STEPPING OFF THE ROAD: A RESEARCHER'S STORY OF CHALLENGING METHOD/CHANGING METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT. This narrative recounts the disruption of my graduate research project by persistent, self-reflexive questioning of the process of doing independent research for the first time, and draws its texts from the resulting master's thesis. In this story, the ethnographic method I chose initially to study the experience of women returning to school to earn degrees became less methodologically convincing as critical questions about the method emerged through self-reflective writing in my research journal. As I followed the disruptions generated through writing, and attended to the equally compelling disruptions due to disabling chronic illness, these experiences prompted a methodological shift in the research, with unforeseen textual consequences. Slowly, it became apparent to me that research journal writings that reflected my observations and concerns about power, representation and authority in the research I was conducting, and within the academy itself, constituted the ground of a viable narrative inquiry into what I had been experiencing as a beginning researcher. The thesis I had set out to create was definitely not the one I wrote.

SORTIR DES SENTIERS BATTUS : L'HISTOIRE D'UNE CHERCHEUSE QUI CONTESTE LES MÉTHODES DÉFICIENTES ET CHANGE LA MÉTHODOLOGIE

RÉSUMÉ. Ce récit relate l'interruption de mon projet de recherche d'études supérieures en raison de la remise en question constante et autoréflexive du processus de recherche indépendante entreprise pour la première fois, et tire ses textes de la thèse de maîtrise qui en a résulté. Dans ce récit, la méthode ethnographique choisie au départ pour analyser l'expérience des femmes qui retournent aux études afin de décrocher un diplôme est devenue moins convaincante sur le plan méthodologique à mesure que je me posais des questions très importantes sur la méthodologie dans la rédaction autoréflexive de mon journal de recherche. Tout en suivant les interruptions générées par la rédaction, et en prêtant attention aux interruptions tout aussi contraignantes en raison de la maladie chronique invalidante, ces expériences ont mené à un changement de la méthodologie de recherche ainsi qu'à des conséquences imprévues sur la rédaction. Il m'est ainsi lentement apparu que la rédaction du journal de recherche qui exprimait mes observations et mes préoccupations concernant le pouvoir, la représentation et l'autorité dans le cadre de la recherche que je menais, et au sein de l'académie elle-même, constituait la

matière pour une recherche narrative viable sur mon expérience en tant que chercheur débutant. La thèse que j'ai écrite n'a assurément rien à voir avec mon projet de thèse initial.

Allow me to present a snapshot of my world, the world of the story I am about to relate, an "ingot of time and place" that Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 11) suggest as a way of providing a brief narrative sketch to orient you to the autobiographical story I relate in this text.

A number of years ago, at the time this story began its life, I was a graduate student in counselling psychology, a woman on the threshold of mid-life, having lived for two decades with a disabling, degenerative chronic illness. I had entered graduate school directly from a nursing degree (BSN) program. My experience of being disempowered as a BSN student provided the impetus for my master's research, in particular my sense as an undergraduate in nursing that my own life experience with chronic illness was not an appropriate site for study. At that time I believed that "playing the game" and "jumping through the hoops" were the only ways to survive in this highly competitive discipline. Any creativity I brought to my studies withered in a parched climate of learning objectives and outcomes and competition for top marks. What was I learning in this environment? Was there something about nursing and nursing education that pushed students to the limit? Was there something about nurses as women that lay at the heart of this experience?

With newly-crafted questions about how gender informed the education of women, as a graduate student I sought to better understand the experience of women returning to school, in particular, nurses undertaking BSN degrees. Like most graduate students doing research for the first time, I chose what I thought was a suitable "method" to pursue my questions, and set about doing "the research." But things did not go as neatly as I had envisioned. Through ongoing critically self-reflexive writing practices in a research journal, begun intuitively at the beginning of my degree program, and ongoing disruptions in my studies due to disability, reflected upon in that journal, the study I had undertaken using an ethnographic interview method (Spradley, 1979) was disrupted. This disruption sent me off in an entirely different methodological direction. Slowly, it became apparent to me that research journal writings reflecting (on) my observations and concerns about power, representation and authority in the research I was conducting, and within the academy itself, constituted the ground of a viable narrative inquiry into what I had been experiencing as a beginning researcher. The thesis I had set out to create was definitely not the one I wrote.

It was my intention to include a page from the thesis so that reader's could see for themselves how unconvential a text it is. Unfortunately, reproducing a page from what was a very unusually-formatted text for this journal article was an unsurmountable editorial challenge, but the following excerpts from the thesis provide readers with the material to visually imagine the original formatting. All the excerpts that follow immediately below fit onto *one page* in the original document, juxtaposed in relation to each other. The first three paragraphs are part of the (central) research story being told in the thesis, around which other writings were positioned. The italicized text, drawn directly from my research journal, appeared off to the right of the page encased in a box. The quote from van Manen stood alone in bold type in the upper left corner of the page, and the excerpt beginning with the question ("Why is letting go of the ethnography a turning point for me?" was drawn from the personal narrative I wrote as a lengthy reflexive text, which appeared throughout the thesis as a footnote.

Excerpts from thesis (Kimpson, 1995)

As the questions slowly mounted, like clouds building before a storm, I continued along the path I had chosen, despite the fact that the ground was becoming considerably less firm. By this time I had dropped my first informant, Camilla, from the study in an effort to reduce the amount of work, and was continuing with Rachel, Shirley, and Faye.

