

<http://somatosphere.net/?p=15379>

## Word Shell

2019-03-12 06:00:34

By Janelle Taylor



I have never lost my childhood habit of beachcombing for special rocks and shells, and I think of ethnography as involving a similar process of collecting bits of evidence. Mostly what I collect are words (interviews, quotations, or notes) that I then use to make various kinds of word compositions (descriptions, analyses, arguments, and articles). But words also do have limits, which dementia — as a human condition, and as an object of inquiry — makes palpably evident. How can we create understanding of a predicament that is largely defined by the absence of precisely those tools we most rely on to create understanding?

The word shell collage layers together two kinds of found objects: words written on a piece of paper that I found among my mother's things, and a moon snail shell that I found on a Whidbey Island beach. I made this image a few years ago when I was trying to learn about photography, as a way of

exploring the limits of words. I share it with you here, in the spirit of “thinking with dementia.”

Even as I do so, I hesitate. I found the process of making this absorbing, and the resulting image seems compelling to me — but I hardly trust my own judgment. I don't know whether it will speak to anyone else. I take my hesitation to be part of what the image helps me see: the limits of language also mark the limits of expertise. For academics (such as me, and perhaps you who read this) expertise becomes a hard surface that we present to the world, a protective carapace that shields the formless tender creature beneath.

Another reason I hesitate is that I fear this image could be read as a damning metaphor for a person with dementia as “a shell of their former self.” This hesitation speaks, perhaps, to yet another limit of words, one that is the flip side of their power: we can never completely control what they will mean.

The note was written on a small yellow piece of lined paper in my mother's handwriting. I have it on my desk:

Favorite scent:

Helen Keller said: Smell is a potent wizard that transports us across a thousand miles and all the years we have lived.

Smell is so mysterious. Some odors can repulse and tell us that gas is smelling.

I don't know when or why my mother wrote this note; perhaps she attended a talk, or took part in a workshop of some kind at the assisted living facility where she lived for a time. By the time I found it, her dementia had progressed to the point where she could no longer write – and because of this, what would otherwise have been a bit of ephemera took on for me the aura of a relic, a precious souvenir from a lost time before the end of language. The words themselves also speak to the limits of language, pointing toward the powers of smell, which lie forever beyond their grasp. And yet, across a thousand miles and all the years, Keller's words somehow reached my mother, just before her own words abandoned her.

Shells are of course always relics, remains and reminders of the lost creatures from whose bodies they were accreted. (Thinking with dementia made me see a familiar beach in an entirely new light: my God, it is covered with empty abandoned homes). This shell, with its lovely spiral and its gaping brokenness, seems like a fitting surface on which to inscribe

words that speak of their own limits.

At the level of the body, human beings arguably *are* shells. Jeannette Winterson writes:

Odd to think that the piece of you I know best is already dead. The cells on the surface of your skin are thin and flat without blood-vessels or nerve-endings. Dead cells, thickest on the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet. Your sepulchral body, offered to me in the past tense, protects your soft centre from the intrusions of the outside world. I am one such intrusion, stroking you with necrophiliac obsession, loving the shell laid out before me (Winterson 1992:130).

For human beings and shells alike, the outermost surface shows wrinkles and lines, the signs of aging. In this regard, oyster shells are even more striking: deeply carved, irregular waves of white and gray, like a fiercely hairsprayed helmet of old-lady hair.

Oyster comes from *ostraka*, the name for the shards of broken pots that ancient Greeks used as ballots when voting whether to banish an individual from the community, without crime or trial. *Ostracized*, cast out, tossed on the shore like an oyster shell, are many older adults with dementia. A condition that erodes memory and language is bound to enact its own exclusions, but these are cruelly compounded by social banishment.

Ostracism, a political ritual newly invented at the birth of Greek democracy, mobilized tropes and techniques familiar from magic, games, divine oracles, and collective stonings. Of the words written on *ostraka*, the Classics scholar Paul Kosmin notes that “curling the inscribed name or phrase into a circle has also been recognized as some kind of magical act” (Kosmin 2015: 130) Helen Keller’s words, in my mother’s handwriting, curl magically toward the spiral at the center of the word shell: We have lived. We have lived. We have lived. We have lived.

Lines of words curling across other surfaces of the shell are interrupted by the large hole, reminding us yet again of their limits – but also, perhaps, of the possibilities that may open up in the spaces where language breaks down. We can piece together what is missing. Gaps in language call upon our human capacities to create meaning from fragments and to reach out to those whose grasp on language is uncertain, to keep them within the community. Peering through that gap in the shell, we may find other wonders. Interior surfaces show themselves; intriguing hidden spaces beckon; strange new species may venture in, seeking shelter, seeding new life.

The pieces I've gathered here do not add up to an argument, but arranging them alongside the word shell image may open another spiraling path toward thinking with dementia:

In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. ...Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series... A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life (Nabokov 1989: 275).

The word shell offers no answers to the questions with which we began: questions about how to reach beyond words in thinking with dementia. Rather, twirl upon twirl, it offers layers of resonances. It is a kind of worry stone, an object to handle and probe, turning it this way and that, focusing the senses as a path toward focusing the mind, there at the limits of language.

I am tossing it out, now, where perhaps you will find it. If you hold it to your ear, perhaps you will hear the wordless roar of the world. This too is part of ethnography in beachcombing mode: we hope that these objects we create out of words will be beautiful, that they will endure, and that other people will find them and cherish them.

#### Acknowledgements:

Endless admiration and appreciation to Ellen Garvens, the talented photographer and who patiently guided the explorations out of which this "word shell" emerged — and warm thanks to Kathy Woodward and the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, for giving us the opportunity to work together. Thanks to Sharon Kaufman, Ann O'Hare, Michael Rosenthal, Lynn Thomas, and Priti Ramamurthy for encouraging and insightful comments.

#### References:

Kosmin, Paul J. 2015. "A Phenomenology of Democracy: Ostracism as Political Ritual" *Classical Antiquity* 34(1):121-161

Nabokov, Vladimir. 1989. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: Vintage.

Winterson, Jeanette. 1992. "The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body," *Granta* 39.

[Janelle S. Taylor](#) is Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Washington, where she researches and teaches medical anthropology. Dementia has been the primary focus of her work for the

*past ten years, and her publications on the topic (listed on her webpage) range from an auto-ethnographic essay, to articles that draw on interview-based research as well as readings of public-cultural texts, to a critical review of published research in geriatric medicine. She currently holds (as PI) a grant from the National Institute on Aging, that uses data from a long running medical study of dementia and from the study participants' health records, to explore how the presence or absence of family affects the health of older adults with dementia. She remains an avid beachcomber.*

**AMA citation**

Taylor J. Word Shell. *Somatosphere*. 2019. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=15379>. Accessed March 12, 2019.

**APA citation**

Taylor, Janelle. (2019). *Word Shell*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=15379>

**Chicago citation**

Taylor, Janelle. 2019. Word Shell. *Somatosphere*. <http://somatosphere.net/?p=15379> (accessed March 12, 2019).

**Harvard citation**

Taylor, J 2019, *Word Shell*, Somatosphere. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=15379>>

**MLA citation**

Taylor, Janelle. "Word Shell." 12 Mar. 2019. *Somatosphere*. Accessed 12 Mar. 2019.<<http://somatosphere.net/?p=15379>>