

Homesteading: At Play in the House of Wood and Wonder

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The act of Homesteading . . . *narratively speaking*
Is the commitment to breathe life over the coals of memory.
Words exhaled over memory ignite
and illuminate the 'still life' with clarity and precision.¹



I am a homesteader. I come from a line of homesteading folk who cleared space for themselves on borrowed land, on land leased from others, because it was their privilege to do so. Like my kin before me,

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¹ *Shadowboxing: Myths and Minatures of Home*, 38 (this issue).

I have scouted a site and staked my claim on a piece of history that *is and is not mine* to build upon, yet my narrative presence will mark its landscape indelibly. As homesteaders do, I have displaced indigenous growth with structures of my own design, embracing whatever materials are raw and ready to hand: a tree, a lake, a forest of folk, talk-trails snaking through the woods, mementoes skipped like stones across a river-flow of time, the rapid rush of stories falling, the wide field of memory.

I am a homesteader. With autoethnography's reflexive glance back over the shoulder of experience, I have surveyed the forest for the trees. Mindful of the elements, I have cut down and dug up and joined end to end each mitered tale at my disposal, until I had crafted a home fit for habitation, a hearth round which to raise up my family. To look them in the eye. To pose them for posterity. As tree is to timber, so too is history to homestead. I come from a line of homesteading folk who have used wood and word to make up a place for themselves. On one shore or another.

I am a homesteader. I too know the craft of tongue-in-groove design. I take pride and pleasure in building with stories. Sometimes, I like to fit piece to piece by notching the ends for snugness; sometimes I struggle to right the corners where one tale abuts another. With an eye toward perspective, I have cut each threshold, just so, hoping to maximize view and circulation, yet knowing all the while I cannot hope to encompass the panorama of people, place and time that surrounds me, people who build their own thresholds on our common, historical shoreline. I am a homesteader, using narrative to work the raw material of memory and imagination, so that I might write up my residence on the shores of someone else's, someone's larger, history.

In the fall of 2005 I homesteaded my family history. Over the course of three months and in collaboration with a graduate colleague, Amy Pinney,² I used the raw materials of familial

² Amy Pinney is a doctoral student in performance studies at SIUC with expertise in historical ethnography, autoethnographic performance and directing the one-person show. Amy served as full collaborative partner

biography to carve a clearing in a social history of local and international significance. My family circumstances were unusually iconic: my parents' lives unfold against the colonial post-war expansion of northeastern Canada; my father personified the mythos of the bush-pilot entrepreneur as cultural hero; their homestead, *Barney's Ball Lake Lodge*, a wilderness tourist resort built adjacent to an Ojibwe reservation, was 'homesteaded' on a foundation of environmental racism against indigenous First Nations people. Lastly, although perhaps most personally significant, my parents' decisive response to environmental poisoning of the Ojibwe dramatizes a model of *ethical privilege* that continues to ground my adult social conscience.³ I homesteaded my parents' story, in order to inhabit, *with a mature, critical, and embodied intelligence*, the social history and ethical imperatives that were their burden and their legacy to me. And like the line of homesteading folk who are my disciplinary kin, I stake my claims through narrative performance.

Shadowboxing: Myths and Miniatures of Home was a two act, solo performance presented December 2005 in the Marion Kleinau Theatre at Southern Illinois University. Over the arc of the production, I reconstruct, in media and in miniature, my parents' wilderness resort, while telling a series of interlaced stories about growing up in the tangle of ethnic, economic and environmental conflicts that attended my childhood. Through a mix of poetic narrative and artifactual reconstruction that transformed the bare stage to Lodge hearth-- complete with airplanes, taxidermy, and my dramatized parents--the performance was, itself, *embodied scholarship in narrative homesteading*. I offer that performance here, in Liminalities,

throughout the conceptual, compositional and staging processes of *Shadowboxing*.

³ I began using family stories to develop a critical autoethnography of privilege in "Engraving the Silver Spoon: A Critical Caligraphy of Privilege." *The Green Window: Proceedings of the Giant City Conference on Performative Writing*. Eds. Miller, Lynn C. and Ronald J. Pelias, Carbondale, IL: SIUC Press, (2001): 66-77. This early essay deploys literary genre as a method for inscribing and deconstructing the ethnic and economic power I have inherited.

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through the combined performance modalities of text and technology. I offer it, moreover, not as a recapitulation of the live event, but as a new heuristic for narrative homesteading as a performance method. Through a fugue of text, video production, and photographic media, this liminal cyber-performance constitutes a new stake in the disciplinary field, a third generational homestead.