

Writer's work/place: The non/fictional pedagogical possibilities of the Canadian landscape

Mary Sylvia Land

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Abstract

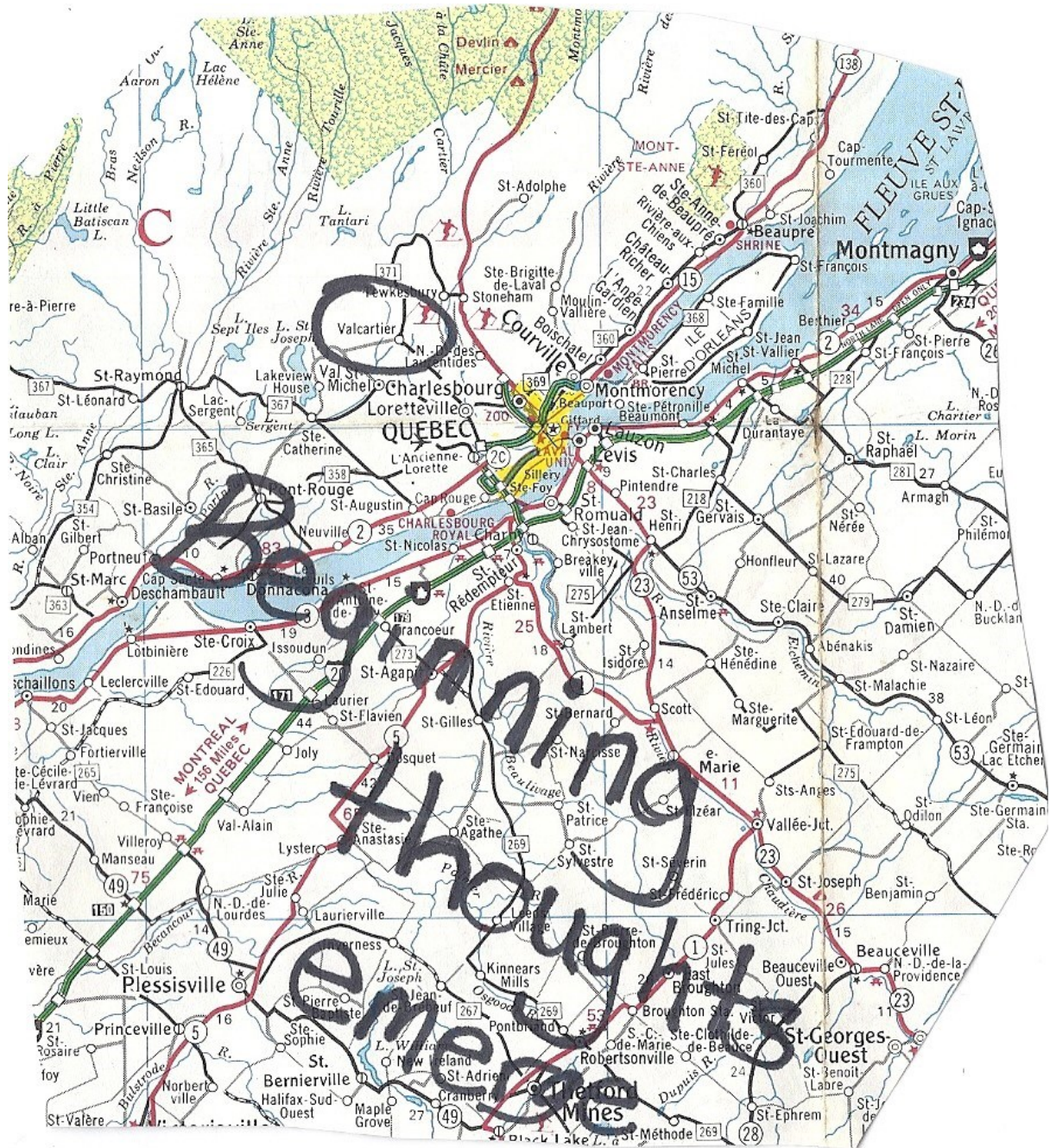
This project considers the role of place in the writing process of Canadian author Monique Polak. Drawing from ideas of literary geography, place-based literacy, and an ecological framework for viewing writing as a social process, this research specifically considers how places are represented in three of her novels written for young adults. This work draws from a representative case study approach, which included conversations with Polak about place, writing, and the intersection of these ideas. By inquiring into the pedagogical possibilities of place as experienced and demonstrated by Polak, educators and researchers can reflect on the role of place in their own work, and consider how teachers and students may benefit from these ideas in their writing as well.

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Prologue – Setting the Stage



The dog teams pull up near a small wooden cabin just beyond the trail. The cabin has a porch that wraps around two sides. "One of the teachers built it himself," Tom explains as we climb off the qamutik. "He moved back south. But he left Steve the key."

"Why would anyone go to the trouble of building a cabin up here?"

Tom shrugs. "I guess he wanted some place quiet to come to."

I look to see whether Tom is joking, but he isn't. "Some place quieter than George River? Isn't George River already in the middle of friggin' nowhere?"

I'm sorry I said it almost as soon as the words are out of my mouth. Tom puts his hand to his chest, like I've slugged him. "It's not the middle of nowhere to us," he says, looking right at me. "For us, George River is the middle of everywhere."

(Polak, 2009, p.83-84)

As a high school teacher in Quebec City, my students often asked me "Why do we need to learn this?" when it came to topics in History or Geography. For them, it was difficult to see how they were ever going to use this knowledge somewhere outside of the classroom. Yet I did not receive these comments in English Language Arts. They placed a higher value on what was done in this class, as they could immediately understand that reading, writing, and communicating with others would always be important. Taking advantage of this, I began to incorporate novels that overlapped with the history or geography courses in some way. The curriculum for Geography in Secondary Cycle One, Year Two indicates that students should study certain Native territories in Canada (Quebec MELS, 2007), with one of the optional regions being Native territories in Northern Quebec. Given that Monique Polak's 2009 novel *The Middle of Everywhere* introduces readers to the community of Kangiqsualujjuaq (also called

George River) through the eyes of 15-year-old Noah from Montreal, this was one of the books that I used with my class.

The students who chose to read this story not only benefited in the ELA class, but definitely developed better understandings of the concepts we were learning in Geography as well. Kangiqsualujjuaq is located near the mouth of the George River on the east coast of Ungava Bay, and in fact the name of the town means “very large bay” (Nunavik Tourism Association, 2010). Although Noah is a fictional character, my students could relate to him, and he is what made the community of George River interesting for them. Where they had previously had textbook pictures or videos from the Internet to base their ideas on, they now could start to form their understandings of this place based on Polak’s writing as well. While I’m sure they agreed with Noah that George River sounds like the middle of nowhere, they were also beginning to see how Tom might see his home as the middle of everywhere.

In this research project, I examine how place informs the writing process for one Canadian author of young adult fiction – Monique Polak. Drawing from ideas of literary geography, place-based literacy, and an ecological framework for viewing writing as a social process, I specifically consider how places are represented in three of her novels written for young adults. Through discussions with the author about the intersection of place and writing, I (as a researcher, educator, and writer) have learned more about how these ideas can help shape the writing process, which may encourage student writers as well.

Getting to know the literary landscape

The geographical concept of place is at the same time simple and complex. Eric Prieto (2013) reminds us that place is a social construct (a physical location does not really become a *place* until people assign a meaning to it). This explanation of place is also apparent in the work

of Lucy Lippard (1997). She indicates that place is about connections; it is a space that is filled with memories and history. Michel de Certeau (1984) distinguishes between space and place by saying that “space is a practiced place” (p. 117). He also contends that every story is a spatial practice – stories are “constantly transforming places into spaces or spaces into places” (p. 118). It is through stories that the relationship between place and space can become evident. In this way, we can consider *The Middle of Everywhere* to demonstrate how Noah's perspective on George River changes from simply a place to the defined space of Tom's home.

Each place in the world has a unique history and people will develop their own connections with places that are important to them. There is also a great deal that can be learned from places. Cynthia Chambers shares an idea from the Western Apache that “wisdom sits in places” (Basso, 1996, as cited in Chambers, 2006), indicating that all places have unique lessons to teach us. One of the ways that we can learn this wisdom from places is by reading stories that capture the distinctive feeling of the landscape – both the natural landscape as well as human-built. Through reading and sharing more young adult novels with my students, I was and still am struck by the unique senses of place that authors create in their stories. It is this questioning about how authors create a unique sense of place in each story that has lead me to research this idea further.

Creating a curriculum of place

The word “curriculum” is used to mean a variety of things in various educational contexts, from the physical document filled with expectations that teachers are meant to follow to a set of ideas about what is important to learn. William Pinar (2012) describes curriculum theory as “a field of scholarly inquiry within the broad academic field of education that endeavors to understand curriculum as educational experience. The curriculum occurs through

conversations within and across the school subjects and academic disciplines.” (p. 30-31).

Conceptualizing curriculum as educational experience reflects my beliefs about learning and education, and has helped to inform this inquiry. I propose that through their novels, authors are creators of curriculum. The ideas and conversations provoked by authors' works contribute to an educational experience for those involved.

Because of my background using young adult literature in a cross-curricular context in my own classroom, I am interested in how authors are part of the process of creating curriculum for young adults. As I mentioned before, reading these novels sparked an interest in my students that other resources such as a textbook did not. The students were clearly learning from these novels, despite the fact that they may not have been written with any explicit educational purpose in mind. Reading about the places where they live can help students to become familiar with the world around them. Chambers (2008), in her call to consider a curriculum of place says that “novices must learn to perceive the world in which they are immersed. Through the education of attention each generation learns to notice the clues in a place, the clues through which each generation must learn how to live here, and the clues [about] what it means to live here” (p. 122). Novels such as those written by Polak contribute to the curriculum of place that ‘novice’ students can be immersed in and learn from.

Canadian and cross-curricular contributions

The students in my classes were able to choose what they wanted to read in my English Language Arts classes. Overwhelmingly, they were reading young adult novels, specifically those that had been written by American authors and were set in the United States. Students certainly were drawn to interesting stories and characters, yet could not always relate to the cultural or geographic elements of the texts. As a teacher, I began to wonder why Canadian

young adult novels were not as popular. After all, “texts written by Canadians for Canadians are most likely to be the ones that represent the world in ways a Canadian audience will recognize. Furthermore, it seems patriotic and important to encourage children to read books produced in their own country” (Nodelman & Reimer, 2000, p.15).

Yet there has not been a great deal of research about the use of Canadian-authored texts in schools. Sylvia Pantaleo (2002b) notes the “small body of research that has examined the use of Canadian literature in Canadian elementary schools” (p. 226), and this statement is further underlined by the fact that “few surveys of teachers’ knowledge and use of Canadian literature have been conducted” (Bainbridge, Carbonaro, and Green, 2005, p. 314). Despite the limited study that has been done in this area (as noted by Pantaleo (2002b)), researchers identify the lack of knowledge on the part of teachers about Canadian books and authors as a barrier to the use of these resources in the classroom. For this project, I am defining Canadian literature to be a work that is written by a Canadian author and set within Canada. Yet this definition is also something to be questioned throughout the process and during conversations with Ms. Polak.

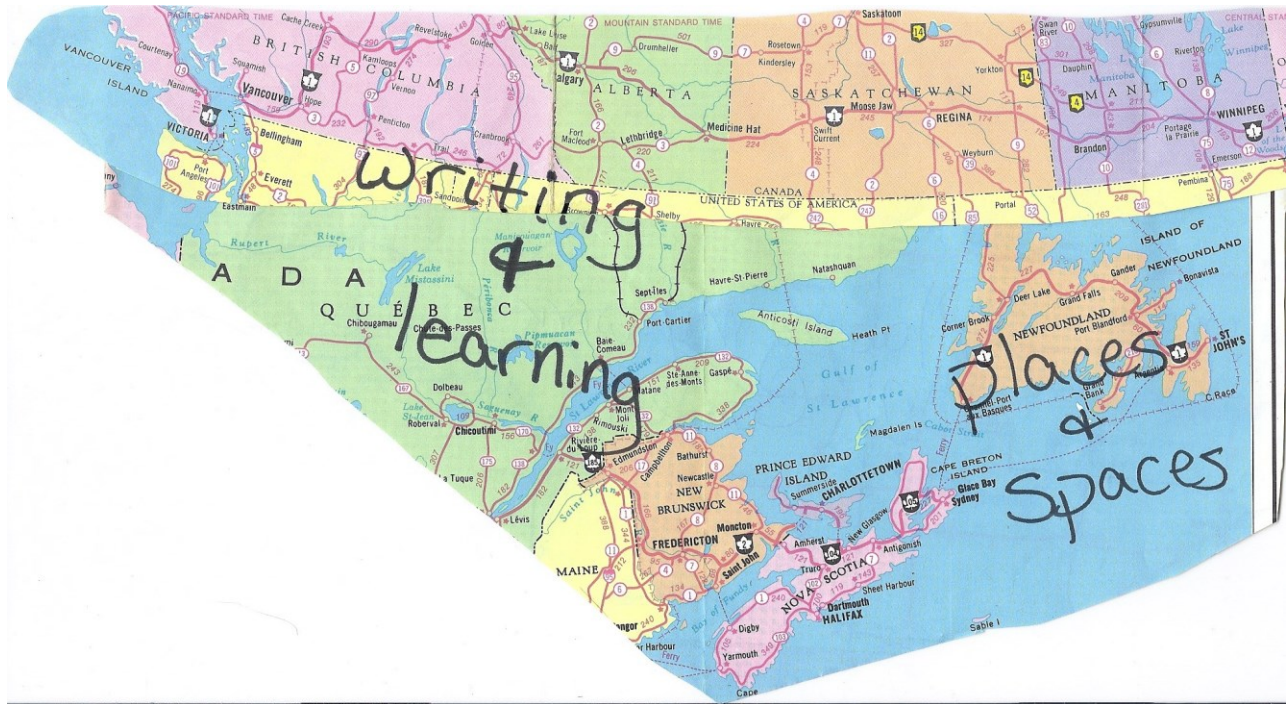
Along with teachers’ lack of awareness of Canadian authors, there generally exists a ‘canon’ of literature that is used within schools (Pantaleo, 2002a; Mackey et al, 2012). While individual texts are not usually prescribed by ministries of education, the same works tend to be used year after year. Pantaleo’s (2002a) research demonstrates that there is a “strong American representation” (p. 7) within this canon of literature, with Canadian authors’ and/or illustrators’ works being used less frequently. Mackey et al (2012) also describe a canon of literature for Alberta’s Grade 10 English Language Arts classes based on research comparing course content from 1996 and 2006. In addition to seeing a “conservative trend towards older, well-established texts” (p. 45), the researchers also found that Canadian authors made up only 16% of the data in

2006. In terms of the setting of the works used, Canada made up less than 18% of the content. American authors and texts set in the United States topped each of these categories, suggesting that students are most often presented with these works. Like Pantaleo, Mackey et al indicate that it would be desirable to include more Canadian authors in the texts used in classrooms.

This previous research about the use of Canadian literature reflects my own experiences in the classroom – I was unaware of many authors of Canadian young adult fiction and generally did not stray too far from what previous teachers in my position had done. I actually cannot remember how I first came across Monique Polak's novel *The Middle of Everywhere*. It was likely during background research for the geography unit on Native Territories, and because I enjoyed this story so much (and could see that my students did too) I began to seek out her other novels (such as *Miracleville*) as well. Using this cross-curricular approach to combine language arts and social studies benefitted my students and created opportunities to make connections between subject areas.

My research contributes to the literature that addresses Canadian authors of young adult fiction. Since the lack of awareness of Canadian authors and novels is a barrier to their use on a larger scale, highlighting Polak and her work in this way serves to address that point. In addition, combining the approach of place-based education with the writing process has not been well-documented in the academic literature. While my interpretations are specific to Polak and her novels, I have connected them to my own experiences and actions as a writer, indicating that there could be implications for others' work as well.

Placing my work in context – Reviewing the literature



To inform this study, I have drawn from three major areas of literature. The first area has to do with place-based education, more specifically place-based literacy. Because of the ways that place permeates Polak's writing, I feel that this is an important foundation for this research. To examine the three novels, I have looked at ways that other stories have been studied from a geographical perspective. This led me to the field of literary geography, where I found a variety of theories for examining place in fiction. In this section I will present a detailed examination of literary geography with an emphasis on regional approaches, as my study will involve novels set within the province of Quebec. Finally, I broadly address authors' perspectives on writing, and additionally how the products of writing are less important than the process, especially for students in schools. While there is significant overlap in these three areas of literature (with the idea of place being the most common connecting thread), all of these ideas contribute to the theoretical background of this inquiry.

Place-based Pedagogy

My initial questions about the intersection of place and pedagogy lead me to the concept of place-based education. In a broad sense, this pedagogical approach aims to contextualize student learning within their lived, local experiences (Smith, 2002; Gruenewald, 2003b). It is based on the idea that the most valuable knowledge to be learned is that which directly relates to the social realities of students. It draws from a variety of theoretical traditions (problem-based learning, outdoor education, experiential education, etc. (Gruenewald, 2003a)), yet the most definitive characteristic of this approach is the value attributed to the unique and specific characteristics of individual locations. It is these place-specific characteristics that provide natural opportunities for learning. As Gruenewald (2003a) explains, "once one begins to appreciate the pedagogical power of places, it is difficult to accept institutional discourses,

structures, pedagogies, and curriculums that neglect them” (p.641). Smith (2002) echoes this idea when criticizing current educational practices, indicating that teachers are generally expected to direct children’s attention away from their own surroundings and toward standard knowledge from other places that has been dictated by people they will never meet.

Practiced more often by schools in rural settings (Jennings et al, 2005), place-based education is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary (Resor, 2010). Geography, with an emphasis on location, locales, and general senses of place, is a clear starting point for place-based discussions. Yet it can easily be widened to include a variety of subject areas. Bringing in economic, cultural, and social dimensions for learning strengthens the connections that students are able to make (Israel, 2012). Overall, students should feel as though their learning has a distinct purpose.

The generic education for “anywhere” (which Gruenewald (2003b) notes could easily deteriorate into an education for “nowhere”) may persist because of the ease with which it can be measured and accounted for (Jennings et al, 2005; Gruenewald, 2003b; Gruenewald, 2005). Yet place-based education is not limited to simply the community or region where a school is located. It is meant to be a starting point for learning about larger concepts. Resor (2010) states that by examining *place* within the context of their local community, students can learn critical thinking skills about how things appear and are perceived. This can then be applied to national and international contexts. Given the pervasive nature of globalisation (Stevenson, 2008), the local foundation provided by place-based learning opportunities will help students make sense of the place dynamics that exist elsewhere as well.

Literary Geography

According to Hones (2014), literary geography is an academic discipline that happens in the “space between” (p.3) and therefore connects literary studies and geography. Scholars and students in both areas can learn from the traditions of the other. The descriptions of settings that are found in texts allow readers to get a sense of place, helping to shape their ideas and understandings of places that they may or may not have visited. Geographers can aid in the interpretation of landscapes that may be symbolic for the author or reader (Sandberg & Marsh, 1988) at the same time as the literary portrayals of places can encourage interest in and perhaps a greater appreciation for the physical space.

