MEMORIES AS SACRED ARTIFACTS AND REMEMBERING AS A SACRED LITERACY

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Discussion in the session will include background information, setting and participant descriptions, conceptual framework used, study design, methodology, definitions of sacred literacy and sacred artifacts, research questions, notation on gaps in research, 1-2 data sets from the study along with their analyses, next steps in the research process and the implications for the research. I will be presenting the information by starting with an opening vignette of the participant’s place of home and will then clearly define sacred literacy and sacred artifacts. Within these definitions will be a supportive framework constructed from theories of reader response and artifactual literacy. I will then provide a story of each data set and will provide information on my analysis framework for each as well as findings. From there I will provide information on how this pilot study fits into my overall research process and what the next steps and implications will be. The poster board will be used to display photographs of artifacts, place maps, the participant and organizational charts. It will also be used as a space to display information for these items: conceptual framework, design, methods, definitions of sacred literacy and sacred artifacts, research questions, and resources used. Attendees at my session will be able to take away an understanding of a new literacy: sacred literacy. They will have the opportunity to see sacred literacy as it is used in the life of an individual who has remembered experiences and used those memories within her daily life to make meaning and as tools of resilience and survival. Attendees will be privy to a rich story of someone who, though living in poverty, does not view her life as impoverished but rather as an experience of knowing, learning and doing.

Keywords: Sacred artifacts, Sacred literacy, Artifactual literacy, Qualitative.

Introduction

The walk from the road to the vine where her house is begins with the gate – barbed wire – threaded through tall wooden railroad stakes, ones she obtained years ago. A beautiful Yucca with its pink and yellow blossoms stands, welcoming neighbors and visitors to her place. The cactus, in its infancy, was brought back from a trip in Mexico. The yucca towers about eight or nine feet tall. Behind it is a large wagon wheel, one salvaged from a covered wagon decades ago. The wood is worn and splintered in so many places but its form is still recognizable. Up, up toward the flames of red and pink and smoky gray that are spread across the Southwestern sky, one’s gaze could settle on a great block of wood, rectangular and course and handcrafted by Chowsie herself. “SS” is the only inscription. This, a replica of the “Sullivan” brand from Chowsie’s childhood, marks her place. Just under the gateway a gravel road makes its way, passing a small field one one side filled with assortments of southwestern beauties: white and pink primroses, prairie grass, bundleflowers, chocolate flowers, sunflowers, deergrass,
Indiangrass, and soapweed. Cockleburs, which can easily find their way to shoes and socks, are plotted among the foliage. Beyond the little field, which is surrounded by the railroad stakes and barbed wire fencing, is an enormous wooden barn. The red paint, once more of a rubicund, is now faded and chipped so that pieces of it spread out in different places on the structure. Past the barn, up toward the house, different varieties of hollyhocks flourish. Chowsie rotates them every year: pinks, salmons, oranges, reds, maroons. Pinks are her favorites. Surrounding her house, wrapping nearly around it, is the most beautiful aroma of honeysuckle. The vines cascade over two front windows from the roof to the flower beds where azalias, daisies and clover grow. Also wrapping around Chowsie’s house are beds filled with seedlings of carrots, radishes, watermelons, and onions. Extending from these is the lovely vine which serves as coverage from the baking southwestern heat. Sipping sun tea while brushing away the occasional wasp, drawn to the honeysuckle sweetness. This I remember. The timeworn card table, painted black and set up in the corner, the main vine coverage stands with two wooden folding chairs, one on either side. Here, checker-playing happens. Here, one walks the jagged cement cobblestone path around the vine to find the perfect ingredients to help out with dinner stew. Here, talk about “horse and buggy days” and the “old homestead” take place. Here, stories of family members and their life histories are recounted.

Weaving a Theory

Kern (2000) defines literacy as “the use of socially, historically, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning.” (p. 16) Literacy is dynamic, moving across various communities, discourses and cultures. “It [literacy] involves many different scripts, and it can exist in many different languages and settings.” (Pahl & Rowsell, p. 3, 2010).

Cynthia Dillard (2006) notes that spirituality “involves choosing to be in a relationship with the divine power of all things.” (p. 41). Spiritual literacy can be understood as the use of different practices to sacredly read the world (Brussat & Brussat, 1996). To go beyond the proposal of spiritual literacy I offer the proposal of sacred literacy. Sacred is a word which can encompass much more than spiritual. Spiritual seems to invite a narrowed focus, oftentimes only referring to religion or religious frameworks. Sacred can embrace a plethora of different practices considered reverent by the individual who uses them. According to Webster’s online dictionary the definitions of sacred are:

- Worthy of religious worship: very holy
- Relating to religion
- Highly valued and important: deserving great respect

Sacred literacy then would take into account various practices of sacredly reading the world. The practices conceptualized as sacred would be so because of their strong pull on the emotions. These practices could be spiritual or religious in nature, but would not be limited to as such. Sacred literacies can encompass many different practices that can be considered significant, hallowed. Sacred literacy can then be conceptualized as the embodied knowing that life holds within it, components – events, relationships, memories, moments – which are special, ones given significant value. Sacred literacy is the use of various sacred practices (texts) to sacredly read the world through one’s experiences.