I had already written a summary of the cultural scene, and a descriptive summary of Rachel's experience as told to me. I was consciously experiment-ing with "writing styles," and began to create a third document in which I wrote about Faye's experience, bringing in aspects of feminist theory and other literature to explain or theorize (about) her experience, and what she had in common with the others. I hadn't really conceptualized the text of the final document (the "ethnographic text"), and my experimentation with writing was, in part, a way of helping me decide how it would be written. Unwittingly, it was also helping me develop themes, which I had tentatively named (power, powerlessness, empowerment or personal authority), but remained unsure of. I still wasn't really sure I was doing it right, coming to the themes in the systematic way outlined by Spradley.

At that point, not yet really ready to make any changes, I began in earnest to explore my difficulty with finding themes, penetrating more deeply and self-reflexively the concern that "when writing is thought of as a reporting process there is no place for thinking of research itself as a poetic textual (writing) practice" (van Manen, 1990, p. 125).

> *June 13, 1994: I've been writing a summary of Rachel's experience. In our first interview, she talks about professors telling students that they are "on track" with respect to an assignment, which is a qualitative answer, and the student interprets it quantitatively – in terms of marks. This brings up the question of differences in*

communication – are these communication differences between someone who has power and someone who doesn't? Or communication differences across cultures – are professors yet another subculture? They are clearly part of the university culture, and the culture of nursing, the culture of the school of nursing within the university. Do students and professors communicate differently based on their relative positions in the hierarchy? Professors share with their students their membership in the same culture of women in the larger societal culture. Professors, like students are in two worlds, they have to "translate" the university's requirements to the students, just as the students have to translate what the professors require into a concrete product. The professor has to give marks not just to the student, but also has to give students' marks to the university. Both are dancing, in different ways, to someone else's drum. Both, to some degree, have to play the game. (Excerpt from research journal)

Why is letting go of the ethnography a turning point for me?

This shift represents a new respect and honouring of not just what I knew, but the myriad ways of knowing lying close to the heart of my personal authority. It was a difficult decision, one that played on my insecurities, but that ultimately felt right. I was finally listening and attending to my own intuition and voice, after deferring for so long to the 'experts.' While learning to value my own knowing, I was unlearning values I had learned about the knowledge of these experts, and the methods they espoused. With respect to the research I had undertaken I was moving myself from the margin to the centre, while paradoxically moving from the centre of the dominant discourse (ethnography) to the relative margins (interpretive/autobiographical inquiry). Yet as a woman I was always removed from the centre of power in the culture I live in.

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How did this different thesis, structured so unusually, come to be? Or, as Rushdie (1997) asks, "How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is?" (p. 8).

Narrated here is a story characterized by multiplicity, containing both a personal narrative about my experiences of being a graduate student and a disabled woman, and a narrative about (doing) research. Inextricably intertwined, at times these narratives are indistinguishable from each other. Focused primarily on my thesis research process, the story being told here draws its language/text directly from the multiple narratives (and reflections) that constituted the original thesis. Thus it is a retelling that mirrors the original.

I am writing this paper having re-entered graduate school to pursue doctoral studies. Keeping a research journal is again central to my work, but now more consciously so. As during the master's degree it is a place to track my

thinking and research activities, to struggle with and reflect critically on ideas (my own and others'), and to describe the daily experience of living in a chronically ill body. In the thesis from which this article draws its texts, and in the article itself, research journal writings serve several functions. They illustrate points I want to make. They serve as counterpoints to other texts, and some provide readers with a sense of how living with disability might intersect with and influence being a graduate student.

In the excerpts from the thesis (above), the italicized text is drawn directly from my research journal and illustrates my reflections and deliberations as I wrote the descriptive summary of this participant's (Rachel) experience. The van Manen quote serves as a counterpoint to the other texts. It is an example of "intertextuality," a discursive practice that Lather (1991) suggests decentres the author and demonstrates how authors are "inevitably inscribed in discourses created by others, preceded and surrounded by other texts, some of which are evoked, some not" (p. 9). Although I will not reproduce these textual practices in the same form here, I used them liberally in the thesis as a way of creating a text that was multivocal, weaving together the voices of various authors, rather than creating a text with a "singular 'authoritative' voice" (p. 9).

As a caution, there are some things you might like to consider while reading this story. It is not a story about journal writing as a methodological tool, although certainly this story has potential to contribute to that methodological discourse. It is also not a story about how the ethnographic method I had chosen fit(s) into the field of ethnography (or not), or even the broader field of interpretive inquiry. Rather, it was a method that I struggled with partly because, over time, it failed to accommodate my changing understanding of, and political commitment to, reciprocity. I had originally understood reciprocity to be the mutual effect of researcher and researched on each other, not the involvement of research participants in the construction and validation of knowledge as Lather (1991) suggests.

Shall we begin (again) then?

Telling stories

I had entered graduate school directly from a nursing degree program, in which I had learned well what "legitimate" research methodologies were. In part, these were believable to me because I was a nurse, steeped in medical terminology and practices. And even though I had lived for several years with a disabling chronic illness, I had – not surprisingly – adopted the dominant societal attitude toward disability as a "personal tragedy," entirely connected to my physical impairment, something to be treated, fixed or cured, not a set of socially constructed experiences I live with on a daily basis.