Yet literary geography has moved beyond simply combining the two disciplines in order to learn from each other. In the past there has been a focus on the ways in which the settings described within a novel help to connect that space with physical locations in the world (Hones, 2011b; Saunders, 2010). This is still a good starting point for studying the many facets of literary geography, but more recently an interdisciplinary approach has been seen as more useful and better representative of how these academic traditions work together to forge new knowledge. Newer studies in the field of literary geography need to demonstrate more than just the “literary analysis of geographical themes or the geographical analysis of literary texts” (Hones, 2014, p. 8). There is less of a preoccupation with the accuracy of a particular setting (Saunders, 2010), and more investigation into the geography of the text itself and what we as readers may learn from that (Saunders, 2013).

Hones (2011b) proposes that a novel can be considered as a spatial event. This means that the geography presented in a novel is understood to result from the relationships connecting the writer, the text, and the reader (p. 248). In this sense, the geography is co-constructed by the

author and reader, with the text also “writing” some of the geography that is contained within it. Saunders (2010) notes that “if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the spatial event of the text we need to understand the other intersections from which it is composed; those that occur in the process of the work’s creation and not just its consumption” (p. 286). These connections between the writer, reader, and the text align with Rosenblatt’s (1970) discussion of the experience of literature. She notes that “there is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works” (p. 25). The literary event is creatively shaped by the author and reader together, and this is especially true for texts with a strong element of spatiality.

In the sections that follow, I will identify research that has been done in the area of literary geography which reflects the relationship between author, text, and reader. One section will focus on research that has used specific novels as case studies for the analysis of an element of literary geography. Within these case studies, several are concerned with regionalism, or a more focused sense of how place is experienced within certain geographical areas. Given my research study’s concentration on the landscape of the province of Quebec, these studies are particularly relevant.

Novels as case studies for literary geography

As mentioned above, recent studies in literary geography have examined the ways that a text is created. Saunders (2010) studies the writing of *Fraternity* by John Galsworthy. Galsworthy’s work was published in 1909, necessitating the analysis of the author’s letters, journals, memoirs, and diaries in addition to the novel. Saunders looks at how early drafts of the text were perceived by Galsworthy’s contemporaries Henry James and Joseph Conrad as well as his advisor Edward Garrett. Each of these men brought not only their unique literary styles to

their comments, but their own experiences with London, where Galsworthy's story is set. In the analysis, Saunders argues that the creation of this novel was a translocal process, meaning that it was "an outcome of spatial influences and that these influences helped to express and articulate new geographies within the novel" (p. 288). Saunders notes that examining the creative process through literary geography is "neither deterministic nor exhaustive", simply offering a possibility for the interpretation of this work.

Saunders' work draws heavily from Sheila Hones (2011a; 2011b). Hones (2011a) looked at ways in which narrative theory could be used in studies of literary geography to examine setting and narrative space. She highlights the interdisciplinarity of this approach, noting that because narrative theories and spatial theories define ideas differently, this may pose a challenge to its use. In her analysis, she uses three case studies to examine how narrative theory and literary geography could work together.

Hones (2014) also examined the narrative space in the novel *Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann. She indicates that this is an "attempt to connect theory and method in literary studies with theory and method in cultural geography" (p.7). Her work proposes a combination of geographical and literary space and rejects the idea that space within a novel is simply contained within the setting (p. 11). The novel was used as a case study to test possible practices within literary geography – this research was not designed to be a critique of the novel. Hones notes that the book only offers one approach to the "broad spectrum of work" (p. 178) being done in literary geography and questions what the future of the discipline may look like as academics from both literary studies and geography continue adding to the complex discussion.

Regional approaches

In her discussion of Martha Ostenso's and Gabrielle Roy's writings about the Canadian prairie landscape, Heather Avery (1988) notes that the prairie culture helps to shape how people perceive their lives, which in turn is shown through literature. Avery's work acknowledged that much of the writing about the prairies involves the attitude of man versus nature, and argued that "geographers need to hear the woman's voice in order to obtain a more informed picture of the human geography of the prairies" (p. 271). She offered work from Ostenso and Roy as examples featuring women's experiences on the prairies, showing that no singular account can show a universal experience of place. She suggests that by looking at authors who do not belong to the majority narrative of a region, alternative perspectives can emerge.

Ronald Bordessa (1988) writes that literature and geography "share in the task of orienting us to meaning [...] and each can benefit from being informed by the progress of the other" (p. 272-273). He examines authors' representations of different Canadian cities, noting that writers serve to remind geographers that they are focused on the same thing, yet can offer new perspectives. He specifically highlights Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* as being an excellent addition to the narrative geography of Halifax, succeeding in "injecting setting and streetscape, fabric and familiarity into the reader" (p.273). Bordessa acknowledges that selecting MacLennan's work as well as the others in his review is not comprehensive, but argues that the literary examples he provides demonstrate ways in which geographers can think about the subtle aspects of the city that perhaps are not commonly addressed.

Much like Bordessa's inquiry into cities, or Avery's examination of women's perspectives in prairie writing, Wayne Partridge's (2014) questioning of the literary geography of the southern United States involves a unique perspective: a discussion about race and

racialized experiences. Partridge's study used four Young Adult literature novels to interrogate how "notions of white privilege and black subjugation" are reproduced against the setting of the South. The historical aspect to questioning race in these settings was very important, with some books giving the impression that racial discord was a historical event, not modern. Overall, Partridge argues that "these novels about the South, in short, are a form of 'racial tourism'" and do not accurately portray modern experiences, or only portray those of a young, white, female protagonist. While the books that Partridge chose to study were chosen to be on lists by prestigious associations, the places that are shown within them are only part of the landscape that exists in the South.

Authors' Writing Processes

Nedra Reynolds' 2004 book *Geographies of Writing* offers an alternate viewpoint on the process theory of writing. In the past, writing was seen as a temporal process – and multiple distinct drafts were written on the way to a finished product. Yet Reynolds suggests that continuing to ask students for drafts that demonstrate their writing process is not reasonable given the use of technology that makes writing more fluid. She suggests that by seeing writing as a "set of spatial practices informed by everyday negotiations of space" (p. 6), the process can become visible again. The point is not to replace the idea of writing as a temporal process with writing as informed by geography, but simply to recognize the importance of spatiality and place.

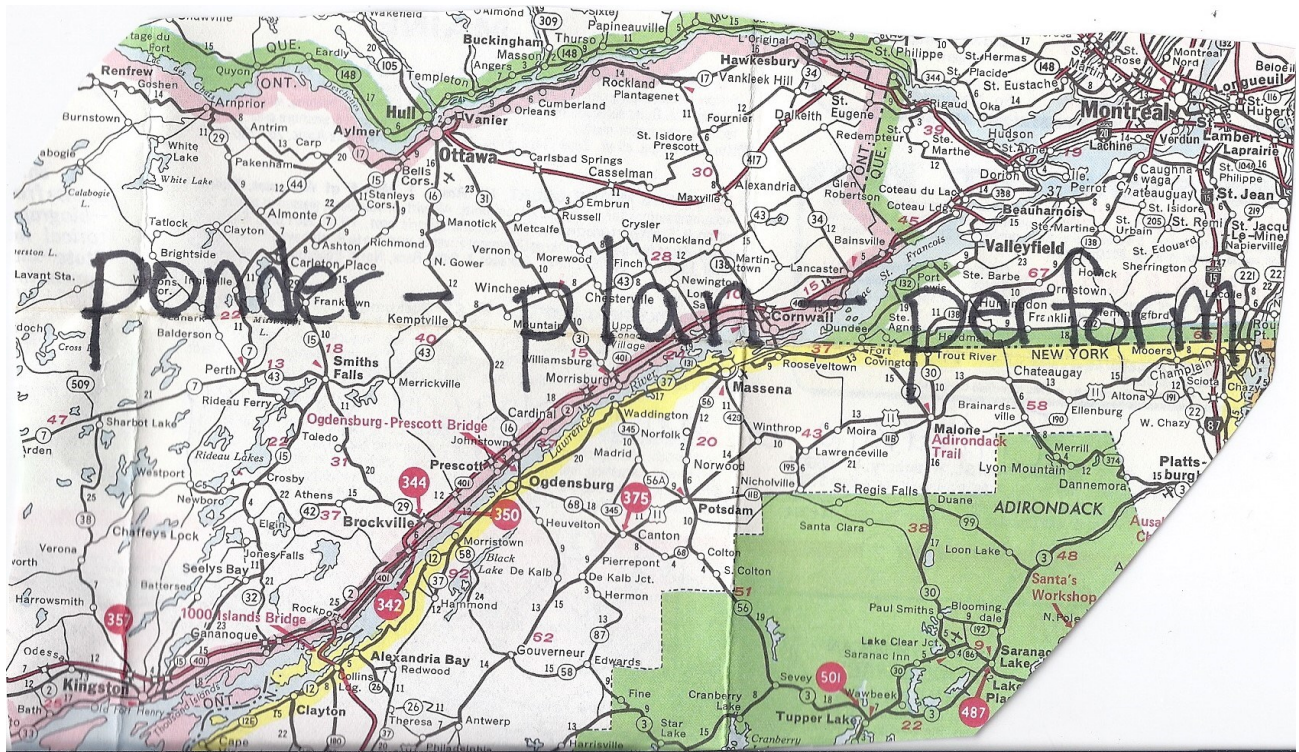
The Writing Life by Annie Dillard (1989) gives readers insight into Dillard's writing process and her views on writing. While she does not explicitly refer to spatiality in her process, many of her ideas are shaped by space or provide evidence for writing being a place-based process. In fact, her opening words are highly involved with space: "When you write, you lay out

a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a wood-carver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow...you go where the path leads" (p. 3). Dillard also points to many occasions where, in order to write, she needed to physically move to a different space (a room without distractions; an isolated cabin). Many of the experiences with writing that she recounts in the book are entwined with space, although she does not comment on that directly. However, her discussion of an author's writing life allows readers to learn more about how an author may begin and continue writing.

Charlotte Doyle's (1998) interviews with authors of creative fiction mainly focus on the connections between the literary world and psychology, but there are two elements that emerge from her discussions that are related to place-based processes. The authors in the study describe a "writingrealm" (p.31), or designated place where their writing took place (an office, writers' colonies, rented rooms). Several authors discussed the fact that they needed to be in their "writingrealm" to recognize the idea for a story, as their place and surroundings influenced their ability to think as a writer.

Doyle's participants go on to describe moving beyond the "writingrealm" into the "fictionworld", the "unfolding world of characters and events as they appear in the imaginative experience and words of the author" (p.31). They share experiences of characters taking on voices of their own, even if they had been inspired by actual people or events. In this "fictionworld", the story develops beyond the conscious control of the author. Yet the participants also note being able to move between the "writingrealm" and the "fictionworld", depending on how their external social worlds exist with their writing process.

Embarking on an ecological journey



Each November, the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers holds a convention in Montreal with workshops about various topics. As a new teacher interested in ongoing professional development, I attended this convention each year. In 2012, I noticed that Polak would be offering a full-day session titled 'Writing for Writing Teachers'. I quickly registered for this session and looked forward to meeting an author of books that I and my students had enjoyed.

During the workshop, Polak shared stories from her background as a writer and teacher. Looking back at my written notes from this session, I am struck by how much *place* is a central part of the writing suggestions that we discussed. When creating a story, Polak noted that it is the author's job to 'take [the reader] there', to create a rich and textured setting that is not just a backdrop for a story, but part of the essential elements. Given my background in geography and my experiences as a teacher of language and writing, these ideas fit together quite well.

When contemplating this topic for my research, this workshop and Polak's writing were at the forefront of my thoughts. I was left questioning a variety of things. In a broad sense, where do authors get their ideas? Are there commonalities among authors for this? How can place inform the writing process? Is it necessary to visit or live in a particular place to be moved to write about it? Thinking more about this question, I started to consider the idea of representation: How can places be represented in stories? Is this connected to the authors' inspirations for stories? These questions were quite general, and I needed to focus my thinking to Polak's experiences. Once I began to consider the ideas in this way, one central question that addressed these points emerged:

From an author's perspective, how do stories for young adults emerge from and represent geographical and cultural landscapes in Canada?

Seeking threads in an ecology of writing

To interrogate this question, I consider the perspective that the writing process is part of an ecology of interconnected social systems (Cooper, 1986; Luce-Kapler, 2004). Using this ecological lens aligns not only with the goals of this inquiry, but with my beliefs about research. The ecological view requires holistic thinking, considering the phenomenon in its entirety (Schram, 2006). There are so many factors that influence writers and writing. Through using the ecological approach, the factors that have most impacted Polak's writing process become clear, and how this affects her role as creator of curriculum for young adults can be discussed.

Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2004) discusses writing as an ecology, connecting various social systems by words and practice. In her work, she explains how individual writers are constantly interacting with other people and ideas that help to create their own pieces of writing. In particular, she notes that the "locations and situations" (p. xiii) in which writers work, especially those that provide links to the natural world, also influence writers' works. It is this idea that I have discussed with Polak to learn more about how she, as a writer, works within these interconnected systems.

To frame this research, I have followed Rebecca Luce-Kapler's (2004) approach that writing is an ecology which involves a variety of interconnected systems. A writer exists within this ecology and works within and between these "social constituted and interacting systems" (p. xiii). Luce-Kapler draws from Marilyn Cooper's (1986) work "The Ecology of Writing". Cooper proposes that we reconsider the idea of the "solitary author" (p. 365) who has the singular goal of producing a text and instead suggests that working with language is essentially a social and connected act.

Polak's writing ecology

Katrina Powell (2014) draws connections between writing and place-based learning, using Cooper's (1986) ecological framework. Powell suggests that "attention to our environments, whether it be literal physical space, the seemingly ephemeral space of the Internet, or the places we create in our classrooms, remains an important avenue for understanding the role of composition studies in the classroom, the role of writing across locations, and the ways our located-ness impacts these roles" (p. 190). I too see the implications for the ecological framework in the curriculum of writing. Because I think that writing can be heavily involved with place, I was interested to see how this manifests itself in Polak's writing process. It is certainly not be the only thing that has an influence on her writing choices – I have continued to use the holistic approach that the ecological framework requires to examine her experiences. Yet looking at this topic from a mindset that values place provides more information as to how place fits in with the entire ecological process of writing for this author.

Towards paths intersecting: authors, writing, and fiction

Like many travelers embarking on a trip and encountering unfamiliar places, my research involved careful planning. Guided by the literature mentioned previously, my own qualitative research project began to take shape. I have focused on one Canadian author of fiction for young adults, Monique Polak, and examined three novels written by her that represent different places in the province of Quebec. Keeping my overall research question in mind, I chose to study multiple novels by one author to learn more about her overall writing process. While I recognized that there may be similarities between the processes for the three chosen novels, I was interested to see how the landscape can be involved differently in each separate story.

Looking at this idea through the experiences of one author allowed me to learn about her own ways of writing – which then lead to thinking about how this may happen for others, too.

As explained previously, there is a lack of Canadian authors represented in the 'canon' of literature used in Canadian schools. For this project, I have also ventured outside the 'well-worn path' of Canadian authors whose work is widely used. Given my previous familiarity with Polak's novels, I chose to discuss these ideas of landscape, place, and writing with her in order to learn more about the connections between all of these elements.

While Monique Polak's novels may be less common in schools than other authors', she is certainly a popular author and often conducts workshops with students, especially in the Montreal area. She is a freelance journalist, an instructor at Marianopolis College in Montreal, and since 2004 has written 16 novels for a young adult audience. She is also involved with a variety of organizations that support writing for younger students, having been the 2013-14 Writer-in-Residence at Riverdale High School in Pierrefonds, Quebec where she collaborated with students there to start writing a new novel. Through her stories, she represents the unique landscapes of Quebec and usually the distinctive experience of English characters in a predominantly French location. This theme is not explicitly addressed in each book, but her stories represent life as lived by young adults in these places, which includes navigating within this ever-present social and linguistic dynamic.

Because of my familiarity with her work as used in my own classroom, as well as initial insights gained at the writing workshop, I focused on three of her novels for this research study, each representing a different landscape within Quebec. The three novels included in this project are *The Middle of Everywhere* (2009), which is set in Kangiqsualujjuaq (George River) in Nunavik in Northern Quebec; *Miracleville* (2011), set in Saint-Anne-de-Beaupre; and *121*

Express (2008), which takes places in the Ville-Saint-Laurent neighbourhood of Montreal, specifically along the bus route of the 121 Express.

Mapping the research journey

This project demonstrates many important characteristics of qualitative research.

Research Design

For this inquiry, I chose to draw from a case study approach. There were several reasons for selecting this approach. My intent was to inquire deeply into the writing process of one particular author, who will be representative of other Canadian authors of young adult fiction (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). This is not meant to generalize Polak's experiences or suggest that all authors act in the same way (Swanborn, 2010), but to use Polak's approach to writing as an example and a guide to learning more about this process. In combing through the academic literature on the topic of literary geography to inform my study of her novels, it became clear that case study was a common method for other researchers (Hones, 2014; Saunders, 2013; Hones, 2011a) in this field. Not all research projects used the representative approach to case study; some conducted multiple case studies, especially if many books were involved. But because my research question is focused more on the author's process than the finished works themselves, a representative case study is most applicable here.

Drawing from a case study approach shaped the design process for this research. In terms of the research question, this meant that I specified that the topic was being looked at "for one author of young adult fiction". It involved analysis of only Monique's novels and interviews with her directly.

Multiple Sources of Data

I draw from two major data sources in this research. The first is the series of three interviews I conducted with Monique during March and April 2015. The second source of data is her novels *121 Express*, *Miracleville*, and *The Middle of Everywhere*. The interviews provide me with more background information into her process while writing each novel, but the novels themselves are the finished product of her writing. They represent her ideas. It is important to have both sources of information because they complement each other, each providing data that the other may not convey. Taking a look at all of this data together can provide much more information than either the interviews or the novel texts alone.

Holistic Account and Inclusion of the Natural Setting

Qualitative research in general aims to describe a particular phenomenon. This is usually done through the creation of a holistic account of the issue. In this manner, a complex picture of the issue being studied is developed. In the case of my particular research study, the holistic approach is augmented by the ecological framework through which I view Monique's writing process. To learn about her as an author, I felt it was important to travel to Montreal to conduct the interviews with Monique. This is not only where many of her novels are set, including *121 Express* that I have studied here, but also where she does her writing of the novels. Although I have certainly visited the city before, I wanted to specifically visit the city as a researcher with this project and research question in mind. I had indicated to Monique that the interviews would take place at a location that was convenient for her, thinking that she would suggest a coffee shop or perhaps her office at Marianopolis College. To my surprise, she suggested that I come directly to her home. In doing this, I was able to gather information about Monique and her writing in the most natural setting possible.

Researcher's role

Because of my previous experiences attending Monique's workshop and using her novels in the classroom, I knew at the outset of starting this degree that I wanted to work with her stories at the very least, and ideally Monique herself as part of my research project. My familiarity with her work helped to focus the scope of what I would be looking at. I was also able to consider what some of the potential topics of discussion might be.

In order to work with Monique, this project needed to be approved by the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board (REB). I had initially contacted her in July 2014 to determine her level of interest in participating in the project. She was very enthusiastic about it, responding quickly to my inquiries and providing thoughtful suggestions for other possible directions. Having determined that this project was feasible, I wrote up the research proposal and it was approved by the committee on January 27, 2015.

