possesses incalculable energy" (p. 16, italics in original).

Fukai explains how contemporary fashion designers in the show explore the interplay in-between the two-dimensional form of clothing that only takes form in a three-dimensional state. He shares designer Johji Yamamoto's belief

that the clothes he designs are “made half by him and half by the wearer” (p. 16). I liken these ideas to the donning of a static two-dimensional teacher persona becoming dynamic in form by the teacher-wearer. Intrigued by Fukai’s exhibit and theorizations on the body and clothing as ways to think about how the pre-service teacher may put on the teacher identity as a cloak or clothing, or ‘wear’ the teacher self, I further investigated the interval of *ma* between body and clothing. I wanted to better understand the *ma* space and how the development of becoming a teacher, specifically in taking on the teacher identity, could better prepare pre-service teachers in their chosen careers. The links between pre-service teacher identity with attrition (Hong, 2010) and unpreparedness for the demands of the profession (Beltman, Glass, Dinham, Chalk, & Nguyen, 2015) have been well documented.

Creative expression as a form of knowledge generation develops artefacts that operate as pedagogic tools to facilitate greater connection, communication, reflection, and knowledge growth in identity development (Burn, 2007; Joseph & Heading, 2010). Making artefacts and learning through the method of *currere* as formulated and practiced by Pinar and Grumet (1976) required the 90 students to actively create two phenomenological descriptions in the making of their cloaks: (1) to know the self in context; and (2) “to trace the complex path from preconceptual experience to formal intellection” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 415).

With various teams, I had previously explored the data set of the 90 student-made identity cloaks and their accompanying one-page written reflections through Atlas-ti (a qualitative software coding program) and the creation of six data-response art pieces made by graduate student-researchers and five pieces made by me. The utilization of artefact making as a form of arts-informed analysis of the data is part of the parallaxic praxis framework (see Stock, Sameshima, & Slingerland, 2016).

The first artefact I created as an investigation of the data was a silk embossed cloak, lined in blue velour, laden with round, heavy, metal award medals around the base. The work was an exploration of the tensions between teacher risk and high expectations. The medals, while symbolic of excellence, were weights on the teacher identity cloak, weighing the wearer down and preventing freedom of motion.

The second work (see Figure 1.1) focused on the meta-narratives of the teacher identity and their limitations. Key findings from that phase of the project focused on superhero ideals/Disney phenomena/Hollywood tropes, becoming, and the spaces between private and public (Stock et al., 2016).



Figure 1.1. Amway Apple.

Source: Artist and Photographer: P. Sameshima, Model: Cameo Sameshima. Photographer: P. Sameshima.

In the 1970s when eminent fashion designer Issey Miyake launched his career, he first created the fabric before making the clothes. While far from emulating Miyake's studies of traditional Japanese dyeing and weaving techniques, I took a weaving course and set out to further investigate the teacher identity data through weaving framed by the concept of *ma*. Before I discuss this arts-informed (Cole & Knowles, 2000) exploration, I will offer here a brief overview of the perspectives in approaching this research project.

Perspectives

Material culture is the study of belief systems, behaviours, and perceptions through artefacts and physical objects and is central to the socialization of human beings into culture (Kopytoff, 1986; Purcell, 1983; Schlereth, 1982). Teacher perceptions and how they approach and express their practice through objects suggest that identity development in part involves the attribution of qualities to objects as a form of testimony, in which meaning-making is a synthesis of their field experiences and their private lives (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Induction into the teaching profession is a multifaceted and complex process (Head, 1992) involving both idealism and pragmatism (Shkedi & Laron, 2004).

Malkogeorgou (2011) has found that the preserving of cultural material (which is likened here to the creation of symbolic teacher cultural artefacts) offers "significance in materializing the self and contextualizing social activity" (p. 442). By extension, the concept of *ma* aligns with the emerging discourse of new materiality, which challenges assumptions and clichés and allows for possibilities not yet imagined, perhaps even previously inconceivable possibilities. New materiality approaches connote the belief that 'things' have agency and can be "conceived as active, forceful and plural rather than passive, inactive and unitary" (Lemke, 2015, p. 4).

New materialism demands an unsettling of language as the sole "mediator of the world" (MacLure, 2013, p. 663), pointing to matter such as the student-body or researcher-body itself as agentic. Like the Japanese fashion designers' use of the body as knowledge agent, Jane Gallop (1988) laments:

Rather than treat the body as a site of knowledge, a medium for thought, the more classic philosophical project has tried to render it transparent and get beyond it, to dominate it by reducing it to the mind's idealizing categories. (pp. 3–4)

The body itself is the mediator; and thus the artefacts I make, extensions of me, instigate meaning. If I imagine *ma* as the interval between two markers—if

one marker is data and the other is understanding—the stepping stones that allow the body to move across, draw connection, or close distance between the two markers, are the constructed artefacts. The material objects allow traversal across and through what once was an unnamed or unattended void.

Not only is the *ma* space substance (Fletcher, 2001, p. 370), the agential space seeks relational harmony and connection—when attended to, the space itself calls with desire to mediate between the two markers. The metaphorical embrace brings together the teacher body and the teacher persona. Di Mare (1990), explaining the concept of *ma*, draws from Soshitsu's explanation of the tea ceremony: “*ma* is the continual transition from move to move which not only allows the tea ceremony itself to proceed smoothly, but also leads host and guest to interact harmoniously with each other” (p. 321).