What might have prompted me to think differently about research and its effects? There was little in my life or the social context of the academy that effectively countered what I knew at the time; authoritative voices dominated, especially those of the medical community. Treatments and curative practices were developed by scientists and researchers who had the authority to define disabled people's lives – my life – using "rigorous" – objective, neutral, valid – research methods. As a BSN student, I was not exempt from learning these methods, and spent considerable time and energy learning how to calculate standard deviations and statistical significance. But when I learned about the importance of a holistic approach in community nursing practice, I could envision a crack in this intellectual armour. This kind of holistic practice seemed to recognize and attend to the daily challenges I faced living with disability, like taking stock of energy and pain levels and deciding which activities to engage in and which to defer. These were deeply subjective experiences unaccounted for in descriptive statistics.

At the beginning of graduate school, a colleague suggested I read Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule's (1986), *Women's Ways of Knowing*. A research journal entry reveals my responses to their theorizing:

> *I'm not sure I recognize myself in the category of "constructed knowing," or "the impetus to allow the self back into the process of knowing, to confront the pieces of the self that may be experienced as fragmented and contradictory" (Belenky et al, 1986, p. 136). I haven't really articulated a way of thinking about truth or knowledge that could guide my intellectual life. In fact, if asked, I would probably say that my intellectual life has been focused on getting assignments done, including reading and quoting other's work. I wonder if some of the frustration I felt being a BSN student has to do with the lack of fit between how I learn and experience the world as a woman – the way Belenky et al describe it – and the way I was expected to learn. I felt so disconnected from myself and others in that competitive atmosphere, which went contrary to my need to connect with others, an essential component of my learning.*

Clearly, graduate school provided me with the opportunity to begin to reflect on and question what I came to understand as an adherence in nursing at the time to masculinist intellectual and scientific practices. But along with the intellectual awakening, graduate school created new physical challenges for me, prompting a reconsideration of how I was proceeding with my studies and how I was living my life.

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It is difficult for me to remember when I decided to approach doing research and being in academia differently. Having to bow to the limitations on my energy as a result of living with chronic illness seems central to this decision. But there was more. Initially, like my peers, I had also chosen not to "have a life," to pursue my academic work relentlessly, using up most of my energy on my studies. Institutional imperatives bore down on me, a transport

truck of rules, regulations and codes of conduct leaving me on the shoulder whirling, like so many fallen leaves, in deadlines, meetings, assignments, and presentations. Also, a sexual harassment case erupted in our small department in my first term, leaving me confused and angry. I added political action to my heavy academic load, co-founding a small group of supportive women students who met regularly to respond to ongoing issues of concern.

Displacing the challenges and messiness of living with disability in order to meet the demands of academic life, I chose to push myself physically beyond my own limits. Ultimately disabling, the imperatives that demanded a whirlwind pace from me left me no choice. Near the end of my first year, I underwent emergency abdominal surgery because my life was threatened. Yet this frightening event represents a divergence, forcing me to reflect on my life in altogether different ways, to formulate not just new meanings, but a new self. I could no longer allow myself the questionable luxury of putting most of my life on hold in order to complete my degree. Surgery and recuperation forced me to slow down enough that I could carefully consider my previous experiences as a BSN student.

Slowing down allowed me the time to be more reflective, indeed more self-reflexive and I began to carefully consider my former experiences as a BSN student, and those as a graduate student. Writing was central to all my activities, especially in the research journal I had begun during my first term. It provided a place to chronicle my experience, to store information and insights, to work through questions and concerns, thoughts and feelings, and to struggle. Recursively engaging in the ongoing research process and writing about it revealed to me important insights about learning to do research, as this journal entry shows:

> How is choosing to study the BSN experience a turning point for me? It marks the application of my budding feminist sensibilities to scholarship. Although reading feminist literature has generated in me a multitude of questions about my life and the experiences of other women, in addition to being at once validating and somewhat disturbing, I really hadn't thought these could become guiding questions for the research I am expected to do. I actually hadn't even seen that the questions have been leading me towards this end.

Deeply generative, out of this kind of reflexivity emerged my proposed thesis research. The journal became fertile ground from which pieces of my thesis began to grow. In time, something new and tenuous – a different way of doing research – the narrative inquiry I undertook into my own research practice as I learned to become a researcher, was born. As that new process unfolded I reflected on it in my research journal:

> December 5, 1994: So now I'm back to "What am I doing?" knowing that what I have just done is part of what I am doing; reflecting on and beginning with my own present experience and questions, writing the process as it unfolds, using the literature when it feels right, and paying close attention to what I am

doing. I am also interpreting my experience in a critical way through the lens of feminist thought, deconstructing realities of my own, and those shared with other women, which are harmful and disempowering. I also tell a story with my experience, understandings and insight as I go, a story of what it is like to be a woman doing research for the first time. This is my method.

Although my original intention beginning the research journal was to provide a place to chronicle my research activities, during my convalescence I allowed myself to bring thoughts and feelings arising from living with disability to the writing, to bear witness to my daily struggles, my fleshly life. Thus, my lived body was slowly transposed into a vehicle for understanding, something I sought to respect and understand, not defer, as the research unfolded. By including the body – "that sad grey dishrag philosophers hang inside the door beneath the sink" (Zwicky, 1992, p. 142) – and especially my disabled body as a source of knowledge, I ". . .intervene in the production of knowledge. . . in ways that work out of the blood and spirit of [my life], rather than out of the consumerism that can pass for a life of the mind in academic theory" (Lather, 1991, p. 20).

October 12, 1994: I really don't feel like a writer today. I'm really in a lot of physical pain, and need to take just little steps. I can only do so much, especially when it's difficult to concentrate on writing. So I follow closely what's happening in my body right now – the burning in my wrists, the achy, weak feeling pulling my body down, pulling energy into the pain, using it up like coal in a fire. It hurts so much, I begin to cry. . .