I then began the process of applying for approval from the REB. This project proved to be different from the majority of cases seeking REB approval. Generally the identity of participants is not revealed and it is the role of the researcher to ensure that all participants remain anonymous. But for this study, it would not be possible for the participant to remain anonymous. Quite the contrary – the research would be specifically about Monique, and her novels and other identifying details would be explicitly mentioned. After consultation with a protocol officer, I was reassured that a study such as this was still possible. Monique needed to be made aware of the fact that her name and identifying information about her would be used in this research, but she was very agreeable to this so it was not an issue.

After receiving approval from the REB on March 9, 2015, I was then able to proceed with contacting Monique and establishing a timeline for data collection. As previously described,

Monique was approached for participation in this study because of my previous familiarity with her novels and discussion of her writing process during the workshop I attended. The three novels were chosen because they represent different parts of the geographical and cultural landscape of Quebec. *The Middle of Everywhere* depicts life in a small Inuit community in the Nunavik area of the province. *Miracleville* touches on Quebec's religious roots and modern life in Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre. *121 Express* is one of several of Monique's novels that is set within the city of Montreal, but this story has the added element of showing the teenage culture on the bus. With the variety shown between these three novels, this case study would represent multiple landscapes within the larger setting of Canada.

During the time between the approval of my research proposal and approval of my ethics application, I read each of the three novels and took detailed notes including quotations from each story where the geographical or cultural landscape was depicted. This information helped to determine questions to ask Monique, especially during the first interview where we specifically talked about each book individually.

The interviews were semi-structured. Before each interview, I established an overall theme I wanted to discuss that aligned with my research question. I then created a list of between five and seven questions that pertained to that particular theme. During the interview, the questions progressed naturally and the tone was conversational. If Monique discussed something that I wanted to question further, I did so until we were done with that topic. In each hour-long interview I was able to ask all the questions I had planned, as well as delve deeper into other aspects she was bringing up in her responses.

The fact that the interviews took place in Monique's home allowed me to observe the setting for her writing. We sat at the dining room table where she had easy access to her daily

journals, which she showed me multiple times. While she does her writing in her office upstairs at her home, it felt like the dining room/kitchen area was the real centre of her actions. Also being in her home environment I was able to experience her busy life, from phone calls, to visits with neighbours, to running errands with her husband.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

I transcribed each interview within three days of the interview itself. Because I had planned to schedule the interviews with a one week break in between each one, it was important to complete the transcription quickly so that I would have time to reread our conversation and revisit any topic that needed more discussion. While I was transcribing and working with the data, initial themes began to swirl in my mind and on the page and computer screen. In this way, the interpretation of the data happened alongside the collection of it.

Based on reading the transcripts created after each interview, a number of themes began to emerge more clearly. I considered how each of these themes related to my overall research question and began to sort the data. I highlighted the transcripts to show where each theme was discussed and found more supporting information from the texts of the novels as well.

As is customary in a case study research design, to aid in the analysis and interpretation of the data I created a detailed description of the data. I have described each interview in a narrative style, using Monique's own words to highlight the important parts of information that would be included in the analysis.

Interpretation in Qualitative Research

One of the tenets of qualitative research is that my interpretations of the data are based on my own background knowledge, previous experiences, and understandings of the pertinent academic literature. Another reader may see other themes or discover connections between

segments of information that I did not make. This case study in particular, while potentially representative of Quebec authors of young adult fiction, only examines the writing process for Monique Polak. I did not provide Monique with transcripts of the interview to read, but over the course of the second and third interviews, I did discuss some of the ideas for themes that had already become apparent to me by working with the data. She enjoyed the discussion about the analysis and the academic background behind my research project. She mentioned a number of times how the questions I was asking her were allowing her to see her work in a different way. There were topics that we talked about that she had not considered before and she enjoyed the chance to approach ideas from new angles.

Reporting the Findings

As mentioned previously, the data section begins with a narrative account of each interview, as well as the process of initial correspondence with Monique. The original quotations from the interviews can be found within this section, in italics.

My findings are presented visually as a web, demonstrating the role of the ecological framework in the interpretation of the data. Each point on the web is discussed in terms of its relationship with the other points. I also address how all of these elements the web can be constructed to address the research question outlined at the beginning of this project.

Fiction and Research

In reflecting on the research process, I felt a need to make my research study accessible to a larger audience. At the same time, I wanted to represent the findings of this project in a way that acknowledges the process of writing. I am inspired to draw on the notion of fiction as a research practice. I came to this idea after realizing that Monique's books are used as a learning tool despite the fact that that is not necessarily her overall intention. In conducting a search for

academic literature about this topic, I was introduced to this discipline which encourages researchers to create original works of fiction that allow their work to reach a wider audience. This project is the intersection of research, fiction, and writing, so I have chosen to include a research-based fictional short story as an additional way of interpreting the findings of this study.

As Patricia Leavy (2013) writes, "Fiction can draw us in, giving us access to new yet familiar worlds in which we might meet strangers or through which we might reflect on our own lives" (p.20). Leavy continues to explain that fiction allows us to "see" places that we otherwise would not be able to visit. By writing and reading about "imaginary or possible worlds" (p.20), we create a variety of possibilities for learning. She also notes that fiction writers strive to create representations of worlds that are believable and portray genuine human experiences. It is through their writing of particular places and events that we as readers can learn about new landscapes, yet also be re-introduced to those with which we are already familiar.

I continued to be drawn in by Leavy's description of research and story. "In the academic world, researchers are storytellers, learning about others and sharing what they have learned. [...] We are charged with telling the stories of others in creative, expressive, dynamic, and authentic ways." (p.35). This is an idea that would resound very strongly with Monique. Leavy continues to add that fiction based research "[illuminates] the particulars of daily life" (p. 43) and allows for reflection on what may otherwise escape our attention – something else that speaks to Monique's ecology of writing. I was also encouraged by Banks & Banks' (1998) discussion about research and fiction. "For, after all, if scholarly research is genuinely a pursuit of the researcher's mind and heart, it is the expression that makes the research come to life and connect each of us to what we have learned, to a tradition, and to audiences. In at least this one sense, fiction writing and scholarly reporting are closely linked. To consider scholarly reporting

otherwise is to fall into a tragic cynicism; to consider fiction writing otherwise is to deny it legitimation" (p.9).

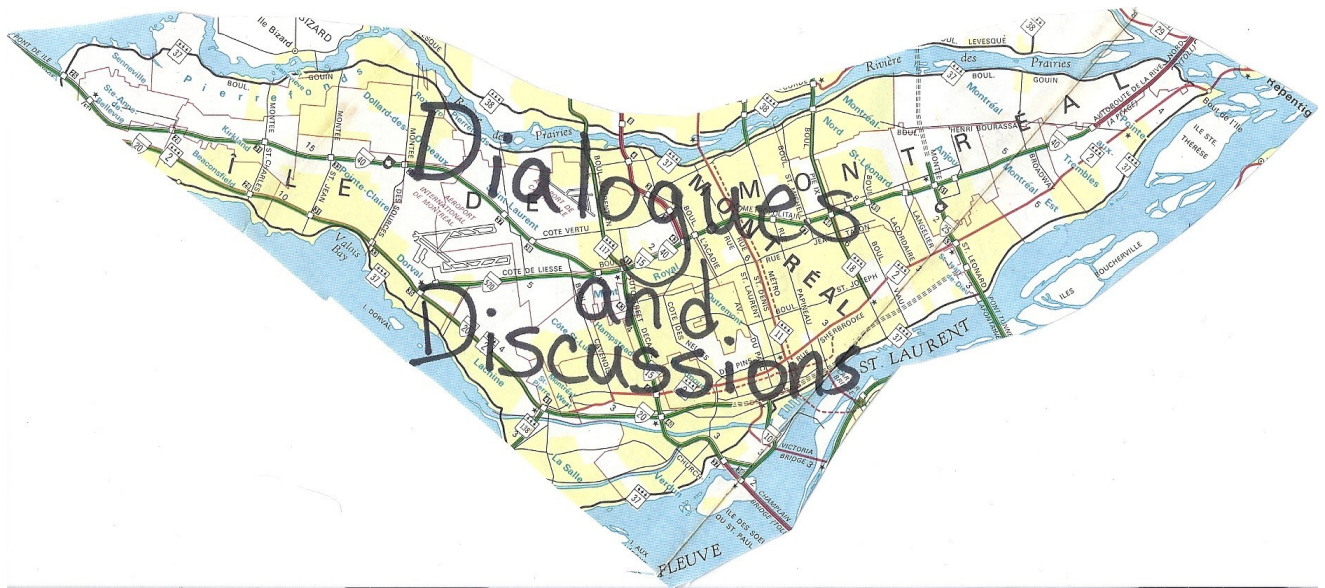
Rishma Dunlop (2001) explains how she has used fiction as a research practice. "The novel as research provides me with a form to say what I could not say otherwise. As a teacher-educator, a poet, and a fiction writer who teaches about reading and writing practices, I wanted my research to embody and perform the beliefs about knowledge and education that I try to embed into my teaching practice. This is my research, my act of fiction, an act of passion." (p.11). She continues to discuss her writing as an act of performative inquiry. "Writing and reading become acts of performance, intertwined acts of performative inquiry. [...] The fictional text constitutes boundary crossing transgressing over referential fields of thought and textual systems of representation" (p. 12).

Considering writing as performative inquiry embodies the idea put forth by Pelias (2014). He outlines six characteristics of performative writing in an attempt to define what this term means. Those characteristics are broadly described below, followed by an explanation as to how my research-inspired fictional short story meets that criteria to be called performative writing.

For Pelias, performative writing "expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge" by featuring "lived experiences [and] telling iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life" (p.11). Shaping these experiences into evocative stories can show the belief that the world is constructed from multiple realities. Performative writing also then can spark empathic responses in the audience – creating a space where others may see themselves. In this way, it can turn the personal into the political and the political into the personal. Finally for Pelias, performative writing is involved in relational and scholarly contexts, being able to connect people within a scholarly community and locate them as individuals.

My performative writing contribution will not only display my understandings of the themes developed from this research study, but will do so within the context of the experiences of an adolescent from my home base of Manitoulin Island. This is a work of fiction – while I have drawn on my own memories and feelings from my youth, it is not a narrative about my own life. It is a new work, inspired by my thoughts about this research as well as my desire to reach new audiences. I hope that it creates a space for readers to see themselves, even if they have not traveled to my home. Above all, it is taking everyday experiences and shaping them into new contexts guided by the themes resulting from my conversations with Monique.

Research Data: Conversations with Monique



To begin this research, I read the three novels I selected for this project and noted information from the story that depicted the geographic or cultural landscape. Using these notes, I then created questions to be discussed with Monique. Below is a brief discussion of each novel, as well as information from our conversations together.

The Middle of Everywhere

Noah does not waste any time sharing his feelings about being in George River at the beginning of Polak's 2008 novel *The Middle of Everywhere*. In the second paragraph on the first page, he says that "It's pretty depressing being up here in the middle of nowhere, two plane rides away from Montreal. There's nothing to see except snow and more snow." (p. 1). While the story starts as a 'fish-out-of-water' tale of a city-raised teenager going to live with his father who teaches in Quebec's Far North, Noah begins to make connections with the people who live there. It is these connections that help him to realize the uniqueness of George River and begin to appreciate what this place means to others (and eventually to him, too).

In the author's section at the back of the book, it is noted that "This book was inspired by Monique's trip to Nunavik in 2007." (p.203). To me, this statement creates more questions. Were the events in the story inspired by actual things that happened? Do the characters represent people living in Kangiqsualujjuaq, or perhaps a combination of multiple people? If so, how did these people feel about themselves and their home being represented in this story? Polak mentions many organizations and people by name in the Acknowledgments section, which indicates a great deal of planning and research that went in to not only the trip, but the novel as well. This research allows her to create a story that represents George River's unique sense of place and demonstrates the life and culture of those who live there.

Miracleville

Polak followed *The Middle of Everywhere* with *Miracleville* in 2011. As mentioned above, visiting this place sparked a story idea for the author and she was immediately committed to developing it further. In fact, she extends “thanks to the many people [she] met on [her] visits to Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre for sharing their town with [her]” in the acknowledgements section of the novel. The essence of this town that Polak depicts is something that cannot be separated from the plot or characters of the story.

Generally, modern teenagers in mainstream society are not seen as very religious. In addition, despite the historical Roman Catholic influence, Quebec is a very secular society today. Yet because she lives in Saint-Anne-de-Beaupre, a town where religious pilgrims come to seek miracles, 16-year-old Ani is confronted with faith and religion every day. Her family runs a souvenir shop that is popular among those who come looking to be healed by the power of Saint Anne. The town is shaped by the visitors who travel there; as Ani states, “Sometimes, when I’m walking on Avenue Royale, I feel hope hanging in the air like a living thing” (p. 3). Over the course of the story, Ani’s feelings about faith and miracles become complicated by things that happen to her. Yet without the backdrop of Saint-Anne-de-Beaupre, the thoughts of a teenage character about religion, faith, and the existence of miracles could fall flat. Here, it is woven through the story so seamlessly that the town becomes an integral part of the story.

121 Express

Before both *Miracleville* and *The Middle of Everywhere*, Polak wrote a novel in 2008 that took place in Montreal. More specifically, the novel predominantly takes place on a bus route traveled by high school students. It is from this bus route that *121 Express* takes its title.

While there are explicit references to places in the Montreal area (the addresses given in the letters at the open and close of the story; main character Lucas explaining that it would take over an hour to walk to his new home in Ahuntsic (p. 1); describing the bus driving down Cote-Vertu Boulevard, “across from the McDonald’s” (p. 55)), the unique sense of place presented to readers is the bus itself. Polak captures the wide range of emotions of the adolescents riding the bus: the bravado of students wanting to cause trouble for the bus driver balanced with the apprehension of students just wanting to be ignored until they can exit the bus. All of these emotions and the characters’ actions together create the feeling as though the reader is riding the bus with these characters.

Interview sessions

Being able to discuss Monique’s writing directly with her had long been my vision for this project. Following approval from the research ethics board, I contacted her again to make sure she still wanted to be involved in this research.

Hello Monique,

Last summer I contacted you regarding my thesis research about the connections between place and writing. Thank you for being so enthusiastic about participating! I hope that being involved with this research still interests you. I am looking forward to working together and learning more from you about your experiences.

*I have now received the approval from my thesis committee and the University’s research ethics board to move ahead with this project. As I mentioned last summer, the purpose of this research project is to examine how place informs your writing process. I will be re-reading three of your novels (specifically *The Middle of Everywhere*, *Miracleville*, and *121 Express*) and analyzing them to consider how places are represented. In addition to*

reading these novels, I would also like to discuss these ideas of place, space, and writing with you in person.

Your involvement would consist of participating in a series of three interviews. I anticipate that these conversation-style interviews would each last for approximately one hour, and they would also be audio-recorded. The interviews would be scheduled at a time and location that is convenient for you.

If you have any questions about this research, I would be pleased to discuss the project further.

Thank you,

Mary Land

Considering it had been about eight months since I had sent the initial email to determine if the project would even be feasible or not, I was slightly apprehensive about sending the above message. My mind kept thinking about all the things that might have changed: maybe she was now too busy to take this on; perhaps she had reconsidered wanting to be involved; what if she was going to be away for an extended period of time? I had followed the ethics rules of not contacting her prior to receiving full approval, but now all these possibilities were racing through my mind.

Luckily, I did not have long to wait. About twenty minutes after sending that first message, I had a new email in my inbox:

Hi Mary! Still game! My home tel in case that is helpful: 514.XXX.XXXX

I was filled with a huge sense of relief as we shared a few more emails back and forth in quick succession, agreeing that I would call her in half an hour.

"Hello!"

"Hi Monique, it's Mary Land calling."

"Hi Mary. Now, tell me: Have we met before?"

"Well, yes, sort of. I was at a workshop that you gave a few years ago at the QPAT convention in Montreal."

"Uh-huh. I'm just trying to remember what you look like. Are you a young thing?"

"Ahhh...I don't really know how to answer that one...I'll be twenty-nine in a few weeks?"

"That's pretty young to me!"

This exchange was an introduction to Monique's quick-talking curiosity that I would learn more about during our conversations together. By the end of this first telephone visit, we had planned to meet at her home in Montreal on an upcoming Tuesday afternoon.

The First Interview:

Filled with nervous excitement, I boarded the mid-morning train to Montreal. As the train passed through small towns and farmers' fields, I thought about the upcoming afternoon. After our phone conversation and shared emails, I was looking even more forward to meeting Monique again and talking about writing with her. I read and reread the questions I had planned for the day as we approached the city. For me, arriving in Montreal by train has always signified some sort of important event (like a conference or long overdue visit with friends) and this day was certainly no exception.

I exited the train and remained in the station for a while, knowing that I had plenty of time before I needed to take the short cab ride to Monique's house. Other travellers circulated around me as I once again reread my notes and questions for that afternoon. This preparation

calmed my nervous energy just a little bit, although I still decided to leave for Monique's with plenty of time to spare.

The cab ride brought me on roads through Montreal that I had heard of, but never travelled on before. I watched the street signs, knowing we were getting close to her street based on the map I had consulted online. The cab dropped me off a half block away from her house. As I walked, I looked at the numbers of the houses to make sure I was going the right way. Up ahead I saw a house that, for a reason I could not exactly put my finger on, seemed slightly more *welcoming* than the houses around it. There were several plants and a chair on the front porch. I felt this was going to be the place.

It was a sunny March afternoon and light was pouring in the living room window. I felt surrounded by colour everywhere. Beautiful artwork hung in the living room and dining room, bringing even more bold, rich colours into my view. There were also many smaller items decorating the walls and shelves – souvenirs of life experiences with many of their own stories to tell. Above all, a feeling of happiness and positivity is what greeted me there. After an introduction to Ninja the cat and polite refusal of her offers of coffee, tea, and banana bread, we got ourselves set up at her dining room table.

I had interrupted an afternoon of marking. The two stacks of papers (with the “to-be-marked pile” that seems never ending) are familiar to all teachers. But she put those to the side, started brewing tea for herself, signed the consent form to participate in this project, and we were finally ready to begin the ‘formal’ interview.

When considering how to structure these three separate interviews with Monique, I took a closer look at my research question. Although there is only one question there, I actually see

three parts to it. I decided that each interview would focus on one of these three parts. That meant that for the first interview, I wanted to know more about her writing process in general: From an author's perspective, *how do stories* for young adults *emerge* from and represent the geographical and cultural landscapes in Canada?

Monique the Writer

I began by asking her about her background as a writer. I learned that she comes from a family of storytellers, so beginning at an early age she learned from her mother about telling stories and engaging people through narratives. She explained that during parties, *"if I needed to find my mother, she would be in the middle of a group of people, right in the centre, and they would be kind of mesmerized because she was telling a story."*

Yet school changed her views toward writing. *"I became a really good student and that was my identity. ... So I became like a performing seal of term papers. I got really good marks on my term papers, but I didn't really enjoy writing, I just performed."*

She then talked about the difficulties she experiences with the writing process as an author now. *"People who are good at it struggle, you know, and they rewrite and they agonize and they're miserable most of the time. Most of the time when I write, I'm pretty unhappy! But I still do it. I'm hooked on it."* She wishes someone had told her about this when she was younger and she now tries to share with students in her classes and the classes she goes to visit. *"So when I do school visits, I try to demystify: Writing Is Hard Work. Writing, yes, you feel miserable mostly. You do not write a sentence and go 'That is exquisite! Oh, Monique, what a fine writer you are!'* No. *I write a sentence and I'm like 'I hate that sentence!'"* She feels this is an important message for students to hear.