I pose that particular artifacts (tangible or intangible) – sacred artifacts – exist within practices, within sacred literacies, because of their ability to speak and tell stories (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). They act as extensions of the literacy practices, connecting us to sacred events,
relationships, memories, moments – the sacred threads of our lives. The practice of remembering (relationships, crucial struggles, joys, sacred events in our lives), as well as other practices we use to make meaning in our lives, contains these artifacts which act as texts, helping us to make meaning. These artifacts are sacred because of their profound association with deeply impactful events, relationships, struggles, joys (as well as other components from our lives).

There are different ways in which human beings read the world – the ways in which we make meaning from experiences – the different ways in which we articulate literacy. One way in which we make meaning is artifactually, through memories, objects and symbols. These allow a third space (Levy, 2008) for sharing. Artifacts or “everyday objects” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2011, p. 130) can exist intangibly, within memories, to provide “a powerful and sometimes mysterious means of binding oneself to a sense of time, place, purpose, and community” (Thiel-Stern, Hains & Mazzarella, 2011, p. 161). Particular artifacts can also exist as sacred objects – objects that hold significant value. Objects have always existed in humans’ lives. However, sacred artifacts, I suggest, are ones that are imbedded in our lives and remembrances, and are ones that induce emotions. Feelings of joy, sadness, guilt, anger, and such can be evoked when looking upon the object, feeling it, remembering certain threads of meaning associated with the object. These artifacts, whether they exist tangibly in our everyday lived experiences or within memories, can be referred to and used as entry points to evoke talk about significant, reverent experiences. The connections to particular objects in our lives or remembrances of them, as well as the threads of meaning that we hold reverent and to which the objects are tied, these are ways in which we sacredly read the world.

Methodology

In September 2013 I began to understand more clearly what the nature of my research would be. In the previous summer I had been reading through literature and essentially preparing myself for this project in which I would ask one participant to work with me in a pilot study involving the sacredness of memories. Chowsie (pseudonym) was the participant I had in mind. The longevity of our friendship had spanned many years, which made for a wise choice. I asked her to take part in this qualitative project because of her attachment to her memories and also, and more importantly, because of the way she has valued her lived experiences and ethic of self-sufficiency and the ways she has used her memories as tools for her present life, despite her social status as one living in poverty. Having known about her passion for letter writing through the years, I asked Chowsie if she would be willing to do some “letter writing” in the form of a journal. She graciously agreed and spent one month writing about her life from pre-birth to the present time. From time to time I checked with her about the writing. After I received the journal and read through her writing I looked for two critical times in her life which seemed to be interconnected in some way. From these I created a simple framework for our first interview in which I initially asked her to just speak of the said memory. The interview was audio recorded, and I wrote jottings in a field notebook during the recording. The second interview, which took place approximately two weeks later, focused on particular artifacts from her memories. I mentioned a particular artifact and framed questions as we went, about the meanings, uses and connections these have had in her life. Both interviews were transcribed and were initially coded with en vivo codes and open codes and secondly coded with pattern codes.

One experience in which I have had the opportunity to really become in touch with sacred literacy and to understand its implications has been in conversation with Chowsie. Chowsie is an elderly woman with whom I have been acquainted for years. She lives in an impoverished predominantly Latino neighborhood where she is the only European American inhabitant. In
talking about her status as poor I do not mean to present a deficit view. However, there is something to be said about the placing of value on one’s life. So, I mean to emphasize this, the value of how one has lived life and has valued relationships, times of struggle and joy and experiences rather than the value some place on social status. Chowsie’s memories of experiences are rich. I asked her to talk about her life because of the way she values her lived experiences and life lived.

Sitting under the great vine, one can listen to stories of yesteryears. The harshness of life, times of struggle filled with sicknesses and death balanced with times of joy – these permeate the stories. And objects which are imbedded within her memory are tied to the stories she tells. In fact, the objects are precursors to the stories she tells, and they create “a space for storytelling” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2011, p. 130). The ways in which she describes the objects are fascinating. Though I had sat under the great vine at her home many times and listened to many stories I wanted to understand more deeply how those histories, as remembrances have been literacies, practices she has used to understand experiences from times past and ones in times present. I wanted to come to know the layers of meaning from reflecting on the artifacts. Certain memories she has shared with me through the years have been “special…ones I never forget” (Chowsie, telephone interview, November 2013). Are there particular objects that stand out? How does she perceive the memories? Does she see them as sacred? How have the memories connected to her present life? How have her memories helped her to sacredly read the world?