Journeys bring power and love
back into you. If you can't go somewhere,
move in the passageways of the self.
They are like shafts of light,
always changing, and you change
when you explore them.

Rumi
These Branching Moments

The tension of bearing the pain subsides. I experience relief, and clarity. Being enervated passes. Which passageway should I enter now? There are so many calling to me, and I stand before them, unmoving, waiting for a sign, a voice gently echoing, leading me forward.

I am wrestling with whether or not to write in response to my reading of Bateson's (1994) "Peripheral Visions," but as I think of doing that it feels like I should be writing in response to my own research journal, and what I have recorded since I began. I think I am stuck because of a judgment I have of myself that I don't know enough to respond to either of these texts in a way that creates an intelligent critique. It feels like I'm having a 'crisis of the literature.' I've read a bit, enough to pique my imagination and stimulate my thinking, but not enough to really understand how it can guide me right now. So I am torn between reading others' works, and beginning to write an account of how I came to be where I am now.

As I slowly articulate this conflict, again paying attention to my body, I become aware of a slight pull towards, actually a relaxing into, writing rather than reading, and then I notice a supportive thought – that I don't have to critique while I write, I can just write. Maybe I can critique later, when I have a deeper understanding of how to do it. Why do I need a deeper understanding now? Won't that come as I use my existing understandings in a reflective way?

Am I not then working out of the blood and spirit of my life? Will this be enough? Is self-reflexivity a sufficient antidote for the bitter pill I accept as a participant in the production of knowledge?

Ethnographic intentions: Choosing a topic and method for study

My original intention to use phenomenology to study registered nurses returning to school to obtain Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degrees emerged from an initial desire to know the meaning of this experience for these women. I wondered if the stress these students experienced might be linked in some way to the fact that they were predominantly women studying in a male-dominated institution. But my life had slowed down considerably following the surgery, and this interlude created space for questioning. In particular, I queried whether phenomenology would uncover BSN students' implicit understandings about power, which I believed were linked to what I assumed was their lack of awareness of the influence of gender on their experience. I began to doubt whether phenomenology was up to this task.

Realizing that I needed a method that revealed these tacit understandings and how they informed the BSN students' experience, I began to look elsewhere. When a colleague had used Spradley's (1979) ethnographic interview method to study women's lives, revealing important issues of gender and power submerged in their consciousness, it seemed attractive to me. With its detailed, step-by-step design, I was actually seduced by the "simplicity" of Spradley's method.

This excerpt from my research journal (also appearing in the thesis) reveals my understandings of how to proceed using Spradley's method:

The ethnographic interview method is structured in two phases: an initial interview and a second of follow-up interview. The initial interview provides an opportunity for myself and the informant to develop rapport through the process of eliciting information (Spradley, 1979), and for the informant to begin discussing her experience of returning to school. This descriptive data is then subjected to a focused analysis from which emerge the fundamental units of knowledge (or domains). The follow-up interview will use more specialized questioning (structural and contrast questions), to confirm my analysis and to distinguish the meanings embedded in the informant's language. Again, analysis (taxonomic and componential) follows the second interview to discover cultural meanings and themes. The final event in the sequence is writing the ethnographic text, the cultural description.

Naïvely, I hoped that following Spradley's clearly-outlined steps would reduce some of the complexity inherent in qualitative methods and simplify the research process for me, especially in light of the institutional pressure I felt to finish within allotted time frames, in the face of a variety of ongoing disability-related interruptions. Pressures to finish bubbled up everywhere.

> *We are sitting, all of us, graduate students in counselling and a couple of faculty members, in a large circle in a high-ceilinged, carpeted meeting room in the graduate students' building. Over the past year, we have been meeting together to discuss issues of common concern to our department. I am nervous, and feel the comforting presence of the other members of our small women's group around me. A couple of us have volunteered to bring what we believe to be serious concerns to our 'community' meeting, and strongly suspect that these may not be well-received. During some cross-talk following our usual "go 'round" of names and years in the program (in which I reveal I have been a graduate student for over two years), one of the faculty members calls me an "experienced student" in an overtly ridiculing tone. I feel a wave of shame, followed by the searing heat of anger, but realize it would not be safe for me to reveal my true feelings.*

Like other graduate students I was always aware of the ongoing pressure to finish within the expected rather than allotted time limits, a clear expectation that students undertaking Master of Arts degrees in Counselling, requiring a thesis, would finish their degrees in 2 years, rather than the 5 years allotted by the Faculty of Graduate Studies. This was not the first time this particular professor had voiced his displeasure of me in an indirect, oblique way. Never did I sense from him any awareness, empathy or compassion for my particular circumstances. Unfortunately, when these incidents happened I spent considerable time feeling inadequate, or berating myself for not being able to finish on time. In vulnerable moments, the weight of my socialization, a well-used bowling ball, neatly toppled any silly notions I had about honouring my own voice, or my rights as a woman with a disability. My ingrained belief that people in authority know better, and that there is something wrong with me if I cannot finish on time, seemed to be blemishes on my skin, masking any clear, strong, authoritative self that may lie below the surface.

Making the choice of ethnography gave me some confidence though, and I thought that doing this research (in a timely fashion) was possible; it was not just something I read or dreamed about, or struggled with. This method seemed to provide me with the means to take my informants beyond their surface understandings as to the influence of gender in their lives, which I assumed would be either non-existent or buried. I also thought that I wouldn't have to worry so much about any biases I might have if I was studying how the women used language as a tool for constructing their realities.