She then went back to describing her journey back into writing after school had made it so much less enjoyable. She became a teacher at Marianopolis College and continued doing that for about ten years, but she still knew that something was missing from her life. *"I didn't have to, you know, climb a mountain and meditate to figure out what it was. I knew it was writing, 'cause it was a thing I loved doing as a kid and then I had stopped doing it. So I slowly, slowly found my way back to it."*

Now she writes a variety of pieces for publication, but she also simply writes for her personal enjoyment as well. *"I can't stop writing. Here, I'll show you: In this trusty drawer, here's how I start my day. Every single day with my journal. I still do it. Three pages a day. Today I was thinking 'What if I could just do two?' But then it's like, Nah, I've been doing three for over twenty years."* As she was telling me this, she pulled out her journals from a drawer at the table. She explained that every morning she sits there and writes her pages. Sometimes this writing helps her develop ideas for a character in a novel or work through something for an article, but more often than not, it is a chance for her to write about other aspects of her life. *"And I really like starting my day like that. I'm always grateful that I've done it. I always feel – I call it 'Pages' and often I'll say 'Thanks, Pages, for listening...'".*

She began to describe her early experiences writing professionally. *"Nothing gets wonderful quickly! That's a life lesson, too: It's all hard work and difficult!"* In the early 1990s, she sold a book review to the Montreal Gazette and that then led to other opportunities working as a journalist for that publication. This was the first time that she was earning money for her writing and she enjoyed that quite a lot. She also enjoyed seeing her name in print – something that still pleases her today.

About four or five years after selling that first book review, Monique began to work on her first Young Adult manuscript. It did not sell, but she continued to write other manuscripts for YA readers. Her first novel was published in 2004, which meant that for close to a decade, she had been going through a frustrating process of writing but not publishing. She said that it got to the point where her father told her to focus her energy on other things. *"My dad said 'Just give up. You're a teacher, you write for the newspaper, give up on this crazy dream of being a novelist for teenagers'".* Her father disputes that he ever said such a thing, but Monique remembers it clearly.

She now has multiple writing projects on the go at any one time, in addition to her teaching work at Marianopolis College, which has been a constant in her life for the past 31 years. I asked her how she balances all of these things. *"Well, on a bad day, I feel like I have a crazy life, and like 'What did I get myself into?' So I have frequently days like that. I'm not saying I'm miserable, but days when I feel a bit overwhelmed by the number of projects I take on. I'm a little bit in that phase now because also it's marking season, but on a good day, it just all kind of fits together. That the work I do with my students informs my stories, the journalism – everything all kind of ties in together. A story that I'm researching for the newspaper feeds the fiction, I talk about it with students, it all kind of fits".*

I then asked her more about her visits with high school students and how that informs the novels she writes. She explained that on the surface, it may look like she is just talking with students, but she almost always is taking notes, even just in her head. She is listening for new experiences and things that are out of the ordinary. She compares herself as a writer to several different types of birds: *"One is a bird like a vulture that, like, lands on roadkill. Like I'm very interested, like 'Ooh, that's a problem! That could be good for my story!' But I'm also a little bit*

like a bird building a nest. That's a nicer kind of bird. So I collect snippets, I collect interesting stuff, I collect odd things, and, you know, fun students, weird students, difficult students – because I need them for my stories. That's why I can't retire!"

Places for Writing – (Miracleville)

From there, we began talking about her experiences with place and writing. I asked her if she had always lived in Montreal, and in fact she does not live far away from the house she grew up in – the house where her parents still live. Seeing as most of her novels are set in Montreal, I wondered if this was a conscious relationship between these two things. *"The very first manuscript I wrote, I didn't have much of a very clear setting. I made it, like, you know, a town in North America, probably the United States. And I gave it a name like, I don't know, Clearview or some generic town with a mall, and that was it."* This first manuscript has never been turned into a novel, although the other manuscripts she had written before selling the first one to be published have eventually all been reworked and turned into published novels. It was only after hearing Newfoundland author Kevin Major at a CANSCAIP (The Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers) conference that she began to think about the importance of the setting to the story. *"He said you should write about your place. You should write about what you know in terms of setting. And that rather than making it generic, something that readers are interested in is finding out about a place"*. For Monique this brings up questions about what home means, and what it means to be *from* a place. But overall, she says *"I can't write about a place that I've never been to. I would have a hard time. I always want to go to the place and really get a feel for it"*. And she thinks that readers feel the same way. As opposed to early YA, where the setting was not very developed, today the audience wants to learn

something from the story about where it takes place. *"There's been a big shift into the specific rather than the generic."*

At the workshop I attended with Monique in 2012, I remembered that she mentioned *Miracleville* as a novel where it was very important for her to be in that place (Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre). So I asked her to elaborate on the process of developing that particular story. She and her husband had been driving through the area on their way to a kayaking trip in Tadoussac, Quebec. But because they were going to miss the last ferry to Tadoussac, they decided to take a hotel overnight and start out again in the morning. It was late when they arrived at the hotel and they did not really take in their surroundings or even take much notice of where they were. The next morning, Monique went out for a run along the 138 Highway and quickly ended up in the town of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre. *"When I jogged into the town, I realized right away that this was, from my point of view, an odd place."* She noticed many trailers being set up on the outskirts of town, and then as she approached the main streets she saw many tourist shops selling a variety of religious-themed goods, like trivets and salt-and-pepper shakers. She was not able to do much research about this place during her run, but she did realize that the main feast of Sainte Anne would be coinciding with their return trip from Tadoussac the following week. Monique felt the need to experience more of this town. *"I came back from the run, and I said to my husband 'It just so happens that when we come back, on our drive back from Tadoussac next week, it's going to coincide with this – where all these pilgrims come to pray to Sainte Anne for healing and all this stuff, and I want to stop here on the way back and do some research. So I think I'll need two or three days, so I've just booked us a B&B.'"*

When they did come back and started exploring the main street at the height of the festival, it was crowded with pilgrims looking to be healed. Monique's husband found the

situation to just be overall too bizarre, and headed back to Montreal by bus on his own, leaving her and the car in the town to continue her research. *“And in a way, it wasn’t bad that he left because it meant that I could totally, totally focus. And I believe I was there for three days. I got a ton of notes.”*

I asked her if she knew right away that she was going to write a story set in Saint-Anne-de-Beaupre. *“Yeah. The place just struck me as – I gotta set a story here”*. In order to develop what that story would be, Monique began talking to people in the town. She did not do formal interviews, but she chatted with a variety of people, mainly teenagers. She spoke with a boy who was a parking attendant at the cathedral. She asked him if he believed in all this, and while he did not, his grandmother did. In a tourist shop, she also spoke with two sisters and asked them the same questions – one was not, the other wasn’t sure. These three examples of people that she chatted with can easily be linked with the characters they inspired in *Miracleville*.

Monique took these conversations and began to ask herself an important question that she asks in all of her writing: What if? It was pondering the possibilities of what could happen in a place where miracles and faith are so important (and these are the topics that Monique wanted to question) that helped the actual story of *Miracleville* develop.

I told her that I felt *Miracleville* was a story where the setting could not be separated from the story itself. She agreed, and explained more about the title of the book: *“I think that was my title all along because that’s what I was so interested in.”*

121 Express

After *Miracleville*, we began discussing her novel *121 Express*. This developed in a very different way than *Miracleville*, but Monique has a unique sense for determining when a good idea for a story is in front of her. She describes the sensation of feeling goosebumps on the inside

of her elbows and when she gets this, she knows she is in proximity of a good story. *"I always pay attention. When that happens, I just know. To me, that's my body saying 'write it down, you might use this. You probably will use it'."*

She had been working on a project with a photographer through the Blue Metropolis Literary Foundation in which she would help the class tell a story. She was working with Mr. Andrew Adams' class at Lauren Hill Academy in Ville St-Laurent, and after class one day she commented to Mr. Adams about how well-behaved his students were. He provided her with another perspective. *"I said 'Those kids are such nice kids you have. What a lovely group of Grade 7 students you have, Mr. Adams' and he said 'You think they're lovely? They're monsters.' And I'm like 'They're not monsters, get over it!' And he said 'They are monsters, and if you don't believe me, you should see what happens when they get on the bus at 3:30'."* At this point, Monique got her body's signal that a good story was nearby, and she began to dig into this further.

She says that she does not consider herself to be a brave or adventurous person, but *"for a story, I'm brave and adventurous. For instance, I got on the bus with all those screaming maniac kids."* She brought her pen and paper to take notes, and one person who immediately caught her interest was the bus driver. *"I remember thinking, like, 'What had he done to deserve this miserable bus route?'"* She used this idea for the bus driver character, making him an integral part of her story.

Another aspect of *121 Express* is that the story takes place almost entirely on the bus itself. This was a challenge that Monique set for herself – a task she wanted to see if it was even possible. She also brought in the idea of the 'geography of the bus', where the cool kids

dominate the back section and the other students are stratified by social class. *"The geography of the bus. I think that's really important. And kids really know that and relate to that."*

In our discussion about the geography of the bus, she mentioned that she recently found another topic to include in a future novel: the geography of a classroom. *"Not long ago, I did a class visit to a private school on the West Island and I noticed – because you can tell these things rather quickly, especially if you're such a long time teacher as me – that there were kind of some troublemakers and they were spread out. And I noticed there was one in each – the front corner and the back corner, and then I remarked jokingly in front of the class to the teacher, like 'Whaddya got?' and she said 'Oh no, I have the four corners' and as soon as I heard that, I got the little – I just got it again – because I'm going to make a really good story from the four corners."*

Getting back to *121 Express*, she told me that the students Mr. Adams' class provided her with more inspiration for the book than actual feedback while she was writing it. This is in contrast with her Fall 2014 book *Hate Mail*, that was originally developed with students at Riverdale High School in Pierrefonds through another project with Blue Metropolis. The idea for the story came from one boy there, and then Monique was able to go back as she was writing and continue to discuss the progress of the book. *"I went several times to the school and read them bits of the book. And that was amazing because I could see firsthand their reaction, you can see the teenagers go – Okay, they look a little bored for this paragraph but they're laughing in the next paragraph. They correct certain words: 'We would never say that!' You know, I think I had B-ball instead of basketball and they're like 'No way! We would never say B-ball. That's dorky! Basketball!' I thought B-ball sounded good, what do I know?"*

While her current writing project is not with Blue Metropolis, Monique has gone through a similar process with the book she is currently working on. She had been asked to do a number of visits at a school on the West Island, and got a wealth of opinions from students about the dress code, a topic she is including in her upcoming book.

The Middle of Everywhere

But Blue Metropolis had also been involved in the development of *The Middle of Everywhere* as well. It was actually part of the same project, Quebec Roots, which *121 Express* had developed from. Together with a photographer, Monique Dykstra, she worked with a class in Nunavik, first via email and then she had the opportunity to go and visit them in their community. *"It was an amazing place, I kind of fell in love with it and with the people and the experience"*.

Monique enjoys running and continues to run even when she is away from home. *"Being a runner has definitely influenced my writing too in a lot of ways"*. Much like how her initial run in Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre helped shape *Miracleville*, an experience she had while running in George River was something she included in *The Middle of Everywhere*. At the beginning of the story, Noah takes his father's dog out for a run, and the dog is hit by a car. This same situation happened to Monique on her first morning in George River and she knew it would be interesting to add to a story. *"Something horrible happens ... and part of my mind is already collecting it for a story. I hate to admit – It sounds so bad, but that's what I've turned into."*

She continued by describing more of her experiences over her ten days in Nunavik. *"I had never been anywhere like this. It's our own province, it's part of Quebec. Most Quebecers will never ever have the experience of going there. It was amazing. It was kind of bleak but gorgeous."* Yet she also noticed a difference between her approach to writing and how the

students approached it. One student had been writing about killing a ptarmigan – a common occurrence in the North as they hunt their own food. Before visiting the community, Monique suggested that the student try to tap into his emotions more in his writing. *“I remember writing my notes: ‘How did you feel about killing the ptarmigan?’ Get into your emotions here, right? And my thing would be like ‘Poor bird, he’s dead and there’s blood on the snow and don’t you feel guilty?’ But that’s not [the way]. When I was there I saw them shooting ptarmigan. I ate raw ptarmigan heart with the kids and nobody was feeling bad for the ptarmigan. They were feeling proud that they shot the ptarmigan in one shot. They know about a lot of stuff that I don’t know about, that I would never have known.”*

Seeing as many of her own experiences made it into the novel, I asked if she knew who the main character of the story was going to be right away. *“I certainly can’t write about a lady in her late forties who goes up there and out for a run, because I write for teenagers and no one’s going to read a book about a woman in her late forties. So my first question is ‘What kind of teenager will I be to tell this particular story?’”* She did create the character of Noah so that there were many similarities between their experiences. *“I wanted him to be who I was at the beginning, thinking because he’s Qallunaaq from the big city, he knows. So I wanted him to have the experience I had, which is realizing ‘Man, they know what to do if you get caught in a whiteout storm’. What if there is a polar bear? I mean, we wouldn’t know what to do.”*

For creating these characters, Monique credits her curious nature and the fact that she is willing to ask questions of people so that she can get information. *“I barge right in without a sense of ‘I don’t have a right to ask this’. I’m curious and I’ll ask. And I think in that way sometimes I kind of overwhelm people with my style. And because I overwhelm, I sometimes get good information that way. It’s like the opposite of being a subtle spy. I get good info by being*

unsubtle.” She also takes advantage of other opportunities to learn more, like attending the gathering at the community centre when an Elder was telling a story. Also, because she writes a variety of forms, she is sometimes able to interview someone for an article in the Montreal Gazette, but also use their information in her novels as well.

With all of these actual experiences making it into her novel, I asked how she balances the sections that are imagined with sections that happened to her. She explained that the imagined sections have a lot to do with driving the story forward. She thinks about what is happening in the story (the parts of her experience that she wants to include) and then considers what needs to happen to move the story along. For example, in *The Middle of Everywhere*, she knew that they were going to go winter camping because that was an experience that she had had and she had discussed with others. But the “big event” of that section – when the teenagers encounter a polar bear near their tent site – was imagined by Monique. In order to get these sections as rich and detailed as the events that actually happened to her, she does a great deal of research about what a situation like that would be like. She also asks questions of other people so that everything is as accurate as possible.

I then asked her what the reaction is like from these people who may recognize themselves in a story like this. *“Well, it goes in different ways. I mean, I think people like to be – to feel that they had a role somehow in the story, even if it was just being a helper to the writer and answering questions and so on. So that’s part of it. And in terms of inspiring characters – whether they realize that they are certain characters that they’ve inspired, sometimes people don’t see themselves in a story.”* But generally people who do see themselves in the stories (or who know that a certain character was based on them, such as Mr. Adams in 121 Express) are pleased with their role in the story and come to think of it as “their” book.

My last questions about *The Middle of Everywhere* were about the title. The section with Tom describing his home as the middle of everywhere and not the middle of nowhere was so memorable to me (and actually the opening lines of this thesis) and I was curious as to how this had developed. *"I don't think anyone said that, although I can't really remember for sure, but I think it was the idea that for me, I felt I was in the middle of nowhere."*

She has kept in touch with a number of students and other people from the community and has noticed the difficulties they often face when trying to move to a larger city like Montreal. *"They're overwhelmed by the big city. It's very interesting to talk to them. The noise of the big city – if you're up North, there's no noise but the snowmobile, you know? Like, it's like a quiet that we can't imagine if you live in the city. Especially the students I got close with – home for them is being on the land. Home is being in Kangiqsualujjuaq. What I might see as the middle of friggin' nowhere. You know, you look around, all you see is white. You can't take a car, you can't go anywhere by car. You wait for your airplane if it's on time, and it's a long trip. But for them it is everywhere."*

Home

It is this idea of home and what we each value from our home that Monique continues to find interesting. *"Where our home is, is the middle of our lives. It's central to us. And it's also interesting that – these kids, we want them to – our view again, you know, like, white lady teacher is like 'You must get an education. You must come to CEGEP and then to university.' ...But that's like our values again, you know? It's true that we do – that those communities do need well educated leaders. It helps if they're educated, it helps if they have certain skills that they can learn, let's say at university. But once again, it's not the only way of living."*

To wind up our conversation for that day, I asked if she had anything to add about her writing process. *"I never planned to become, you know, a writer who was interested in place. It just sort of happened to me. A happy development. A happy discovery."*

The Second Interview:

One week later, I returned to Monique's home for our second conversation about writing. This time I drove to her house, allowing me to situate myself more in the city and experience more of her immediate neighbourhood. I have visited Montreal countless times, but have never really spent much time in this part of the city. This trip let me see what "Monique's Montreal" is like in a new way.

As I was taking off my boots and hanging my coat in the entryway, Monique and her boundless energy were in the kitchen. *"I'm just finishing up the salad, I've got to wait for the eggs to boil but other than that we're set. Do you want eggs? I've got tuna and feta cheese as well."*

I was slightly overwhelmed at this, both by her generosity and the already quick pace of the afternoon. I said to her, *"Wow, there are so many options. You must have known it was my birthday."*

"Is it your birthday, really? Well happy birthday! You must have realized that last week when we were setting it up."

"Yes, but, I mean, it's not like I was really doing anything else special this afternoon. This seems like a great way to spend my birthday!"

As I joined her in the kitchen, she was putting the finishing touches on the salad. We moved to the dining room and began eating before moving into the 'research discussion' for the day. As we ate, we talked about her upcoming Passover plans – she was hosting a special dinner in honour of her nonfiction book about Passover that will be released next year.

I started recording our conversation a few minutes later as we shifted in to discussing the questions I had prepared for this afternoon. The focus of today's conversation was on a different part of my research question:

From an author's perspective, *how do stories* for young adults emerge from and *represent the geographical and cultural landscapes in Canada?*

English, French, & Quebec

Reflecting on our discussion from last week had allowed me to come up with new questions based on threads that Monique had already mentioned. At the beginning of our conversation, I wanted to clarify that her stories were mainly set within Quebec and specifically within Montreal. She affirmed that with the exception of *What World Is Left*, a story set in the Netherlands based on her mother's experiences in a concentration camp during World War II, her novels are all set in Quebec. In fact, other than *Miracleville* and *The Middle of Everywhere*, all of her novels take place within Montreal. (Even though the idea and research for her novel titled *On the Game* came from Quebec City, the story takes place in her neighbourhood of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce in Montreal). She said "*I love Montreal. And it's an interesting city, and I know it and I observe it, so it was fun to write about it*".

The next topic I brought up was something I had noticed in her stories from the very first time I read them. The characters in her stories are speaking English, although there is always a sense that the story is taking place in a context where French is always around. In *121 Express*, for example, Lucas notices a sign on the wall in his school/bus station? "*Paix sur l'autobus. Paix sur la terre.*" That was French for 'Peace on the bus. Peace on Earth'." (Polak, 2007, p. 38). This reminder that these characters live in a dual-language society is just one such instance during the novel.