Green Covers

To metaphorically attempt to construct the teacher identity before or beyond the drive of the meta-narrative of “the wholesome, perfect teacher” (see Stock et al., 2016), I learned how to use a ridged heddle loom. Like Miyake, I also wanted to explore the beginnings of construction. After practicing with a series of scarves, I completed two pieces for this research project.

Green Cover 1, the title of the first piece, is an allusion to donning an identity cloak that explores variations in skin covering and the tensions between the vulnerable space between the private and public identities teachers negotiate. Fukai (2010) describes the fashion design work of Vivienne Westwood, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohhji Yamamoto adopting the phenomenon of tears and holes in garments as a breaking of the canon cover in protest against European hegemony. Fukai further explains that in the late twentieth century, in the fashion world, clothes became a second skin, the metaphor of fabric as skin described tears and holes in clothes as a statement demonstrating openings to the self; wearing torn clothing was “an act aimed at helping the wearer to find a new self” (p. 18). I experimented with various weaving techniques to create space or holes with the warp and weft (see Figure 1.2). The Mobius strip design on the front of *Green Cover 1* creates a pull and release with every movement, a reminder of the constricted space between what pre-service teachers hope for and the realities of pedagogical practice.

Green Cover 1 plays with how ‘holey’ the teacher covering can be. I discovered that in testing the hole-ness, the cover began to be uncomfortable to



Figure 1.2. Holes as Access to the Self.

Source: Green Cover 1. Artist and Photographer: P. Sameshima.

wear because it snagged on door handles and got caught on various objects in my daily routines. The vulnerability I felt of damaging the cover as well as the sense of exposing too much skin was not practical. The personal teacher-self does require a cover that has a threshold (see Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3. Green Cover 1.

Source: Green Cover 2. Artist and Photographer: P. Sameshima.

Green Cover 2 takes its design from a shrug—a shawl type of wrap that has arm holes. In this design, because the length of the cover or teacher identity is too wide to fit the pre-service teacher, the cover needs to be manipulated, wrapped, or draped. The variability of how the teacher identity is worn has many possibilities. Surprisingly, although the teacher identity variations can be similar, some are drastically different, and yet, when grouped together, seeing one common identity is an easy assumption. The variability in the teacher self and how that self pedagogically manifests the teacher persona is extensive (see Figures 1.4 and 1.5).

Objects are useful for examining metaphoric and/or symbolic interpretation. The artefacts offer a new lens to discuss and deconstruct meta-narratives with aspiring teachers.

The multistages of this analysis and the various artefacts (the pre-service teachers' cloaks and the researcher team's makings) utilize Bakhtin's (1981) polyphonic and carnivalesque theorizations to enable teacher educators and pre-service teachers to look critically at meta-narratives and their potential



Figure 1.4. Green Cover 2.

Source: Artist and Photographer: P. Sameshima.

impact on multifaceted teaching identities. Bakhtin describes the chronotope (perhaps a ma space) as “the place where knots of narrative are tied and untied” (p. 250), the site of engagement.

Ma as Currere

The strength of ma as a conceptual entry point to teaching and learning offers a unique provision and a fresh and meaningful account of lived experience. “Ma goes beyond just being a ‘way of seeing,’ but is a ‘way of life’” (Syng Tan, 2009, n.p.). Irwin (2004) beautifully reminds us, using a/r/tography in describing the third space, that opposition is always present: “with presence comes absence, with light comes darkness” that “there are spaces between and spaces



Figure 1.5. Green Cover 2.

Source: Artist and Photographer: P. Sameshima.

between the in-between” (pp. 30–31). The search for engaging in the ma, that can never be filled, is the call for meaning-making. With the site of knowledge as the body (Gallop, 1988; Spinoza, 1996), the work of ma is autobiography, is curriculum, is immanent becoming, is learning how to live with.

Ma, at its simplest asks; why do we separate when there is richness that occurs across, in between and beyond it? And what will it mean if betweenness, and not individual subjects, is the ground for being and “becoming with”? (Akama, 2014, p. 24)

As a mode of creative inquiry, ma is an aesthetic, collective, experiential, embodied, emotional and intellectual way of knowing and creating knowledge for engaging participants in all stages of inquiry aimed at producing practical

knowing about teaching and learning. Eisner (1991) suggests that “the forms through which humans represent their conception of the world have a major influence on what they are able to say about it” (p. 7). Ma affirms processes of becoming(s) in which we embrace seeing what might be instead of what is (Martin & Kamberlis, 2013). With new materiality (DeLanda, 2015) at the heart of practice and/or making-approaches that involve multileveled, multilayered, and interdisciplinary collaboration with, in, and through diverse perspectives and experiences concerning teaching and learning, this book investigates the intersections at the core of these encounters, in order to demonstrate the layers of the “self that teaches” (Palmer, 1998).

In the ma space, in the liminal studio (Wiebe & Sameshima, 2018),

we stand in the middle of our lives without disavowing our experience. It is a phenomenological position, but a critical phenomenological position, where our standing in the midst is held in reserve, a curiosity that pushes us to yet another explanation. (p. 11)

This research is significant to the field of education because it addresses the self as a necessary agent of change in the events and experiences manifest in objects and symbols of individual teaching practices. With sustained and deep attention, ma offers a valued and important daily educational endeavor.

Note

1. For more information on the projects, see Stock et al., 2016; White and Lemieux, 2015.

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