I was excited and energized by this new direction. Yet my first reading of Spradley's book found me confused by the strange terminology. I reassured

myself that this confusion was because I was unfamiliar with this particular ethnographic method and the language Spradley used, and clarity would emerge as I immersed myself in the research process. In my journal, reflective writings mapped out the concrete beginnings of my struggle with bias, framed as questions about imposing my feminist understandings on the participants.

> *What about the 'position' I occupy as a researcher based on my experience as a woman and a nurse who has returned to school? How will it influence what is to be found? What about the fact that I share the same gender socialization and membership in the same minority group as my informants? Anne Oakley (1981) tells me that, "A feminist interviewing women is by definition both 'inside' the culture and participating in that which she is observing" (p. 53), but does this make me better equipped to study the culture of women as Mies (1983) suggests? Perhaps being inside the culture I am studying might have some limitations. I might overlook language differences because they may not be blatantly different to me. Or I might take too much about the culture for granted because it is part of my cultural knowledge. Or worse, I might impose my feminist understandings on the data. Perhaps doing Spradley's method will help to suspend some of that, mostly because of how it breaks their language down into pieces, rather than looking for meaning. There is something 'objective' about this methodology that makes me feel good in the sense that I may be less likely to impose my views on what the informants tell me.*

Naïvely, I thought Spradley's method would "control" for bias. Also, I adhered to my belief in the power of his method to provide validity, revealing that I was still willing to trust an "authority" (male) when uncertain. Even though I had begun to struggle with the tension I felt between my own insights into the experience, and the potential these might have for obscuring the informants' experience, I forged on with the interviews with the four women who volunteered to participate in my study.

Power, representation, and research

The research interviews revealed much about these women's experiences, and unexpectedly, about my experience as a researcher and graduate student. I wondered how they lived with the cultural contradictions being revealed, many mirrored in my own experience as a disabled woman doing a graduate degree. These parallel worlds intrigued me. As women returning to school, our lives revealed the kinds of cultural contradictions that arise from the disjuncture between two competing ideologies, those that prescribe certain types of behaviours for women (nurturant, submissive, non-competitive) and those valued by Western society such as individual, competitive activity in the public sphere as the means for achieving self-hood (Anyon, 1983).

Cultural contradictions are often revealed in everyday pedagogical practices. The previous community meeting episode reveals my response to a professor's efforts to silence me. I said nothing. Beyond my shame and unexpressed

anger, I was thinking that the faculty member had no right to say what he did and that he knew nothing of me or my reality. I silently questioned his authority to make disparaging comments based on his own privilege and power. But I also I understood my place, and the power of the professor to influence my life and accommodated to this, while resisting internally. I also knew that the community meeting had become a regular feature of our academic unit primarily because of the lobbying efforts of our women's group to bring women's issues forward, a direct act of resistance against the male-dominated faculty and discourse in our department.

The BSN students I interviewed also demonstrated similar kinds of resistance through their engagement in "bitch and moan" sessions with their peers. And, as I did, they accommodated to the demands of professors on a daily basis, in the classroom, by "jumping through hoops," and "finding out the hidden agenda." But they also resisted overtly in their own ways: (informant pseudonyms used here) Faye told me she had spoken out in class about women and poverty from her own experience; Rachel had challenged the idealism of one professor; Shirley had constantly asked questions to gain clarity, rather than blindly accept what she was told. Yet she left every time in confusion that was frequently relieved in dialogue with peers. But, like myself, all-out resistance was out of the question. Instead a kind of resistance-in-accommodation, a passive resistance, happened largely in private thoughts or beliefs, which were held from those in authority. This is an example of "accommodation with a critical edge [containing] an internal resistance" (Anyon, 1983, p. 24). I witnessed discrepancies between the informants' public behaviour and their private thoughts (as revealed to me), just as I witnessed my own. I saw these discrepancies as necessary contradictions, given our common experience of powerlessness as students.

I also discovered a central contradiction in these women's lives. Contrary to my initial assumptions about having a lack of awareness of how gender impacted their experience as nurses and nursing students, they had been learning about the historical oppression of nurses as women in the health care hierarchy, and society in general. While they were well able to apply this new awareness of 'oppression theory' to their work settings, they rarely applied it to the ongoing oppression each was feeling as BSN students. When they did put these two together, it seemed to be with a certain degree of resignation, coming from a place of relative powerlessness; I never heard about it being used toward collective action to change their circumstances. Yet they also spoke strongly and enthusiastically of how they had grown in so many different ways as a result of returning to school. Asking questions about how they lived with the cultural contradiction of growing and becoming more enlightened in a largely oppressive academic environment unexpectedly pointed to problematic elements in my own life as a researcher.

Indeed, I was not prepared for the questions our dialogues raised for me in terms of power in the research process. I was not prepared for the difficulty and perhaps lack of fit I was having with Spradley's ethnographic interview method past the initial interviews. I was not prepared for the immense struggle trying to discover "cultural themes" – themes I knew implicitly, buried just beyond my awareness, borne of my own experience of being situated in the same culture of women returning to school. And I was not prepared to deal with my personal battle with bias, trying to bracket my own assumptions, all the while questioning whether or not bracketing was possible, and to what ends.