So I asked Monique how she considers the French/English dynamic when writing her stories. She said that actually she did not think about it. *"I haven't really worried about it too much. I hadn't even thought about that. It's interesting. ... I certainly never worried about it when I was writing the story."* She explained that even though her characters speak English, there are definitely characters in the story that, in her mind, are French. These would be the characters like Monsieur Dandurand, Father Lanctot, and Father Francoeur – Francophone characters, yet they are speaking in English for the story. Monique generally avoids writing the characters as speaking with accents because there is the possibility that it could, at best, take the reader out of the story as they try to determine what is actually being said, or at worst, begin to border on being offensive to a cultural group.

Monique went on to describe her experiences living and writing as an Anglophone in Quebec. *"Maybe it's because I am an Anglophone who was raised in Montreal, I teach at an English school, I'm very proud of being, who I am here, and at the same time, I do feel kind of Quebecoise. I'm as Quebec as anybody else. I spent, you know, nearly 55 years here from the cradle on, you know? So I feel like I'm bilingual. But my stories are in English."*

Related to that topic, I then asked if her novels were translated to French. I was curious to know if perhaps her novels got a different reception in French rather than English. Two of her novels, *On the Game* and *All In*, have been translated into French, and *What World Is Left* has been translated into Dutch and there are currently negotiations about it being translated into French as well. Monique then described two experiences of being contacted by schools who did not realize that she was English (since her name works equally well in French). In each case, the students were excited about her visit (in one case, even voting her book as a winner in their contest over other books written by Francophone Quebec authors). Monique sees that her visit

could have been another kind of learning opportunity for the students: *“In my own way, maybe I taught those kids in Kamouraska something about another kind of Quebecker, as in you can be an English Quebecker who’s translated into French and comes to a school and does a presentation in French.”*

Writing Research

We then moved into talking about the different types of research she does for her books. Monique noted that *“every book ends up being very research oriented”*. Given the large amount of descriptive content I had found when doing my initial assessment of the novels, I was not at all surprised by this. In addition to the notes that she took while visiting George River and Saint-Anne-de-Beaupre, she did research on other aspects of the stories in order to get the details correct. For *Miracleville*, she felt she needed to do a lot of research about Catholicism. Because she is Jewish, there were certain aspects of the Catholic faith that were unfamiliar to her. So doing research about the topic allowed her to write with more confidence.

When Monique writes about experiences that are new to her, she finds experts to consult with. For *Miracleville*, she consulted with a neighbour who had been a priest, and he looked through the initial draft with her and provided notes. She went through a similar process while writing *The Middle of Everywhere*, but she had many more experts to work with. Many of her Inuit friends that she had met during her visit provided guidance on certain parts of the story, like the information about hunting. She also had some of her Qallunaaq friends up North read the manuscript as well. All of these experts definitely helped to shape the novel: by the time Monique sent it to her editor, the novel was pretty close to done without having to make many more rewrites or corrections. For *121 Express*, she had less research to do, but she still did a bit of research about Sikhism, helped by her friend Rina Singh who is also a children’s writer.

Monique prefers to talk directly with people when she has questions about something for a story. While she may do some initial research on the Internet, she does not want to rely solely on information from there because there is the potential that it could be wrong, or it could simply just not be how things are done within the context of the story. And while she appreciates the knowledge of her experts, she does not really have the desire to become an expert in the field herself. Her curious nature helps when needing to learn more about a topic, but she really only wants to know as much as is needed to add to the story in an accurate way.

Blue Metropolis Literary Foundation

The next thing we discussed was her involvement with the Blue Metropolis Literary Foundation. The Foundation is best known for its festival where international writers come to Montreal and they also have a number of educational programs as well. Monique was involved in the early stages of one of these programs called Quebec Roots. Because of this involvement, she was able to work closely with a class of students, and it was this group of students that inspired *121 Express*. Quebec Roots also enabled her to go to Nunavik the first time and experience life in George River. *"Most Montrealers never have an opportunity to go there, they'll go to their graves without seeing Nunavik, and to me it was like – that's one of the best things that's ever happened to me in my life. I really enjoyed working with Inuit students. I like working with all students, but I learned a lot from the Inuit."*

Prior to her visit up north, she had been working with a class via email while she was on sabbatical in Mexico. She recounted a story of receiving poems from Inuit students that dealt with shooting ptarmigan. She would write back to them "What about your feelings? How do you feel?" about shooting these birds. But it was only when she actually got there and observed for herself (and actually ate raw ptarmigan heart with the students) that she was able to understand

why these students did not share her perspective, and reflect on the fact that all these perspectives are valuable.

Considering that that would be a lesson that my (former) students should be learning, I asked her if she writes with a particular idea in mind that she wants her readers to get out of it. *“That book [The Middle of Everywhere] I did want to explore that [the idea of learning that different types of knowledge exist and are valuable]. I think it’s more for me like I want to explore an idea. Like with Miracleville I want to explore faith and doubt. I just want to explore it, and writing is – For me, writing fiction is the perfect place to do that. So no, I don’t really want to teach a specific lesson. If I did – like, there are certain things I really think are important, you know, which I do try to talk about, but I don’t think you can teach them. I think, really, storytelling is a way to get people to just think about them. And like I often say in my classes, play with the idea. Just play, try this idea. Play with it like a ball, bounce it around, and if you don’t like it, well, it’s not for you. But what about the idea of tolerance, what about the idea of learning from others, and there are things, you know, I believe in. I believe we should always be learning. I believe we can always grow and that we can learn from everybody. And I believe we should be kind.”*

From there I brought up something that she had mentioned at the workshop I took with her in 2012. In my notes I had written “take me there”, noting that it is the author’s job to take the reader to a particular place with their writing. She said that years ago she had heard a singer by the name of Mavis Staples perform a song which had the reoccurring line of “I’ll take you there”. Monique had heard an interview where Staples was talking about the song, but disagreed with how the song had been previously interpreted. *“No that’s not what it’s about at all! It’s not about heaven, it’s not about sex, it’s about writing! Because that’s it: I’ll take you there – that’s*

what you want to do. I want to read a book and be transported. And by that I mean geographically, that's the start, but then once we're in the place, now give me the story in the place."

Details in Story Development

For Monique, the way that a story is developed is through details. *"It's all about detail. It's detail and selection of detail"*. She relates an example of being in the North, where there are tons of new details because all of the experiences are new. In a case like this, you need to become somewhat particular in what you are looking for that will help you tell the story. *"I look for weird. I look for funny. I look for, again, like in the weird – surprising. But those are the things I look for. I look for things that give me goosebumps because that's when I – when anything comes up with a good story – those are the things I know. And the more I do it, the easier it is for me to find the stuff."*

She discussed using photographs as a way to help her remember the details of a place, but what really drives the writing of her stories is her notes. She indicates that she is a good note-taker – even though they might be a bit of a mess, she is able to spread them out, and rearrange them, and end up finding a story within the notes. While her notes offer a starting point and reminders of details she wants to include, she also continues to discuss the story with the people she had previously worked with. *"Often I'll do an outline, but then things change and I'll often go back and read the whole set of messy notes all over again. Just to look for stuff, 'cause sometimes it's stuff that you didn't know you'd need that comes back and is important. And that's the thing with research is that as you do it, or once you start writing, then you go, it's like you realize you have a few holes that need to be filled. ... In all these cases, I had contact people. I had a lady in Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre that worked at the church, so I was able to call her a few*

times. Little things like that. Cyclorama? How many sides does Cyclorama have, like was it octagon? So it was very complicated, and you know, I needed someone to go there and count for me. So somebody did."

Differences and Changes

Because her novels are particular to Quebec/Montreal, I was curious to know more about how they have been received beyond this province. Monique explained that her novels are selling in the United States as well as across Canada, and *What World Is Left* is also available as a Dutch translation as well. *Straight Punch*, one of her novels, was named one of the best children's books of the year 2015 by the Children's Book Committee at the Bank Street College of Education in New York. She also said that she gets letters from students living in the United States. There is a school in Dumas, Texas that she has corresponded with via Skype. They were very interested to also talk to her mother via Skype as well, because as Monique says, her mother may in fact be the only Holocaust survivor they have ever met.

We then discussed how the cultural landscape for teenagers has changed since she began publishing YA novels in 2004 (and writing them previous to that as well). One of the biggest changes that Monique has had to incorporate into her stories is technology and how teens use technology. *"Even stuff like cell phones and email. You can hardly tell a story now without, you know, texting and – that's new! That's huge. That's huge. Telephones, in the old days, the telephone rang in the house and you went to get it. If you had that in a book now, people would be like 'What?! They used to do that?' Or, like, answering machines – in the old days you would have a whole clunky answering machine, like a tape recorder. It's like a joke to those students."*

She went on to credit her students with keeping her up-to-date with things that teenagers are currently into. *"I'm like 'Man, am I lucky to have this job', because how else – otherwise, I*

won't be able to stay in this particular business." She may not use all of the things she learns from them in her stories, but they help her to stay connected with the day-to-day experiences of teenagers. She feels that this is necessary to get the details correct because otherwise, it breaks the spell of writing that authors are casting.

Writing Creatively

The final topic that we discussed that afternoon was the idea of accuracy versus creativity. I wondered how an importance to accurate detail allowed for her to be creative through fiction. She explained that while she starts with the research for a story (after gathering initial inspirations through interacting with people), the creative aspect is able to come through the creation of a character. *"I think that has a lot to do with character. That's who the person is, and how they're going to be reacting to the situation and circumstances. ... The character and the voice is really, really important to me. So I couldn't go anywhere if I didn't have the voice. It's usually the voice that leads me. ... I don't know where it comes from, but I know the feeling when I've got it."*

Monique explains that it is characters like this and the potential to learn something through their experiences that makes fiction so interesting for her, not only as a writer but as a reader as well. *"We get drawn in by people. So if you give [students] the people, we get drawn in by people and interesting situations and challenging situations and odd situations, so that's what – If someone stopped me on the street and said 'let me tell you all about, you know, the facts of George River', I would be like 'I gotta go'. But if they said to me 'this crazy thing happened, you wouldn't believe what happened to this lady I knew or this kid who was staying in George River with his dad and a dog and –' I would stop for that, for the crazy story of what happened to the kid."*

As we brought the dishes to the kitchen to clean up quickly so that Monique could go teach a class at Marianopolis for a friend, we continued chatting about the cultural landscapes in her novels. She said that our discussion had made her think about her work in a different way; while she knew she was presenting the geographical landscape, especially in the case of George River and Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre, she had not really considered the fact that she was also presenting the cultural landscape of different regions of Quebec. *“So I’m very proud that I have done that too.”*

The Third Interview:

At the end of our second session together, Monique told me that the following week was quite busy for her, so we would be in touch later to determine a third time to meet. When I contacted her the following week, she suggested that she would be available the following Thursday, but also said that she would need to reconfirm closer to that time. On top of her deadlines for rewrites for a novel, her teaching work at Marianopolis, and various other commitments and activities, she was dealing with an illness in the family as well.

However we were able to meet the next Thursday, after her classes were finished for the day. When I arrived at her house, she was in her backyard talking with her neighbour. But she spotted me on the porch through the house, so she came to let me in. I was able to meet her husband for the first time – he had been in the living room and was about to go grocery shopping. Monique needed eggs to bake brownies for her father who was coming over for supper.

We settled in at the dining room table where the previous two sessions had taken place. After asking briefly about her ill family member (who was doing 'okay' at that point) and the rewrites (a slow process, but moving forward), we began to discuss the questions I had prepared for the afternoon.

Teaching and Learning

The overall topic for this third interview addressed the third aspect of my research question: From an author's perspective, how do stories *for young adults* emerge from and represent the geographical and cultural landscapes in Canada? In our previous sessions together she had mentioned her background teaching at the CEGEP level, so I started by asking if she had always wanted to teach this age group. She indicated that she had, saying that she did do some teaching at the university level, but "*it was my dream to go back to the college where I teach.*"

And I like that age group. I like people that are sort of on the cusp of change. Once they hit university they're more set in their ways. I find teenagers really question a lot. They're especially interested in identity, which is like, to me, the most interesting question. 'Who are you?' you know, 'who are we?'. The "world of teenagers" is something that she finds intriguing. "I can't fully explain it. It interests me, they're so alive, they're so open. Even the ones that are sort of grumpy and negative are interesting, some ways more so. I just – I like kids. They're very – the energy is fun, they haven't experienced some of the difficult things that come with aging and loss. Some of them have, and again, they're often particularly interesting. But there's kind of this sense of potential, you know, and so much ahead of them – it's exciting." She mentioned that she feels that writing is a way she can reach teenagers and present them with the things she wants to say – similar to teaching.

I asked her if the students she teaches at Marianopolis had read her books. Some students mentioned that they had read them during their high school classes. So I then asked about the type of feedback she gets about her stories from high school teachers and students. *"Last week I did a school visit and they said one of my books, I guess it's the one – It's called On the Game and it has juvenile prostitution in it – the librarian said that one always gets stolen from the library. So they have to keep re-ordering it, it's always stolen. So I take that as the sign of a good book."* Generally her books are popular with students. *"The students say they read it, they liked it. What else would they say to me? I guess I'm always a little bit – I feel a little bit tender with those things. If people talk about it, I don't want them to say they hated it. No one ever said it to my face, but [laughs]. Generally, it seems to get a good response."*

Because I had used *The Middle of Everywhere* to discuss ideas in a Geography class while I was teaching, I was curious if Monique knew other ways that her books had been used,

other than in English Language Arts. She had heard the most feedback about *What World Is Left*, and had received letters from students that she is planning to share with her mother (as *What World is Left* is based on her mother's experiences).

I then mentioned to her that I had crossed paths with Dr. Leblanc in the hallway at Lamoureux Hall a few days earlier and he said that he had started to read *The Middle of Everywhere*. She was pleased to hear this and went on to discuss some more of her experiences with that novel. She is particularly sensitive about feedback for that novel because she understands the responsibility surrounding writing about a culture one does not belong to. *"I had talked to people about that while I was working, before the book, after the book. And I know that there are people who feel that you should not write about the North unless you are a Native person. That doesn't really make 100% sense to me, that you should not write for sure from the point of view of a Native person if you are not Native. And I have some issues with that."* She is very much aware of the issues surrounding cultural appropriation, but finds it interesting to encourage diverse perspectives in her work. *"I wrote it from a white kid's perspective and I hope that I was respectful enough because I really believe that – like we talked about – that I have a lot to learn. So I didn't want to come off at all as sort of – I wanted to do the opposite."*

That led us to discussing again how novels can be used as teaching tools, because students will learn and retain different information than they would by using textbooks. She reiterated that for her, stories are the best way to learn. *"I remember the personal stories of people. That's what I'm always interested in. And maybe I'm weird in that way, but I suspect – maybe a little bit – but I think a lot of people are interested in stories."* During a previous visit, I had mentioned that I am originally from Manitoulin Island, and one of her students had just been talking to Monique about the student's family on Manitoulin. Monique remembered that and had

written down the name of the student's family to see if I knew them (the name was definitely familiar). For Monique, in her busy life, she explains it like this: *"I brake for stories. I stop for a story. And I stop for little else."*

School Visits

I followed with a question about what her school visits are like, and again, *What World Is Left* gets a big response. *"I just got asked last week – they wanted to focus on the Holocaust because the kids were studying about the Holocaust. So I focused mostly on that book and the story of how I did the research and talked about my mom. It's amazing, that does seem to have a very powerful effect on kids, even kids that are – Forget being Jewish, in fact, I'm always struck especially by – the hardest to reach kids respond to that story."*

Sometimes schools leave it up to Monique as to what she does during these visits. *"If they tell me 'do whatever you want', then I do this thing about how I get ideas. I talk about how stories come to me, and I talk about the sort of preparation work that I do. I show them I keep a journal every morning. I talk about, you know, doing research, doing interviews, planning a story. Rewriting I think is so important for them to know about, and the teachers love that too, like 'Do not hand in a first draft!'. And then I talk a lot about my own experience so that they'll know. When I was their age, I never met a writer, so I would like to be able to tell them the stuff I would have wanted to know."* She also does this in her work as a writer. *"I try to write the stuff that when I was a teenager, I needed to know, I was curious about. And I think I am still able to plug into that. And maybe that's also because I work with teenagers. So it doesn't feel so distant to me, being sixteen"*.

Earlier Monique had mentioned that some teachers had told her that her books had been challenged by parents for various reasons, feeling that some content was not appropriate for their

teens. The challenged book in particular has some elements of sexual content, but Monique is not bothered by their reaction, noting that many excellent books have been banned over the years.

She said she was waiting for one of her books to cause some trouble!

In light of *On the Game* being challenged, I asked her what some changes have been in terms of publishing for young adults. *"I think if anything, we can be more explicit. You know, we can push the envelope more or be more and more edgy. What was considered edgy when I started is not so edgy anymore."* Her upcoming book for the Orca Currents line will deal with a school's dress code, particularly a boy character noticing girls' bodies and experiencing physical attraction to girls. She thinks that her editor will allow her to be detailed about this.

I asked her a little more about the feedback she gets from students, especially during school visits. She says that she knows it's been a good school visit if students come to speak with her afterwards. She usually brings her lunch and offers students the opportunity to meet with her after the class is finished. When students come of their own volition and talk with her about things that they've written, or discuss some of the ideas she's working on in her novels, she can see that the visit has been very successful. *"Another sign of success is when they file out of the room and say thank you to me. Because no one's telling them – Sometimes the teacher – I do this when we have a speaker in class, I pick a kid and tell them to say thank you at the end. So sometimes you get kind of this artificial, someone stands up 'thank you for a very interesting...', but when they turn around and themselves say thank you? Or 'I learned a lot', or stay and talk to me and tell me their stories, that's – And I'm sure this is every writer who visits schools, but that's a special moment".*

Writing in Other Forms

We then moved into talking about her writing in other genres. It has long been a dream of hers to author a picture book and that is something that she is working on now. She described how difficult it is to break into that particular market, but she has now done so. She also has another historical novel that she is working on with a different publisher. In addition, her first nonfiction book for children is about Passover and will be released in 2016. She mentioned that she enjoyed how different the nonfiction writing was from the fiction writing, and I asked if perhaps this was because of her journalism background. She agreed that this could be the case and added that if she was to write for adults, she would work in the genre of creative nonfiction. She has some essays that she could develop in this way, and rather than starting with a novel for adults, she would try this genre first.

With all of these other outlets for writing, I then asked about her website and blog. She feels that her blog is a good way for readers to get in touch with her directly. It is also for students she meets during school visits – she wants them to have a way to continue to talk with her as well. Overall, she wishes she had had a writing mentor when she was younger and now she wants to share her experiences with those students who may be wondering about the writing process. She also offers a section with writing tips on her website. She is very proud of this being mentioned specifically in a review of one of her books. This is part of her nature as a teacher, and a different way to teach through writing her novels.