**Red Bricks**

At the beginning of this study, I asked Chowsie (pseudonym) to journal a narrative of her own life history from birth until the present time. She wrote every day for one month.

*Dum deed um – dum deed um. Hear those drums they announcing on December 24 – the birth of Me – the first grandchild of Mike Sullivan, the daughter of C.W. and Rachel – the first born me. A couple weeks before C.W. and Rachel were taking a big old bull to a sale in a trailer pulled by the roadster, the car having button windows of icen glass, yet the cold creeping, the animal breathing frosty air from his nostrils on Rachel. It was cold. They had no heater and Rachel coughing. They heated bricks in an oven and carried them. A good case of the pneumonia.* (Chowsie, 10-19-2013, Journaling).

During the time of Chowsie’s birth bricks were heated in the home (in the cook stove) and then transported to the car; these were vital for warmth, to the home space – in the instance of this particular memory, the extension of the home – the automobile. At the time, heaters in automobiles were nonexistent so heated bricks became necessary commodities. These objects, once tangible, were carried from place to place, as they were physically transported from the family’s home to the car and in the driving from place to place. They now exist as artifacts of memory, as texts that have helped Chowsie to make meaning from experiences. As Chowsie talked about the time right before her birth, the bricks were mentioned. I used the remembrance of these as an entry point to talk with Chowsie about the themes of cold and sickness from her life.

Christina: You talked about the cold in your writing, right before your birth with um, Rachel was about to give birth to you and you talked about the cold. When you think about the cold, what comes to mind?
As I talked with Chowsie there were certain phrases like “no heaters”, “bricks that they’d heat” and “keep their feet warm” that stood out. One phrase in particular was memorable: “did their damndest”. Chowsie’s words lent themselves to layers of meaning. The bricks were brought from homes as materials that were readily available and were used because they were the only materials that would relatively keep heat. Though the bricks were make-shift heaters they were important commodities. They were doing what needed to be done in order to be able to endure travels during bitter cold weather. They were doing their all – “doing their damndest”.

“Doing their damndest” became an over-arching en vivo category, which even seemed to surface above another category, “survival”, which I initially thought about. The phrase “Doing their damndest” seemed to also be a theme within Chowsie’s own lived experience. I have heard her state the phrase through the years, and she repeated it again when I talked with her about her own life and how she maintains her property. Through the years I have been able to see the phrase in action first-hand. I have seen how she has restuccoed and tarred her house when it has needed repatching. I have witnessed her doing her own plumbing. These ways of doing for herself, ways of being self-sufficient, point toward doing her damndest, using materials that she has collected and which have been available. Chowsie said that her remembrances have provided a good experience to help her know what to do in the time of need. Memories of protection are relived (Moore, 1996). The memory of the bricks serves as a memory of protection. The bricks helped to provide warmth as a kind of protection from the cold. This memory is relived not only in the telling of it but also in the daily living. Chowsie uses the memories, as she said, as well as other memories, to help her in time of need. “Remembering things is living life.” (Chowsie, 12-12-13, conversation).

Living life is both an ideology and a mantra in Chowsie’s memories of relatives’ and her own lived experiences and within her present life. Ironically, it is juxtaposed with the themes of cold and sickness that frequently emerge from Chowsie’s memories. Though images associated
with these harsh themes recur within her memories, *living life* seems to prevail. Life continues in spite of the harsh cold and in spite of not having enough. Life is birthed in spite of sickness that infringes upon joyous occasions.

**Chowsie’s Birth**

*December 24, 1927* I entered this earth at 9:00 p.m. in the home of Clemons Hinkle there in Sugar City. The next morning C.W. was there to greet the newcomer me. He said my crying sounded like a Cracker Jack whistle. I, sick at my birth. Grandma Hinkle said she and mom had pulled ropes of phlegm that had passed from my mouth, the phlegm wrapping about their fingers. C.W. (dad) had named me ________ after a movie star ________. My name ________. They say the big whistle blewed about the time of my birth, the whistle from the sugar factory changing shifts, and Rachel (mom) said the whistle was letting all know of my birth – what a Christmas gift...me. I had a bad cold for good 30 days.... I was sickly all my childhood. Bad tonsils which did develop from that pneumonia that Rachel caught shortly before my birth. (Chowsie, 10-19-2013, Journaling).