Of course I had biases – knowledge about being a woman, about pursuing a university degree, about living with disability – but was unaware of valid ways to incorporate them into the research. And because I was not prepared for any of these difficulties, I did not initially recognize their importance as they arose. Instead I viewed them as "researcher errors," or things I should have been able to see and understand in ways predetermined and authorized by the method I had chosen.

A series of research journal writings starkly reveal my struggles at the time:

> I feel stuck and doubtful again about how I've been doing the interviews, mostly the kinds of questions I asked. It feels really scary right now and I was having thoughts of calling Vance and going to see him to consider the possibility of modifying this method somehow. I feel blocked and really discouraged. It feels to me like I'm on several edges, or perhaps they make up one big one. I've got so many loose ends in my work – finishing my transcription of Fran's interview, writing a summary of Shirley and Fran's experiences and sending them off for feedback (verification). These seem fairly simple. The hard one is coming up with cultural themes, then the question of how to write the whole thing up. Right now I'm having trouble figuring out 'dimensions of contrast,' in part, but also what elements go into a paradigm worksheet. It's so hard to tell from what Spradley does because he uses 'kinds of things,' but I'm talking about 'ways to do something.' For instance, what's different about each of the ways to 'play the game' and reasons to do so? Do I know yet? It feels like the differences are embedded in the text somehow, and I'm having trouble seeing it. A way to find out differences in reasons for playing the game might be to ask, what would happen if you didn't play the game or didn't have the reason to play the game? But if I asked the informants this question I would likely get something like "you might not please them" or "you might get kicked out" etc., which are just reasons which I already know.
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> I am also aware that I have so much reading to do – or perhaps I have set aside all of those articles to read because of my own doubting of my authority and knowing with respect to this thesis. I feel like I'm caught and there are so many different levels to sort out: my informants' experiences, my own, my reflections on this institution and what it requires me to do to get through my degree – all the hoop jumping – passing courses, getting marks, meeting deadlines and objectives. Yet

I know that somehow engaging with all this in a reflective way is producing for me or developing within me a critical consciousness of university education. And then not really knowing how to approach it in terms of the cultural themes that are emerging – ah the themes and my frustrations with them. No real sub-themes come to mind but when I talk about it with friends and colleagues, it seems I know what they are. How do I language them – my words or their words? And what about power issues in the research – where really all this started?

And one of my other problems is that each informant has her own experience, and way of seeing this experience, which by necessity are different, and I haven't really asked a lot of questions like, would you say most or all BSN students would say/think/do/feel that? – to get at what's common for all. I know that I can to some degree answer that question from my own experience, and may yet have to – and where do I put that element into the research? I sense the paradigm worksheet is going to reveal some things – but what? Will it be something I already know – likely? And what do I do with the gaps? And will it be just a matter of counting up the number of times someone had the same reasons or similar reason? How does that point to themes, if it does at all? Part of my problem I think is how close I am to this topic and how difficult it is for me to see things because it's part of my tacit, cultural knowledge. That's why I think it's necessary to get Vance help me with this – just to bounce information off and have him ask good questions, the kinds of questions I don't seem to ask because I already know what the answers are, and what the informants know, for that matter.

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I think the literature I have been reading about being in and experiencing the world as a woman will likely reveal some important things. I'm sure that what I am reading now about silencing the self is incredibly important and I'm just having trouble seeing just how important that is. I tend to minimize it or get caught in my judgment and blame about myself as being incredibly biased. I think this judgment has prevented me from doing the interpretive part of the study. It's interesting how I also silence myself by judging myself as biased. What effect does this have on my ability to play with and interpret the data? My main focus has been on being as true to the data and trying to leave myself out of it because of my inner feeling of being incredible biased toward/against nursing and nursing education, and how nurses treat their ranks.

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Renate Tesch (1987) says that themes can emerge and be valid before they are actually confirmed by the process, in part because as a researcher I have a deep involvement in my topic, and have deep personal knowledge about it. This supports my sensing of the themes fairly early in the data analysis, but, not knowing this or not being aware of this fact, I have tended to deny my own reality, instead attributing my awareness of themes wholly to my own experience, which I had been told to make explicit but to "bracket" when I was doing the analysis. But perhaps bracketing alone is not enough. Maybe as Bernstein (1983) tells me it "is an illusion to think we can assume the position of disinterested observers by bracketing all our preunderstandings….we can only (understand others) by adopting the performative attitude of one who…enters a dialogue with the subject aimed at mutual understanding" (p. 182).

I forged on with the interviews, the transcriptions and each of the levels of analysis. But, near the end, while drafting the ethnographic text, "the cultural description," I began to consider more deeply the questions emerging from being situated (more or less) in the same culture of the women I was studying, the culture of the academy. What emerged was the authorship of the ethnography and how to represent the BSN students' experiences textually. I had become aware that I was the one who was creating the end product of our labours.