The next thing we discussed was the course that she teaches at Marianopolis called Writing For Children. *“I wanted to teach that course for a long time while I was trying to get published. But I felt I could not teach it, that I was, like, a phony until I had my first book contract. And when I got the word that I had sold the first book, I went in to the head of the*

English department at the time at my school and I said 'Okay, I want to teach this course, Writing for Children'. And I've been teaching it ever since." In this course, Monique teaches about different genres: picture books, junior novels, and YA novels. The students need to write a picture book text, a chapter from a junior novel, and a chapter from a YA novel over the course of the January-May term. They also edit each other's work. There is generally a good response from the students who take the class. *"I wouldn't flatter myself into thinking they take it because they're like 'Oh, Monique Polak's Writing for Children, what an opportunity!' It's how the schedule works out and a lot of them are – In fact, some of my best students are in the science program, so, you know, I don't think they spend that much time worrying about their English course. But I would say that – I think – Am I exaggerating if I say half of them really get into it? I think I'm not exaggerating. I would say half of them really get into it. And the other half are kind of surprised that it's more interesting than they expected."*

Monique also teaches a course for the Quebec Writer's Federation which adults who are interested in writing can take. She team-teaches this course with fellow author Lori Weber, and is pleased with how it has been going. *"We talked and got them organized, but now we're workshopping. So they're bringing their stuff in and everyone responds to it. There's some really good stuff coming out of it."*

I asked her to clarify the distinction in her course between the junior novel and the YA novel. *"That's another case where I'd say it's kind of fluid. And I tell them that in my class too. It's not like I'm going to tell you 'Junior is ten to fourteen', but I suppose I could say, you know, ten to fourteen. That just came out. And YA, you know, fifteen-plus? Also in the same way that I said, like, the content you can get away with more edgy stuff than you could have in the past, more older people are reading YA."* She also explained that the protagonist in a junior novel will

likely be younger than in a YA novel. *"Now I'm writing a book about kids in Grade Seven – this will be my new Orca Currents – so my kids are Grade Seven, I think they're thirteen, fourteen. That means that the reader might be twelve, right? Eleven, twelve. Because a fifteen year old doesn't want to read a book about a thirteen year old. The same way that when we were kids – now I don't care, I can be your friend, you're younger than me – but when you're a kid, a friend two years younger than me, what a pipsqueak or whatever, right? So there's some of that in the readership too, I think."*

Canadian Literature

Our discussion about junior novels versus YA novels led to talking about the criteria for something being called "Canadian literature" – a topic that was brought up during the meeting about this research proposal. I mentioned to her that for this project I defined Canadian literature as a work written by a Canadian author and set within Canada. Her train of thought was that even though the author might be Canadian (giving the example of Eleanor Catton, a Canadian-born New Zealand author whose book *The Luminaries* won the Booker prize), Monique feels there might need to be some other aspect of Canada in the story (such as the setting) in order to qualify the book as Canadian literature. She relates this to her own work in *What World Is Left*: *"If I were teaching a course on Canadian literature, I wouldn't put that one in. But if I'm teaching a course about, like, Canadian writers of YA, maybe I'd be more open to it."* It relates back to Monique's view that geography can be closely related to identity. *"I am interested now. I became interested, partly just out of knowing my own place and being proud to be a Montrealer, Quebecer, Canadian. And also feeling that it is part of who I am. All of those things are part of my identity."*

I also asked her if she thought she was filling a niche for English YA in Quebec. She considered this idea and then said *"Well, maybe that's true. In a way, I don't want to just do that because of course as an author I don't want to just be in Quebec, I want my books to be in Canada, I want to be in the United States, I want to be around the world!"* This is something that is happening for her, and then she also went on to talk about other authors who do have work set in the Montreal area (like Lori Weber), but others who do not have such a focus on place (like Alan Silberberg or Paul Bracegirdle).

Upcoming Projects

We finished the afternoon by talking a little bit more about her upcoming projects. In May 2015 her novel set at l'Ecole du Cirque in Montreal came out. Then her next books will come out in the spring of 2016. This includes her nonfiction book for children about Passover, as well as a junior novel with the working title of FCI Montreal (Forensic Camp Investigation). Currently at the rewriting stage, Monique researched this book last summer when she attended a forensics camp for kids at the University of Toronto, Mississauga Campus. *"I hung out with the kids and I took tons of notes about, you know, how they learned to analyze evidence at a crime scene."* She said it is a bit of a change from her usual writing for a teen audience. *"It's kind of fun to write something a bit more innocent. I've been so much in the gritty...and like, the last one I did, Straight Punch, there's teen pregnancy and there's all this, like, angst about that. Mind you, this has different kinds of angst in it, but it's less about the sort of body angst. So this one – The kids are still mean to each other, there's some meanness. But there's overall a more innocent – something more innocent and a bit more of a romp than usual. It's fun."*

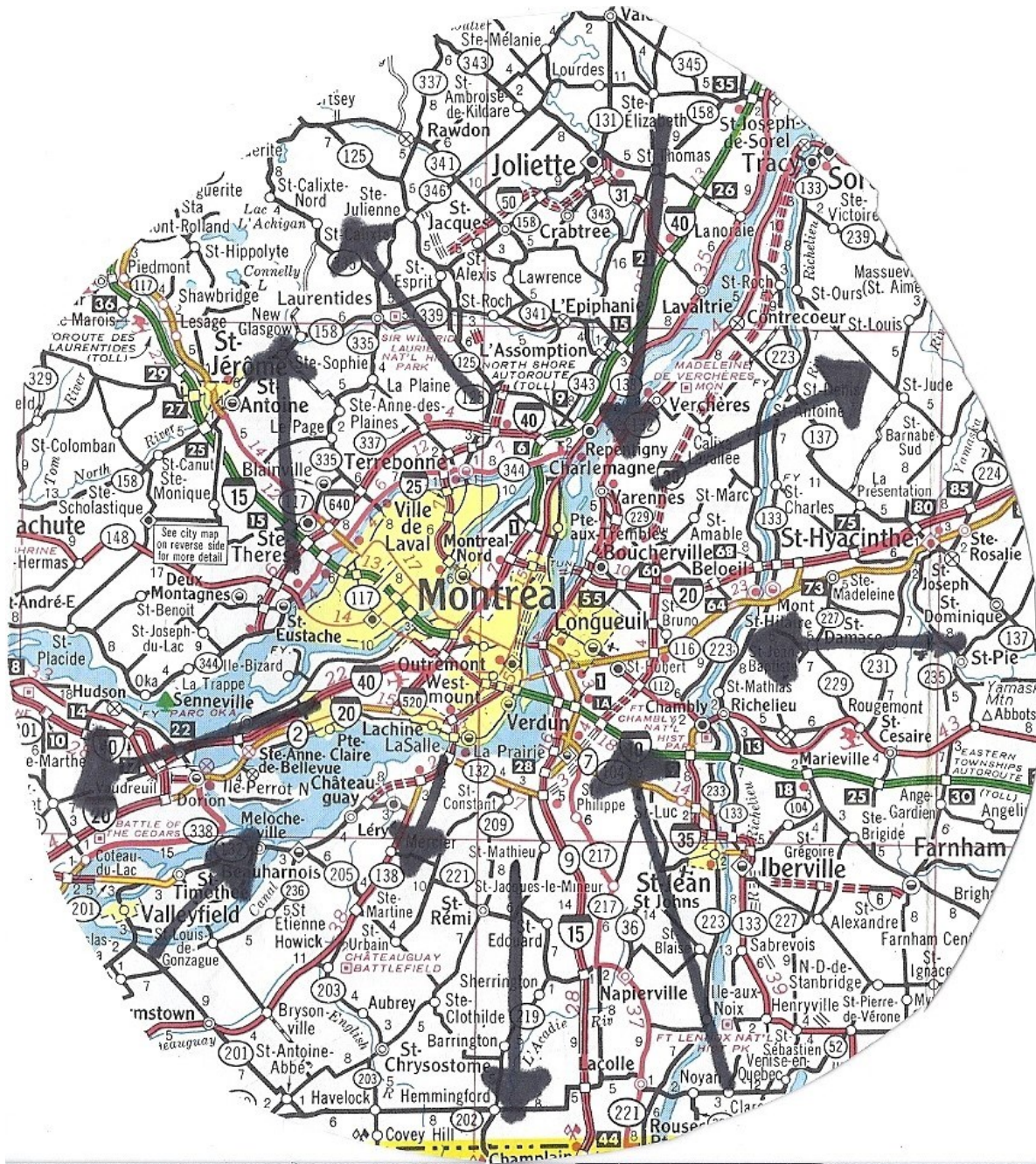
When Monique's semester at Marianopolis finishes, she will be writing full-time, working on the book about the dress code that she had mentioned earlier. She has already written a number of chapters for it, and will finish the remaining part of the story over the summer.

She joked that maybe after that, she would not write anything else, but we both agreed that that was unlikely. Already she has ideas forming for a story about a girl drummer, something outside of the ordinary that intrigues her.

The week following this conversation, Monique was planning to be in Ottawa for the Young Writer's Festival. So as I packed up my things, we chatted about different places to go in Ottawa (although she quickly realized that it was not the best idea to ask a non-coffee-drinker for a recommendation for a coffee place!) She once again showed her generosity, saying that if I had other questions for her, either during her stay in Ottawa or afterwards, I should feel free to contact her and made sure I had her phone number in case I needed it. I mentioned that I would be presenting this research at 2015 Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education and she was very excited about that as well.

All three interviews were on my mind as I drove back to Ottawa. I thought about how fortunate I am to be working with someone who is so interested in this research. Given everything that was happening in both her personal and professional life this particular week, it would have been completely understandable for her to say that she just was not able to meet. Yet she made time to meet with me and welcomed me into her home once again. I also considered her upcoming projects and how all the details we had discussed in terms of her writing process would be evident in each project. The discussion that follows in the next chapter will examine Monique's inspirations for writing from places, people, and details, and show how these elements are all part of her ecology of writing.

Analysis and Discussion: An Author's Ecology



Reflecting on the novels and our conversations together, several themes stood out in terms of how stories emerge for Monique. While I am viewing this information through an ecological lens, these elements are very interrelated for Monique herself. Due to the interconnectedness of these ideas, it is difficult to separate them completely. The elements and their connections are shown in the web below, set against a cartographic backdrop of key places in Quebec:



For each node within this web, I explain how I interpret her novels and our conversations with respect to that idea. This is one way of presenting my ideas about Monique's ecology of writing and following my interpretations for each of the main ideas, I offer a different way of interacting with this information. I present my own short story that involves recurrent key themes of this research. I agree with Leavy that a fictional format "offers a chance to observe [the themes] in all their nuances" and I strive to "invite diverse readers into the text in a pleasurable way" (Leavy, 2013, p. 20). I have also been guided by Pelias' (2011) explanations of performative writing as a "generative opportunity" and a "pedagogical lesson" (p. 13). I see my story as both of these things – an opportunity to revisit important places, people, and experiences of my past, and also an example that other educators may choose to follow.

Monique's Ecology of Writing

I have drawn from the ideas of Cooper (1986), Luce-Kapler (2004), and Powell (2014) to consider Monique's ecology of writing. In Cooper's (1986) depiction of writing as an ecology, she explains that "an important characteristic of ecological systems is that they are inherently dynamic; though their structures and contents can be specified at a given moment, in real time they are constantly changing, limited only by parameters that are themselves subject to change over longer spans of time" (p. 368). Therefore it is important to remember that Monique's writing ecology is presented here as a snapshot of this particular time. Different elements have gained importance at different times throughout her writing life, and this will surely continue. My discussion of Monique's writing ecology also aligns with Luce-Kapler's (2004) description of how writers bring awareness to the lives they represent in their work. She notes that writers "often attend to detail and are close observers; they draw from and frequently revise the tradition of texts that have come before, and they are part of a literate community for whom they write"

(p. 142). In this way, writers like Monique are embedded in the “systems that have influenced and continue to influence writing” (p. 142). One of these systems within her writing ecology is clearly her relationship with place. Powell (2014) states that there is a “‘symbiotic relationship’ between place and narrative and the stories we tell about landscape” (p. 181) and Monique’s writing ecology will portray this as well. I begin below by discussing her interactions with people, but it is important to remember that her interactions with places and observance of details are all highly connected with one another.

Interactions with people

Teenagers

One of Monique’s greatest sources of inspiration for ideas for writing comes from her interactions with teenagers. Her work teaching classes in English and Humanities at Marianopolis College allows her to keep a close relationship with today’s youth. In a somewhat joking way, she mentioned many times that she cannot retire from teaching, as she would lose access to these teenagers! Being able to work with them on a daily basis helps her to create stories that portray a teenage world that is recognizable to her readers.

The teenage stage of life has been something that has always interested Monique. She has had the opportunity to teach different age groups, but enjoys the questioning and openness to new possibilities that teenagers embrace. They are wondering about their lives – who are they and who will they become – and this idea of identity is something that she finds very intriguing.

Teenagers are also very open with Monique. This is possibly a reaction to her own open and curious nature, as people are more willing to share information with someone who makes a connection with them. They share their experiences about their past and present, and she is able to include these experiences in stories that other teens can relate to. She appreciates the

innocence that teenagers may have – recognizing that although some have experienced more serious events like grief and loss, many are free from those emotions that can weigh people down as they get older.

Given that her preference was always to teach this older teenage age group, it follows that as an author, she also usually writes with a teenage audience in mind. Her students inspire characters in her stories, not only individually, but collectively through the language they use and the actions they display.

Monique also regularly works closely with teenagers outside of her own classes at Marianopolis as well. She conducts author visits at many different schools (both in the Montreal area as well as by Skype in places as far away as Texas). These author visits are important for Monique for a variety of reasons. She mentioned many times that when she was young, she wished that she had known an author who could tell her things that she wanted to know about writing. Now she is proud that she can act as a mentor figure for younger students who may want to write. She also feels it is important to break through some myths about writing, whether or not a student wants to eventually become an author. She wants them to know that, like anything, writing is hard work – even successful authors need to edit and refine their own work, which can be a long and difficult process.

But ever the curious, detail-noticing author, Monique does use these author visits as a way of developing new ideas for stories. In the case of *121 Express*, this is exactly how the work on the novel began – she was visiting the school when she heard about the behaviour of the students on the bus and she knew there would be a good story there. Similarly, her upcoming book relating to a school's dress code benefitted from the comments of students who spoke to her while she was visiting their school. The book about a girl drummer that she plans to write

after her current projects have been completed also stems from meeting a girl who plays the drums during a school visit.

In an even more concrete way, her novel *Hate Mail* was developed directly with the students at Riverdale High School. A student provided the original idea, and all students provided feedback as Monique was writing. She visited this school several times with sections of the novel and could see their reactions to the story as she was reading it. Working closely with these teens clearly helped to shape this novel.

When Monique is doing research for her novels, she also speaks with other teens who may not be in her class or cross her path during a school visit. For example when she was writing *Miracleville*, she talked to the teenagers working in the parking lot at the Basilica and in the tourist shops. She asked them about the ideas of miracles and faith that she was thinking about questioning in the story. Their answers and experiences helped to inspire several of the main characters of the story – some of whom had the same names as their real-life counterparts.

Monique also observes teenagers, keeping an eye open for unique details that can really draw a reader in. It is important to her to get these details right. While there are certainly multiple ways that the teenage experience can be portrayed and still be recognizable for her audience, she wants to create as true of a character and world as possible so that readers can fully immerse themselves in the story.

Access to all of these teen experiences helps Monique to craft a story. When she begins to think about the story she wants to write, she considers “what kind of teenager will I be in this story?” She has a variety of examples to draw from and is often able to bring together the qualities of multiple people in order to create a character for the story. She says it is not difficult for her to get into the mindset of a sixteen year old, but at the same time she acknowledges the

changes that have occurred between her own time as a teenager and now. Even from when she first started publishing YA fiction in 2004 to the present there have been major changes to the teenage experience. Monique credits her college students with keeping her up-to-date with contemporary teenage life.

By having all of these various types of interactions with teenagers, Monique is able to create a story that depicts teen experiences that are lived by teens. While no one person may have experienced the same things as a character in her novel, she will have spoken to multiple teens who each provide a source of inspiration. Because she is writing for a teenage audience, her deep connection with teenagers and their lives makes a great deal of sense.

Interactions with other writers and storytellers

Monique has such an incredibly busy life. She teaches multiple courses at Marianopolis College, she has numerous writing projects on the go, she contributes to Radio-Canada, she teaches a course for the Quebec Writer's Federation – and these are only the things I am aware of at this moment! With all of these different elements going on, it is clear she needs to move pretty quickly. Yet by her own admission, she will stop for a story – especially if it is one that incites the tingles on the inside of her elbows that signals to her that this is something to which she should listen closely because it might one day end up in a story of her own.

From an early age, she has been interested in stories and has been surrounded by storytellers. Her parents often threw parties when Monique was a child and she knew that she could find her mother in the middle of a group of people, captivating them all by telling them a story. Having this background encouraged her to begin writing stories, something she only stopped when formal education took the enjoyment out of writing. Luce-Kapler (2004) also had similar experiences with schooling negatively affecting her as an author. She describes high

school as a place where “writing focused more on answers to questions and structured essays” (p.50). This sentiment is echoed by Monique, who says she became a “performing seal of term papers”. For Luce-Kapler, she felt that her opinions, and those of other women, were not seen as valued or important. It was this feeling that led her to think about how she could examine writing in a different way. While Monique did not exactly express this same sentiment, she, like Luce-Kapler, always recognized the importance of writing in her own life and eventually found her way back to the point of enjoyment.

Another group of people that surround Monique and contribute to her stories are the “experts” she consults whenever she is working on a story. Because she wants to learn enough to make a story ring true for her readers, she does a great deal of research for all of her novels. This can take the form of internet searches and reading other books about the topics she is interested in, but stories have always been the best form of learning for Monique. One novel that was very much shaped by experts she consulted was *The Middle of Everywhere*. She came into this new experience wanting to learn about Inuit culture and the lives of people in George River. One of the ways she accomplished this was attending the community events where the elders in the community told their stories – an activity in which Noah participated during the story. She also remained (and still remains) in contact with people from the community who were able to advise her when she had questions about certain aspects that she wanted to include in the story.

Similarly, she had other people to discuss *Miracleville* with as she was writing that novel. There were people in Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre who were able to verify answers to her questions (like how many sides are there on the Cyclorama). She also discussed the story with one of her neighbours. He is a former priest and was able to explain some parts of Catholicism that would

be relevant to the story (parts that Monique, as a Jewish person, may not have the same degree of familiarity with).

A different group of people that may not impact her stories in as direct a way as the experts who contribute their knowledge to her stories, but nonetheless affect her as a writer are her fellow author colleagues. Falling into the categories of both writer and expert consultant on a story would be Rina Singh, who helped with information about Sikhism for *121 Express*.

Monique points to her as an important colleague and friend with whom she discusses her work.

Monique also mentions author Kevin Major as someone who initially got her thinking about writing with place in mind. When she started writing her first manuscript, she set it in a very generic, North American Anytown type of place. Then she attended a CANSCAIP conference titled Packaging the Imagination where Major was speaking. What he said made her think about her writing in a new light. He suggested that authors should write about their place – in effect, write what they know in terms of setting. Readers are interested in finding out about the place where the story happens, and Monique now agrees with this, feeling that when handled well, the setting of a story can be as interesting as the characters in it.

Monique has also been influenced by authors she has read but not necessarily met. She finds it is important to read quality writing while you are writing yourself – otherwise it can be difficult to write well. She specifically mentions Anne Tyler as an author she enjoys. Years ago Monique read an interview with Tyler where Tyler explained what she does as an author, and that has really stuck with Monique. This interview was part of a book of many interviews with writers and that has ended up to be a very special book for Monique – one she cannot seem to part with.