Images of sickness from Chowsie’s memory of her birth were highly important because they acted as interconnecting metaphors, solidifying the cases for the sicknesses of pneumonia. The initial image from Chowsie’s writing about her birth which was presented, was the sound of Chowsie’s cry, which her father compared to a Cracker Jack whistle. Mentioning the metaphorical whistle seemed to be a way to foreshadow Chowsie’s talk on her pneumonia and also to bring back remembrance on previous talk about her mother’s experience with pneumonia. The Kracker Jack whistle, a positive symbol which tangibly existed in lives, as a prize that could be found inside a box of Kracker Jacks, was used as an artifact of memory reminding Chowsie of illness but also of birth, of struggle and of joy: the sweet mixed with the sour. Chowsie’s telling of the phlegm she had at birth which was extracted and wrapped like taffy was another image of juxtaposing layers of meaning. The phlegm, an image which prominent in Chowsie’s birth memory was symbolically referred to as taffy, and this is a critical reference. Taffy, when created must be stretched and wrapped quickly because of its consistency. The phlegm which was extracted was thick. Its comparison to taffy solidifies the seriousness of the situation at Chowsie’s birth and how critical it was that family members worked quickly and fervently against the struggle so that she would survive.

As I looked back at Chowsie’s journaling I could see connections from the memory of her birth to the memory of the red bricks. The connecting pattern that emerged was *survival*. There was the making do of using bricks (the only staples available at the time) to provide heat for traveling. Through these efforts Chowsie’s family members were able to survive the bitter cold while traveling from place to place. There was the survival of Chowsie during birth. The ways in which she described the sickness and phlegm (not only in her journal writing but also in conversation) was critical. Had her family members not quickly extracted the phlegm she would not have lived.

Artifacts are woven into our lives (Rowsell, 2011) and can exist tangibly as possessions in home spaces (Hurdley, 2006) such as the red bricks, when they existed as physical objects
Chowsie’s parents’ lives. Artifacts can also exist intangibly, as memories. And the objects within memories that call up deep emotions (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010) can help us to make meaning from experiences.

Making Do

Owning a home and land brings great joy and a sense of accomplishment but it also means being obligated to keeping things in working order. When there are tasks to be done they don’t get done all by themselves. Chowsie has known this all too well throughout the years. When pipes have burst she has been the one to repair them. She lay all of the piping for her home years ago when she first purchased the property and ever since she has tended to it. She has made many a repair alone.

Keeping warm has been important. From Chowsie’s memory of her parents using red bricks for heat, and in her own life using materials she has had at hand, there has been a learning to make do. Yearly, tar is patched to worn places on the roof. The windows are covered with plastic as well. These keep the heat in and the cold out.

Analysis

At the end of a month Chowsie returned her journal to me. As I read through her writing, I considered threads from her life that seemed to stand out and ones that seemed to have interconnections. There were two crucial memories of threads from her life which stood out: the red bricks and her birth. And I understand now that these two memories were chosen because of Chowsie’s experiences with survival. The ways in which she has made do and acted self-sufficiently through the years speak volumes about her passion to survive by even the smallest means.

As I began taking a closer look at each memory’s narrative I began holistically coding for themes that seemed to emerge, using Chowsie’s own words. In particular, the themes that came forth were ones of cold and sickness, and they were interwoven. Both memories had a shared theme of sickness. The memory of the event of Chowsie’s birth involved her sickness with connections to her mother’s own bout with pneumonia as she traveled to Sugar City, where Chowsie was born. The red bricks seemed to exist in Chowsie’s memory not only as physical artifacts at one time but now as symbolic artifacts of warmth and making do. They were also used to connect the memory of traveling in the cold to Chowsie’s birth there.

The themes that emerged seemed to be tied to particular objects from the memories. I used Chowsie’s words to code for particular objects that were imbedded in her memories and were directly related to the themes of sickness and cold. Objects which she reflected on from her memories were considered “special” and had sacred value because of their various connections to the significant threads. They exist within her memories as texts which she uses to make meaning in her present life.

Conclusion

In the essay “Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit” (1996) Leslie Marmon Silko focuses on the importance of storytelling within the Pueblo culture. She says that keeping track of stories and allowing them to emerge is what helps us to deal with life (p. 52). The ways in which Chowsie has lived her life, the ways in which she has used memories to navigate the care of her
home and her property – these ways of knowing and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) can be reflected on and valued as a different kind of literacy. No doubt this kind of knowing and reading the world through one’s experiences could open doorways into different lives. Inquiry into how we sacredly read life could allow for voices that are not privileged in society to be heard and honored.

Works Cited