I asked myself, "In what ways might I be unconsciously exercising my power as a researcher?" a question that frames this excerpt from my research journal:

> *Something that occurs to me about the ethnographic research process is that I am in control – I know what kind of questions I am supposed to ask to get more detailed and meaningful information from my participants. Not only am I in control – I designed this research – and even though the informants self-selected based on their desire to share in my process of bringing the experience to light – I 'own' this research. Now that I am getting closer to writing the text, I'm realizing that I can't ignore or minimize those doubts I first vocalized about this methodology, and its lack of fit with who I understand myself to be and my feminist values and beliefs about patriarchal power in women's lives. I am required by the method to make interpretations, judgments, and evaluations, and even if I negotiated my final presentation with my informants it wouldn't eliminate the problem of unequal power and authority, nor, I suspect, will "member checks". (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)*

These concerns were not just mine. Judith Stacey (1988) tells of a history in ethnography of grappling with these same issues. Truly I had discovered in this journey that I was drawn to more participatory/action-based research when focusing on women's lives or other topics that are directly concerned with power. Stacey tells of postmodern ethnographers who engage in a "critical and self-reflexive ethnography," who have been "excruciatingly self-conscious about the distortions and limitations of the textual products of their studies" (p. 25). But are criticality and self-reflexivity enough in this power-laden process? Clifford (1986) says that ethnographic truths are "inherently partial" (p. 7), and even considers them to be "true fictions" (p. 6) – "powerful 'lies' of exclusion [in which] power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control" (p. 7). Wolf (1992 calls the creation of a text an "exercise of power" (p. 11), but she also speaks to me of the dilemma I was having with the different experiences and interpretations expressed to me by each of the informants, and how I managed these competing interpretations depended on how well I "comprehend[ed] and process[ed] the data" (p. 10). This is something with which I was clearly having difficulty.

Burdened by my 'ethnographic responsibility,' I explored the possibility of finding ways to share voice/authority/authorship with the informants. But I was not really willing to consider it seriously because, as a disabled woman,

I feared the extra work entailed in altering the method. I imagined a huge drain on my limited energy having to renegotiate relationships with all four informants. I had learned my lesson from the surgery, and was not willing to compromise my health by increasing my workload.

Questions about whether, or even how the method I was using might not be liberating for the informants had also been subsumed by my firm conviction that it would reveal aspects of their experience that were oppressive, thus opening the possibility of freeing them from submerged consciousness. On the surface, Spradley's method implied that life is ordered, observable and congruent, but living every day with disability had taught me that it is messy, disordered and liminal, and my experience as a researcher was no different. I had been asking the informants to talk about their lives using a method that, increasingly, I was having difficulty with. Simply put, by inadvertently imposing order on their experiences I was in control.

Stepping off the road

> *I looked up the road I was going and back the way I come, and since I wasn't satisfied, I decided to step off the road and cut me a new path.* (Maya Angelou, 1993, p. 22)

When I think of the actual moment I "stepped off the road," it was the culmination of questioning about the research I was doing and my role in it, to the point where the questions themselves began to turn the research around, to guide it. As I asked and attempted to answer these questions, deepening understandings pointed me in a direction I hadn't intended to follow at the outset. Or one I hadn't even conceived of as possible.

Cultural themes about playing the game, surviving, and becoming more enlightened were constantly being repeated in my everyday life as a disabled woman returning to school. My own experience of these themes confounded my understandings of the informants' experience. But really our lives were like mirrors for each other. Just as all of the BSN students had talked to me about the different ways they had to jump through hoops – completing the academic requirements of each course and all the administrative requirements of the degree by rote – and play the game – not challenging professors' ideas or idealism – I knew that I had been doing some of the same things as part of my graduate education. Perhaps I was having trouble seeing the emerging cultural themes because they were so familiar to me. Every time I would try and articulate them, I judged myself to be imposing my own biased understandings on the data.

But when I asked myself, "How does doing this research mirror what the BSN students are telling me about their experience?" I began to see how I had jumped through the hoops set out by Spradley's method, in part because I was a neophyte researcher and also because I had not yet learned to trust

my own authority and ways of knowing. So assiduously had I been following the rules, trying to bracket my assumptions and biases, doggedly trying to fit myself into the method, that I had negated my own knowing, obscuring the cultural themes emerging in the data. Appropriating power and authority (Spradley's method) that was external to me and that also held power in my life left me caught in the unavoidable ambivalence germane to the relationship between feminism and ethnography.

At the outset, I did not have the research experience or skills to critically understand or analyze the method I had chosen or to change it. Indeed, the marginalization I had experienced as a disabled woman – and the method itself – constrained me from asking such critical questions as, "Where is Spradley's method situated?" "Who does this method serve?" and perhaps most importantly, "How does it construct both me as a researcher and my informants?"

Like the women's preoccupation with survival as BSN students, I had been caught in my own survival as a disabled woman and a graduate student, which interfered with my ability to see how power enacted through the method was affecting my life as a researcher. When I was unable to see what the method promised it would reveal to me, I mostly blamed myself. I had focused instead on being as true to the data as I could, while trying to leave myself – and my own data – out of it. By silencing myself in this way, my creative, knowing self was constrained and encumbered, just as the creativity of the BSN students had been restricted by having to jump through the hoops.

Yet, the critical self-reflexivity I was practicing in my journal writings, and the sense that my situation as a student (inside the academy) might allow me to cross over into my own research, prompted me to think that these might be possible ways of reducing some of the power-based limitations of creating the ethnographic text. Returning to my research journal, I began to write in response to previous journal writings, from which was borne the narrative of my own struggles with doing research for the first time, freeing my creative self to emerge and play with the data in ways that made sense to me.

What surfaced in this process was my relationship with my self as a writer, and my writerly authority, and the tensions generated between equally compelling prescriptions to be creative and scholarly, and how these resided in my life as a disabled woman completing a graduate degree. Journal entries appearing in my thesis (Kimpson, 1995) reveal these tensions:

> *How do I reconcile the conflicting demands of this thesis, to be scholarly and creative? Forming this text in the context of an academy that values writing and*

research that is objective and disembodied creates a profound tension in me, which challenges my ability to remain attentive, that fertile ground for writing. Yet, I persist because part of my project is to remain true to what I value and believe about knowing, and the ways I know.