These connections with various people reflect the “interchange of ideas” (p. 449) that Saunders (2010) indicates is necessary for a ‘coherent mapping of words’. Saunders goes on to explain that “meaning and significance often lie at the intersection of creation and consumption, production and reception” (p. 449). Monique learns from teens at the same time as teaching them; she is at once audience and author. By living a variety of these dual roles, her writing becomes the ‘coherent map’ from which her readers can learn.

Interactions with Places

Experiences in familiar locations

Having lived her whole life in the city of Montreal, Monique feels a deep connection to the city. This is the place that she can write about best, because she *knows* it best. Her experiences here allow her to create settings for her stories that are familiar to readers who know the area, and give insight into her city for those who may want to learn about Montreal. In terms of Gruenewald’s (2003a) ideas about place-conscious education, it is important to include familiar locations for students because of the pedagogical significance they hold. If these places are ignored, students feel that the settings for their own life stories are not of any value. When Monique writes about neighbourhoods in Montreal, it can give readers an important sense of validation.

For a story such as *121 Express* which takes place in the Ville-St-Laurent neighbourhood of Montreal, Monique mentions specific locations and landmarks to situate her readers. The fictional Lorne Crest Academy is located on Decelles Avenue – the same street that is home to Lauren Hill Academy and Andrew Adams’ students who inspired the story. The route of the bus takes the students down Cote-Vertu Boulevard to the Cote-Vertu metro station. Having ridden the bus with students from Lauren Hill Academy to research this story, Monique creates a rich

description not only of what is happening on the bus, but of the world that these characters inhabit.

She mentions that writing about the locations that are familiar to her comes easily. For her, it makes the most sense to write about Montreal because that is where she has lived. If she wanted to write a story set in Toronto, she would need to go and live there in order to be able to write about it with any confidence.

Monique's stories set in Montreal reflect her experiences with the city. In her writing, she is creating what Hones (2011) describes as a "geography of locations and links mangled together, [a] personal set of connections, journeys, memories, and coincidences" (p.696). One such example of her personal connection is the language she uses. While she speaks English, as do the characters in her stories, French is very much a part of her novels as well – through the characters' names, through mentions of streets and signs, in some of the conversations. Originally, I thought that because the characters were speaking in English in the novels, that meant that Monique had meant for them to be English. But during our conversations she clarified that in her head, these characters are very much French. They just happen to be speaking in English for the purpose of the story. In fact, this ease of having characters switch between French and English is so much a part of Monique's Montreal that she had not noticed that all her characters could be seen as English only. Before I brought up the topic with her, she had not previously considered the French/English dynamic in her stories.

Experiences in new locations

Although Montreal has provided the backdrop for many of her novels, two that take place in a different part of the province are *The Middle of Everywhere* and *Miracleville*. Monique's experiences in both of these places lead to creating stories set around these landscapes. For *The*

Middle of Everywhere, her work with the Blue Metropolis Literary Foundation sent her to Nunavik. As a Qallunaaq outsider coming into this community, she wanted to learn more about the lives of the people who live in this region. She feels very fortunate to have been able to visit this part of the province on several occasions, saying that is an opportunity that many other Quebeckers will not have.

Many of Monique's experiences during her time in George River were included in the novel. The book opens with Noah taking his father's dog for a run and the dog subsequently being hit by a truck. This is similar to what happened to Monique on her first morning there – while out for a run with the dog belonging to the person she was staying with, the dog was hit by a truck. Just as in the book, the people around her were surprised that she would attempt to try to nurse the dog back to health rather than putting it to sleep. Another experience that she worked into the story was when an Elder told stories at the community centre. She eagerly attended this session, seizing this opportunity to not only learn more about their culture, but to do so through stories – her favourite way to learn. Using these experiences in her story – yet writing from Noah's perspective – allows her to share with her readers what she has learned from them. In the case of visiting up North, one important thing that she came to recognize was that while Inuit and Qallunaaq may value different types of knowledge, each is truly as valid as the other.

In addition to relying on her own experiences to draw from while writing the story, Monique took copious notes while she was in George River. For some things, such as the incident with the dog, she knew at the time it was going to be something she wanted to include in the story, but other parts like the details of everyday life in the town (like the produce shelves in the grocery store being bare the day before the delivery plane comes from down south), she added from the notes that she had taken. Being an outsider looking in at the community allowed

her to see things that, while they may be commonplace to those who live there, they really characterize the Northern experience.

By writing the character of Noah as an outsider similar to herself (both Qallunaaq from Montreal, coming into the community thinking they know more than the people who live there), Monique strove to demonstrate the process of learning about a place. Before she came to George River, Monique had been working with a class of students on their poetry. She brought her “city-teacher” perspective to this task, asking the students to put more emotion into their descriptions of things like shooting ptarmigan. It was not until she was actually there, participating in the ptarmigan hunt with the students that she understood that her perspective was radically different than the students’. While in her mind it may make sense to consider the act from the ptarmigan’s point of view, the students saw the situation in a much more pragmatic way: they were hunting the ptarmigan so that they could eat it. The “feelings” of the ptarmigan did not enter into their consideration. Yet to Monique, encouraging students to bring more emotion into their stories is what she had been trained to do. Seeing them hunt firsthand and being there to see the difference between their lived experience and her own was something that helped her recognize that her experiences up North could be something that others can learn from as well.

While writing about a new place from the perspective of an outsider when you are an outsider yourself may be fairly straightforward, Monique’s challenge in *Miracleville* was that her characters were very much part of the fabric of the town. Struck by the sheer oddity of the town in the midst of hosting thousands of religious pilgrims celebrating the miracle of faith and healing, she was inspired to interrogate these ideas through a story for young adults. This time her characters were not outsiders like Noah in George River, they were teenagers who had grown up in the town and their actions and thoughts needed to demonstrate this.

When Monique first saw the town of Saint-Anne-de-Beaupre, she knew that she needed to set a story there. Despite being in the middle of a vacation with her husband, she planned to spend a few extra days in the town taking notes and becoming acquainted with the people who would support her writing. Just by walking around and talking with teenagers, she was able to develop an idea centered on the questioning of and belief in miracles.

Running

Monique is also an avid runner, and while at first glance, this may not appear to have much to do with her writing, in fact a number of scenes in her novels have developed from things that occurred while she was out for a run. The dog being hit by the truck in George River is a clear example of one such instance. It was also during one of her runs that she came upon the town of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre and became enamoured with the possibilities of stories that could exist there. She says that running allows her to be observant in ways that do not happen otherwise. I am reminded of Cynthia Chambers' (2008) call for an "education of awareness" (p.121). For her, this requires that students "learn how to feel with their hands and bodies" (p.121) and really get to know the landscapes around them. Monique becomes more aware of a particular place when she runs than when she is traveling in other ways. Of course, she is not able to write down notes while she runs, but she is constantly gathering ideas and filing away information to come back to at a later time. Running gives her new connections with places that she is then able to incorporate into her stories.

Details representing landscapes

In her novels, Monique represents both the geographic landscape of the region where the story takes place, as well as the cultural landscape of the world that her characters inhabit. Her stories reflect the lived experiences of teenagers in these places.

Geographic landscapes

Monique has admitted many times that geography was never something she was good at, nor particularly interested in. But through her writing as well as her own life experiences, she *became* interested in developing these ideas more.

Similar to the other facets of her writing, one of the key ways that Monique represents the geographic landscapes that she writes about is through observing details and then determining which to include in her stories. She creates rich descriptions of the natural environment so that readers can easily create an image in their mind of where the story is taking place, regardless of whether or not they have actually been to that place themselves. These descriptions are particularly evident in *The Middle of Everywhere*, where readers get Noah's first impressions of the stark landscape, the snow and ice-covered terrain, and the beauty of the Northern Lights. Yet she is also able to capture the built environment of Ville-St-Laurent in *121 Express*, describing the bus route that the students travel together. The hiking trails around Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre (as well as the steep cliff surrounding the town and the views of Quebec City as they travel in that direction) are also familiar landmarks in the region where *Miracleville* takes place. By ensuring that her setting has deep roots in the geographical landscape of the particular area, she is creating the foundation for a story that her readers can easily immerse themselves in and learn from.

She also represents the geographic landscapes by using specific place names and locations in her stories. For readers who are familiar with the actual places she is writing about, they will be able to situate the action of the story and feel as though they are part of what is happening there. But readers who have not visited these places are also given an opportunity to learn about them through how Monique writes about them. Students may be surprised that in a

northern community like George River, there is only one major road, and even then it does not connect to other communities. Including details like this helps to depict the geographic landscape of the story.

Cultural landscapes

Cynthia Chambers (2008) says that “stories and songs and ceremonies are ways of mapping; they are the tools of wayfinding in place and through life” (p. 124). By examining Monique’s stories, I have seen her ways of interacting with place and mapping the landscape. In the three books included in this research project, there are two main cultural landscapes represented: the cultural landscape of the province of Quebec (including the distinct landscape of the northern part of the province), as well as the teenage cultural landscape. Given that her stories are written with a young adult audience in mind, the teenage cultural landscape is particularly prevalent in each of the stories examined here, but setting the story within Quebec brings an additional layer to each novel.

Quebec’s cultural landscape

Gruenewald (2003a), in his call for people to take a closer look at place-conscious education, points out that humans play a large role in terms of place. He suggests that “people are place makers and that places are a primary artifact of human culture” (p. 627). This indicates that the people of Quebec shape the cultural landscape of the province. For Monique, a life-long Quebecker, it simply makes sense to her that her stories are set in her home province, and predominantly in her home city of Montreal. This is the landscape that she feels she can write about with credibility. While she wants her books to be able to speak to readers in all parts of Canada, and in the United States and the rest of the world as well, the fact remains that her stories do depict modern life as lived in Quebec.

Yet like her newly found interest in writing stories that highlight a place's geography, this was not something that Monique set out intending to write. In fact, before I asked her about the dynamic between French and English characters in her stories, it was not something she had really considered. Specifically I asked her about writing from the perspective of an English person living in Quebec (a viewpoint which is often overlooked), and this was not something that had occurred to her before. In her mind, she was just "doing her thing", writing about the type of life she is familiar with.

Her stories do not deal with any sort of language politics or tension between French and English speakers; rather they simply depict the everyday occurrences of living in a culture with two official languages. Details like signs within a school being in French signal to readers that this story is taking place in Quebec. Having characters with French names (referring to them as Monsieur and Madame) or noting that they are speaking French, yet writing their conversations in English – all of these supporting details help to represent the culture of Quebec.

Perhaps part of the reason that Monique has never seen herself strictly as an English writer in Quebec is the success she has experienced with her novels that have been translated into French. She points out that there is a large and growing number of French authors writing Quebec-set contemporary YA, yet her novels continue to be popular with French readers as well. In one contest at a school near Montreal, her novel was selected by the students as the winner, despite the fact that all the other authors had originally published their stories in French. Her name works well in both languages, which may help readers not to prejudge the story. But overall, the fact that her stories do not solely depict the "English Quebec" experience or the "French Quebec" experience, but the *mélange* that Montreal teens live on a daily basis means that she is able to reach all readers – a fact of which she is quite proud.

Another important aspect of Quebec's culture that Monique is grateful to have had the opportunity to experience is life in Nunavik, the northern part of the province. Her partnership with the Blue Metropolis Literary Foundation allowed her to visit Kuujuaq and George River and get to know more about the culture of northern Quebec. She points out that this is still a region of the same province, yet many Montrealers will never experience life in the North. In contrast to her depiction of Montreal from the point of view of characters who live there all the time, *The Middle of Everywhere* shows the region as seen by an outsider. Monique was able to bring her own experiences in when writing about Noah because she was also new to the community. She said that her visit was very eye-opening for her and she wanted to play that idea into a story – that way of considering different ways of thinking.

Similarly when writing *Miracleville*, she wanted to play with the ideas of miracles, faith, and doubt from the perspective of a devout Catholic teenager. While Quebec is more of a secular society today, there are aspects of its religious history that help to form part of the culture present now. Even the name of the town where *Miracleville* is set, Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre, shows a connection to the Catholic roots of the past. This is something that is fairly unique to Quebec, certainly in relationship to the rest of Canada.

None of these depictions of the uniqueness of Quebec culture are overtly discussed; they manifest themselves in the details that Monique chooses to incorporate into her story. They are also a function of the details that she does *not* include in her story. Saunders (2010) explains that literary geography recognizes “writing as an instrument of power, where the choices made over its undertaking help define social and spatial hierarchies” (p. 442). The decisions that she makes hold power in creating a portrayal of life in Quebec that is recognized by her readers and can also help others learn more about it.

The teenage cultural landscape

Because Monique had always been interested in the teenage stage of life, when she began writing novels for publication it was an easy decision to write for a young adult audience. She is able to connect to this group because of her teaching, and then this link is reinforced by her school visits and discussions with high school students as well.

The changes to the teenage experience since she began publishing for young adults in 2004 is something that Monique is very aware of. She has particularly noticed changes in two areas – the use of technology and the boundaries surrounding the material authors can include in their stories. In her earlier novels, characters did not have devices like cell phones. But now that teens use cell phones constantly, she has needed to reflect this facet of the teenage experience in her stories. She does incorporate her characters' use of technology into stories as it fits in. In *The Middle Of Everywhere*, Noah communicates with his mother and friends from Montreal via email, and those exchanges provide readers even more insight into what this character is thinking and feeling.

Yet despite the lack of technology used in *Miracleville* and *121 Express*, the stories do not feel dated in any way. It is simply that other aspects of the teenage experience take precedence over the use of technology – aspects that may be mentioned or questioned in all of her stories but are particularly important in these two novels.

In *121 Express* the aspect of teenage culture that Monique highlights is the relationship among the students who ride that bus route. The unspoken hierarchy that exists between those who are perceived as “popular” and those who fall into a different social category according to their peers is depicted here through Lucas' internal monologue.

Another major change that Monique has experienced since beginning to publish YA novels over a decade ago is the content that is allowed or encouraged by the publisher, especially when it comes to more controversial or explicit content. She explains that she is able to push the boundaries even more now, partially as a result of changing attitudes in society.

Ani in *Miracleville* could be considered the stand-in for society when it comes to these evolving attitudes about relationships. This novel shows a variety of perspectives when it comes to how teens approach relationships. Ani is level-headed, the type of girl who thinks everything through – while Colette is impulsive and hasty in her decision-making. Colette calls Ani a prude, and while Ani falls just short of calling Colette a slut for choosing to start a sexual relationship with Maxime, it is clear she does not approve. Although she is questioning her choices surrounding this topic, she ultimately is not comfortable with all of Colette's behaviour.

The contrast between the two sisters and the frankness with which Monique writes about this topic that is never far from teenage minds are two elements that contribute to this novel portraying the teenage landscape. It is not enough to simply have characters who are a certain age. The characters need to show the emotions and actions that someone their age would have. Even though this is a complex area, Monique's ongoing relationships with teenagers help her to describe the nuanced perspectives that teenagers have, and avoid the stereotypes and one-dimensional characters that could otherwise occur.

Home

As Monique continues to write, she is becoming more and more interested in the aspects of home and identity, pondering exactly what these ideas mean. Yet at the same time, she has written more than a dozen novels depicting her home of Montreal. These elements are evident in

the novels studied here, and represent Monique's understandings of these elements for the main characters of each story.

On the recommendation of Dr. Morawski, I read Annie Dillard's 1974 work *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. When Monique discusses notions of home and what it means to live somewhere, it is Dillard's words I am reminded of. "I live by a creek, Tinker Creek, in a valley in Virginia's Blue Ridge," (p. 2) Dillard writes. "It's a good place to live; there's a lot to think about." Yet Dillard closes that paragraph by noting that the surrounding mountains are special as well. "The creeks are the world with all its stimulus and beauty; I will live there. But the mountains are home" (p.3). While Monique has lived her whole life in her home of Montreal, people she met in George River who have moved to Montreal experience the difference between living somewhere and being home. She realizes that she has a different perspective on the city than they do, and this continues to be an idea she reflects on and considers in her stories.

Closely tied to the questioning of what home means is the idea of identity – what makes us who we are. The main characters of the three novels looked at here are not necessarily questioning their home (although Noah in particular is experiencing life in a new community and beginning to consider just what that might look like for him). Yet through what they share with us as readers and what they discuss overtly with other characters in the novel, it is clear that each of them are dealing with questions that relate to their overall identity. It may not be a singular identity, or even their most defining quality, but all of them contemplate issues that other teenagers may be facing as well.

Lucas in *121 Express* is facing an issue that would be familiar to many of Monique's readers. He wants to fit in with the popular crowd at his new school, even going so far as to downplay his academic success in order to make the other students like him. He knows that the

behaviour of the students at the back of the bus is not appropriate, but his desire to be accepted by them is so strong that he disregards his own conscience for a time and starts to do things that he would not otherwise do. Yet he does question if this is how he wants to treat others and starts to consider his own integrity. He also begins to think about how people other than the popular group of kids at the back of the bus may perceive him and realizes that creating better relationships with other people can be important too. Monique's ongoing development of Lucas's identity throughout the story adds to how she represents this aspect of teenage culture.

For *Miracleville's* Ani it is not so much the aspect of integrity to her identity that Monique highlights, it is her questioning of the role of faith. This was something that Monique was struck by during her visit to Saint-Anne-de-Beaupre and explicitly said that she wanted to question the idea of believing in miracles from the perspective of a teenage character. Ani may not be a character that readers are quick to identify with (her inexperience and almost fear of romantic relationships at the age of sixteen may lead some readers to think that she is overly sheltered), but they may recognize themselves in the broader sense of having their core beliefs challenged. This is almost a rite of passage that teens go through – questioning the very things that make them unique and separate from others. While Ani's particular line of self-questioning may not be what others have experienced, the inclusion of this aspect of her story by Monique demonstrates another way that she represents teenage life through her writing.

Noah's identity shift in *The Middle of Everywhere* is closely tied to the paradigm shift that Monique experienced when she traveled to George River. He comes in to this new comparing everything to his old life in Montreal. When he looks at it through this lens, he finds George River lacking in a number of ways. Yet as he gets to know more about the community (and specifically the people in it), he begins to realize that just because things are done

differently here does not automatically make them worse. He comes to appreciate his father in a new way, and sees the benefits of having these new experiences. Adolescence is such a time of change and teens regularly have their world views challenged and expanded. Monique is very explicit in how Noah realizes this, but most teenagers may not have an opportunity to visit a different culture. Yet they will still relate to the fact that their eyes can be opened about the world and that can have an impact on how they see themselves and their place within it.

I have questioned my own considerations of home, identity, places, people, and writing over the course of this research project. With Pelias' ideas of performative writing in mind, I have created a short story based on this research. It is not a fictional narrative account of my time with Monique, but rather a story inspired by thoughts about the themes of the discussions she and I had together. Incorporating my experiences with important places and people, "Crossing the Bridge" is presented next.

Crossing the Bridge



Lauren picked up the copy of the Manitoulin Expositor from the coffee table in the living room. It had come that afternoon, as it did every Wednesday. It had become a habit for her to read the local news, or at least to scan the major headlines, which always seemed to be about disputes at town council meetings that she didn't really care about. She did like to read the player profile "Mustang of the Week" highlighting one athlete from the high school every week. Lauren had been profiled during Grade 10, when their volleyball team made it to the North Shore finals. This week it was about her friend Kevin who played on almost every sports team the school had. He had recently won the 400m at the Northern Ontario championships, meaning he would now compete on behalf of Manitoulin Secondary at the provincial competition. No matter how the track and field team did there, they would be welcomed back to MSS with a pep rally. Lauren thought that there must be some sort of limit to how many times "We Will Rock You" or "We Are the Champions" could be played during one school year, but apparently that threshold had not yet been reached.

Seeing as it was the spring of her Grade 12 year, Lauren started scanning the classified section for summer job opportunities. She had been accepted to the University of Guelph for the fall and was excited to get off the Island and start the next chapter of her life. But there didn't seem to be many promising summer jobs being advertised in the weekly paper. Lauren's back-up plan was filing paperwork in her father's law office, but in her mind that was almost a last resort. She didn't know exactly what type of job she wanted, but all she was seeing were ones that were highly unappealing. "Looking for a reliable and responsible worker to clean cottages on a weekly basis" – Nope. "The Township of Assiginack is looking for a library assistant for

the summer months" – the job would be okay, but driving from Gore Bay to Manitowaning on a daily basis would cost more in gas than she would earn. "Searching for a baby-sitter for weekdays in the summer! Call Julie at 368-2692" – that would *actually* be the last resort. She would take her father's un-air-conditioned office over baby-sitting.

On the page opposite the classified ads, Lauren noticed a small advertisement for a contest sponsored by the Manitoulin Writer's Circle:

Calling all Islanders! Do you have a story to tell that is so very Manitoulin? Enter our spring writing contest! We are looking for stories that show the Island experience. Prizes will be awarded! Authors must be over 12 years of age. Maximum story length 500 words. For more information, email contest@manitoulinwriting.com.

Lauren scoffed to herself. The Island experience? How boring was that? It wasn't that she hated it or anything, but what did they expect people to write about? Hiking the Cup and Saucer Trail? Splashing on the shallow rocks near Bridal Veil Falls? Taking the ferry to Tobermory? Everybody, visitor or local, could tell a thousand of those stories. With a small sigh, she turned the page of the newspaper but all that was left were the three pages of real estate listings that closed the paper every week.

Just as Wheel of Fortune was starting on television, the phone rang. Lauren's father muted the television and answered.

"Hello?"

Lauren could hear her friend Kevin on the other end of the line. *"Hi, is Lauren there?"*

Her father answered “Yes, *she is.*” Knowing how her father liked to make things difficult for her friends, Lauren cringed as she got up from the couch and went to take the call in the other room. “*Please be nice*” she said quietly to her dad as she left the room.

“*Would you like to speak with her?*” Lauren’s dad asked Kevin, after waiting just long enough that he had assumed the phone was already being passed to her.

“*Oh! Uh, yes please?*”

“*Hi Kevin, I’m here. Sorry about my dad*” Lauren said hastily as she heard the click on the line as her father hung up the other phone.

“*He always does that to me! I guess I should learn to ask if I can talk to you right away.*”

“*Yeah. Anyways. What’s up?*”

“*I’m stuck on one of the calculus problems. Did you finish them yet?*”

Lauren had finished her homework before dinner and went to grab her calculus book from her backpack.

“*Which one are you talking about?*”

“*Number 7 on page 388.*”

That question was almost identical to the example they had done in class that day. But Kevin had missed the first part of class to get a picture taken with the rest of the track and field team.

“*Oh, right, you missed that example. Uh, it’s kind of hard to explain over the phone, you should see the diagram for it to actually make sense. I can come over for a little bit, if you want?*”

"Thanks Lauren, that'd be great! See you soon!"

Lauren walked up New Street towards Kevin's house. It wasn't far, but the hill was steep. Kevin's house was at the top, giving his family a great view of the town of Gore Bay and the North Channel of Lake Huron. Their dining room had a massive north-facing window, displaying that view at all times.

The two of them sat at the dining room table and quickly went over the calculus problems. Kevin had gotten all of the other ones right, at least according to Lauren's calculations. When they were done, they went outside and sat in the garden, which was Kevin's mom's pride and joy. It was a great way to spend the early May evening.

"I was reading about you in the paper before I came over. When do you leave for OFSAA?"

"Competition's on the 29th. So there's still lots of training to do."

Lauren nodded, then switched topics.

"I also saw an ad in the paper for the spring writing contest. Did you see that? They want stories that talk about 'the Manitoulin experience'. Whatever that is."

Kevin considered that for a moment. *"I don't know. I think that's actually a neat idea for a theme."*

"Oh yeah? What would you write about?"

"I'd have to think about it a bit more, but off the top of my head I would probably do something about how everybody knows everybody else. Or maybe the fact that yes, we live on an island, but it doesn't really feel like it."

"That's true. One time I told my cousin's friend that I lived on an island and he asked if I took a boat to get to school. I told him that actually, I swim. And he believed me."

Kevin snorted with laughter. *"See! People do not get what it is like to live here. Tourists come for a week in the summer and think they know! You need to be the person to write about what it's like here."*

Lauren considered this. While her original thoughts about the contest were true, what Kevin was saying now was also true. She had lived there for 18 years. Maybe she did have something to say.

As Lauren walked home, she thought about it even more. Manitoulin had always been her home, so it's not like she had anything else to compare it too. And she knew from talking to her cousins that there were a lot of things that happened in other small towns that happened here on the island. But there was a difference to growing up as an islander that was sometimes hard to explain.

When she got home her parents had already gone to bed. Lauren sat in the living room with her journal and wrote out her ideas longhand. It was way more than 500 words, she could already tell. She went to bed, determined to pick the ideas up again in the morning.

She was still scribbling in her notebook when Kevin met her at their bus stop at the corner of New and Main the next morning.

"Lauren didn't finish her homework?! What is the world coming to?!"

"This isn't my homework, this is the story for the writing contest."

"Oh neat, can I see?"

"Not yet". Her hands protectively clutched her notebook even tighter.

Kevin shrugged. *"Fine. But let me see it before you enter. I want to make sure you didn't steal my idea."*

Lauren rolled her eyes. *"Why don't you enter something?"*

"No time. Practice every night until 7:00 and all weekend too."

"Really gunning for that OFSAA title, eh?"

"Stranger things have happened. But I'm aiming for 15th."

"That would still be pretty awesome."

Kevin nodded as they boarded the bus. They shared a seat together three rows from the back. *"I'd be happy with it for sure."*

He pulled out his iPod, which effectively shut down any more conversation. Which was fine with Lauren. That meant she had more time to think about her contest entry. She kept writing for the whole 30 minute bus ride to school. One time she and Kevin calculated that by spending one hour on the bus round-trip each day, by the end of high school they would have been riding the bus for roughly 750 hours. Which equaled approximately 31 days of their lives spent riding a yellow school bus. Lauren smiled to herself. *Yeah, I guess I know this Island pretty well. Or at least the route between Gore Bay and MSS.*

The following Monday, Lauren walked down the E corridor hallway and found the door to Room 9 open. She knocked anyway. *"Ms. Brown? Can I show you something I've been working on?"*

Lauren had had Ms. Brown for her English teacher in Grade 11. In four years, Lauren had had four different English teachers, and Ms. Brown was her favourite. She didn't mind her teacher this year, Mr. Andrews, but she really wanted Ms. Brown's opinion on this.

"Sure Lauren, come on in. I'm just reading this year's essays about Macbeth." Lauren groaned and smiled a little. That had been her least favourite assignment, and Ms. Brown knew it.

"Well, I saw an ad in the paper for the spring writing contest. At first I thought it was kind of a silly topic, but now I really want to hit the right tone. The theme is to write about the Manitoulin experience. And I guess they could have people enter who write about what they do when they are here on vacation, but I want to show what it is like to live here."

Ms. Brown was nodding as Lauren spoke. *"I see. So what is it like to live here?"* Lauren hesitated for a second. *"I'm finding that part hard to describe, but I think I've got a related idea that could be just as good."*

"Okay! Let me see what you have so far."

Lauren pulled out her notebook and turned past her pages of rough notes. She had started a brand new page with her story.

Crossing the Bridge

When you come home after a long vacation, when does it feel like you are actually home? Is it once you get into your house, or turn into your driveway? Once you pass the sign for your town limits? Is there something special you pass along the road that indicates you are now home?

For me, home starts when I am 65 kilometres from my front door. As soon as I cross the bridge onto the Island, there's a different feeling. Maybe it's that I know the roads a little better. Maybe it's because I recognize the last names on all the mailboxes along the highway. Maybe it's because I can point to a patch of trees along Blue Jay Creek and say "Yeah, my class planted those." While it may be less than 100m from one side of the bridge to the other, that distance makes a huge difference.

There's this kind of bizarre feeling of being from multiple places at the same time. On the Island, when someone asks me where I'm from, I proudly tell them Gore Bay and would quickly correct anyone who thought I might be from somewhere else. But when I am in Toronto with my cousins, I tell people I am from Manitoulin Island. I used to think that this was because they were more likely to have heard of the Island rather than some small town of 900 people. But people in small towns in southern Ontario don't say they are from a whole region, they'll just tell you the town name.

Now I think I tell people I'm from Manitoulin because I am claiming the whole Island as my home. My address might say Gore Bay, but there is a welcoming familiarity that covers this entire rock from Meldrum Bay to South Baymouth. And it always starts when I cross the bridge.

Ms. Brown finished reading, looked up at Lauren, and smiled. *"I really like this."* Lauren hadn't remembered until just then that at one point, Ms. Brown had also been an 18 year old Islander who had never lived anywhere else. Sure, she had gone away for university and teacher's college, but jumped at the chance to come back as soon as she could.

"Before I got the job here at MSS, I taught for two years at a high school in Sudbury. I hated every minute of it. Every Friday I would race out of there to beat traffic to get home to the Island. Some nights I would get stopped at the bridge while it was swinging open to let the boats pass, and I didn't even care. I already felt like I was home, and things were better."

Lauren nodded. *"That's kind of the thing I want this piece to say. Do you think it's okay?"*

Ms. Brown gave her another big smile. *"I hope you win!"*

Lauren went home that evening and typed up "Crossing the Bridge" on her computer. The next day she showed it to Kevin on the bus ride to school. He had finished it before they even passed the police station corner.

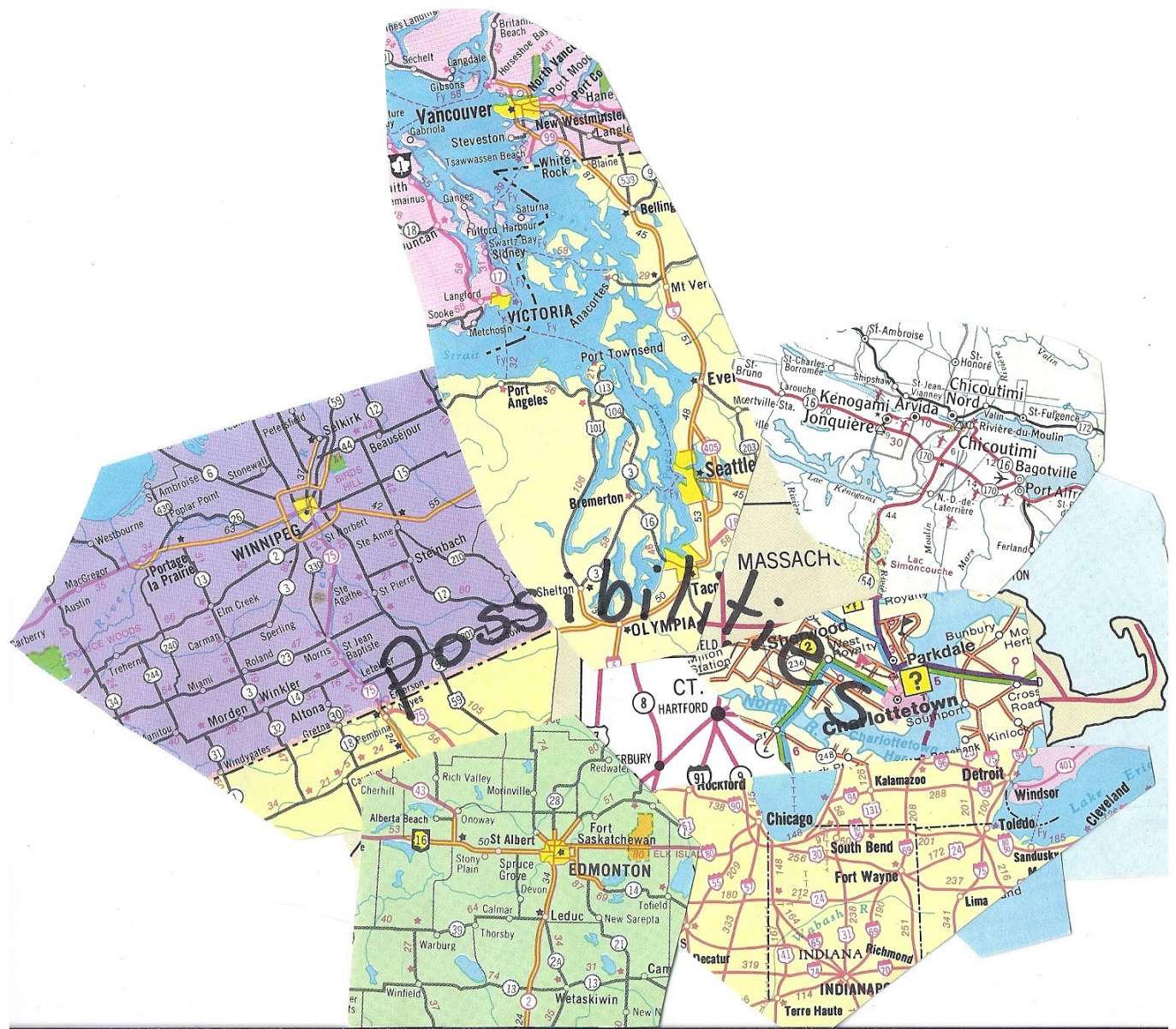
"So...what do you think?"

"I think it's great, Lauren. Aren't you glad now that I told you what to write?"

She slugged him in the shoulder playfully and took her paper back at the same time.

Lauren filled out the contest entry form and placed that and her story into an envelope. At the post office downtown, she placed that envelope in the outgoing mail slot and

collected the mail from her family's mailbox. She smiled as she realized what she would be reading later that evening. The Manitoulin Expositor had arrived. It was Wednesday, after all.

Epilogue – Possibilities in other places

The pink glow gets brighter and pinker. Then there are more lights – still pink – and they're not just at the bottom of the horizon anymore. They're swirling across the whole sky, like paint on a dark canvas. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. And for the first time, I'm enjoying the quiet. Except for the lights in the sky, the world feels perfectly still.

(Polak, 2009, p. 200)

As a writer, Monique turns wherever she is into her workplace. Whether that is watching the Northern Lights in George River (as described by the above excerpt from *The Middle of Everywhere*) or running along Highway 138 in Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre, she is gathering information and ideas for future stories.

Looking at her novels and our conversations together through an ecological lens, important elements of Monique's life that help shape her writing have emerged. Writing practice is highly involved with other spatial practices (Saunders, 2010), suggesting that these practices are often nested with one another. While the three main elements of her work are *places*, *people*, and *details*, each of these has several contributing factors. Monique is most often inspired to write about the familiar locations she knows best, such as her home neighbourhood in Montreal. Yet travelling and visiting new locations has also led to stories for her, as long as she is able to get to know the landscape well. One of the ways that she does this is by running, an activity that allows her to experience an area in a new way.

Within these places, Monique is very interested in all of the people who live there. She most often converses with teenagers, and these are the people who can most easily become specific characters in her young adult novels. As a college instructor, she spends her days with teens, engaging in their lives and creating a strong link with their experiences. To tell specific parts of her stories, she surrounds herself with experts who ensure that readers can fully immerse

themselves in her works and not be taken out of the story by incorrect details. She also has many other storytellers in her life, whether they be other published authors with whom she is friends, or family members like her mother who taught her how to captivate an audience with a good story. All of these people together contribute to her writing.

Monique represents the people and places that inspire her stories through the selection of details that she chooses for her descriptions. As an author, she feels it is important to portray settings and stories that readers will feel a connection to, and one way this is accomplished is by incorporating significant details into her writing. While she is never able to include all of the details that she notices and records over the course of her research (which often involves questioning others, due to her curious nature), selecting the ones that will help craft a compelling story is an important part of her overall process.

Reflecting on my interpretations of this research as well as the notion of novels and short stories as research practices (Leavy, 2013), I considered how my ideas could alternatively be presented. These reflections culminated in my short story "Crossing The Bridge". The story was inspired first by my home region of Manitoulin Island (a place that even came up during my conversations with Monique), then by my memories of people with whom I shared experiences there, and finally through the consideration of details that are specific to life on Manitoulin. This story is meant to demonstrate how the same elements that are important to Monique can also help to shape stories for other authors. It could also provide an example of how teachers might use these ideas to encourage student writers in their classes.

Pedagogical Possibilities

Although place is only one of the factors that is involved in Monique's writing process, this research demonstrates how writing could be part of a place-based curriculum. The other

important elements of her writing process can be linked with place as well (such as learning from people who live in a certain area or identifying details and specific characteristics that can make a place unique). Chambers (2008) is very blunt on this subject: "A curriculum of place is no longer optional" (p. 125). She recognizes the importance of valuing local, place-centric knowledge. Smith (2002) also calls for a "curricular focus [that] validates the culture and experience of students' families, acknowledging them as worthy of inquiry" (p. 588). Identifying pedagogical possibilities in local contexts is an important part of a place-conscious curriculum.

As a teacher, I agree with Luce-Kapler's (2004) recognition of "writing's potential for examining our lives, for understanding the influences and pressures about us, and for seeing the many connections to memory, experience, and other texts" (p. 166). Writing instruction that has a specific focus on place could serve to counteract the negative experiences that both Luce-Kapler and Monique had with high school writing assignments. Students benefit when they are connected with their world (Smith, 2002), rather than separated from it.

These are not easy changes to make. Cooper (1986) explains that "by looking at writing ecologically we understand better how important writing is – and just how hard it is to teach" (p.373). Yet the elements of Monique's writing ecology could provide an example for other educators. Each student will bring their own perspectives to common elements like these, and therefore each person's writing ecology will be different. Students may also, like Monique, see changes in the importance of these elements over time. She has seen the role of place become more important, with home taking on an increasingly larger role as well.

While place-based education may not always involve the notion of home, this is clearly an idea that will continue to shape Monique's writing process going forward. The major elements of places, people, and details all contribute to how "home" is represented in her writing.

The opening lines of this thesis include the section of *The Middle of Everywhere* where Noah calls Tom's hometown "the middle of friggin' nowhere" (Polak, 2009, p. 84). As Monique and I spoke about this novel and her writing process, she had this to say: "*Where our home is, is the middle of our lives. It's central to us.*" And home may provide the place for pedagogical possibilities to begin.

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This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove subjects from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at: <http://recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/submissions-and-reviews>.

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer 4 weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at: <http://recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/submissions-and-reviews>.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: ethics@uOttawa.ca.