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How does a person whose creative life is just blossoming come to know or understand that a work like this one might not be a life's work, but just a piece of it? It seems to me that that knowing must be something which happens in retrospect, something you realize after you have completed it, after you have made the decisions you need to make to contain it, to end it. So many have kindly and gently reminded me of this, but it seems a difficult task, especially when you are someone like me, a person who never expected to even be attending university, or never even thought she'd be writing or thinking in this way. And for someone with a fluctuating and debilitating illness, which may narrow the future for me, how do I know this isn't the culmination of my life's work? Can you promise me that it won't end here? That this is in fact a doorway to infinite future possibilities?

I began to wonder how I might create a text that not just recounted my efforts over time, but aesthetically captured some of the disruptions along the way. And even though my experience became the focus, I was uncomfortable with this kind of textual authority and sought ways to de-centre myself through intertextuality (Lather, 1991). I began to experiment with a disruptive aesthetic form and different ways to represent multivocality. The form began to emerge as I realized I could organize the text as a series of disjunctures and interludes. I played with beginnings, and included these in a series of preludes inspired by David Jardine's (1992) words:

> The urge to introduce and re-introduce is a form of cowardice. Always timid, moving back, repairing wounds that might inflict, hedging bets and covering hunches that might just not work out, wanting to have the first word before which other words need to be said… (p. xxxv).

Several threads ran through, none happening in a linear fashion, but were buried in the fabric of the text; sometimes the interruptions or disjunctures changed the text(ure) as a new connection, another thread woven through. Occasionally, a thought interrupted/intruded and appeared as an aside.

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creating gaps in the text (Jardine, 1992). I wanted the reader's experience of reading to resemble mine in the writing, "losing the thread" and "finding it again" (Jardine, 1992, p. vi), and when the thread was found, it would be in a place slightly different from where it left off. It was not easy to remain present, to hold on to all the threads this writing re-presented, especially

the struggle for/with complexity, ambiguity, irreducibility, and the multivocal and multilayered nature of discourse (Daly, 1990).

So I juxtaposed journal entries with asides, short entries from the interview transcripts, short cultural descriptions, citations from relevant literature, and in several chapters, a running footnote that reflected more deeply on the story being told and how it was being written (as described on p. 158). Again, writings from my research journal appeared in the thesis (Kimpson, 1995) describing the contours of this process:

> *It's clear that over time there have been a number of interruptions/disjunctures in this process. Not all have been because of institutional constraints, or because of illness. Many have come because of my persistent questioning of the process while engaged in it. Time is an important context for this research, in part because it marks out the way the work has proceeded/moved. A pattern has been established in which I write about my experience, or others', and the writing is interrupted. Sometimes a bodily or felt sense of energy being blocked will reveal (upon reflection) that I don't know how to proceed. Other times questions will intrude, and the writing stops. My next move is often to reflect, asking the question, "What have I been doing here?"*
>
> *As I write about what I have been doing to shed some light on how I might proceed, insight is often generated, and I will resume writing, often in a slightly different direction, or at least changed in some way. Often in these forays into the past (most often the recent past), I will bring forward much more than what interrupted the writing. The questions move me further back into the past and I bring more of that experience into the present. Through this process of retrieval, I am developing an increasingly complex and insightful knowledge about this particular experience. Complexity and the interrelationship between present and past deepen through the process of repetition.*

Writing became not just a way of doing research but a means of creative self-expression. With this inquiry into my own research practices, I wrote primarily to illuminate my own understandings and how they were transformed through writing. By exploring and dislodging my own assumptions and beliefs, and the contradictions inherent in the experience, I theorized my own practice of doing research. I had looked up the road to where I was going and, especially, back over where I had traveled, and in doing so, the decision to step off the road emerged.

Arriving/departing

As I write and read my own writing, I am changed. On the path of knowledge, we can never arrive (Newman, 1991). Knowing this, I cannot make claims about how others should do research. It is easy to be seduced into thinking that there is some end-point at which all student researchers must arrive to make the leap to "experienced researcher" or creator of knowledge. Our understandings of what knowledge is, who creates it, from what, how

it is constructed and for whom are all in question now, leaving us without answers, end-points.

As I crafted the narrative, I began to see how often I had felt like I was groping in the dark, looking for light somewhere between the lines on Spradley's page when in fact there was light within me. In some ways, I merely had to turn inward. This was a move that was ever more difficult because of being a woman living with disability, for whom so many aspects of life are authorized by those who construct me as devalued and worthless. Giving myself the authority to value my own insights and to focus on my knowing undeterred was transgressive, a stepping off the road.

In creating the thesis in the way I did, the move to foreground in writing the ethical, personal and political problems that confronted me reveals an explicit consciousness about how we shape our texts. In particular, it illuminates how doing so is "a political issue. . . not just the way the world is written" (Jones, 1992, p. 25), thus rendering problematic our assumptions about the social, while acting in (and upon) it, and taking a stand (Lather, 1991). It also reveals how, as Maxine Greene (1994) suggests, in a time "of decentering, of eroding authorities, of disappearing absolutes, we have to discover new ways of going on, as members of communities, as persons in process, always on the way" (p. 217).

To a degree, I was on the elusive quest to get it right, even while learning from Margery Wolf's (1992) experience in *A Thrice Told Tale* that there is no right way. In fact the right way for me was, ultimately, to realize the importance of the questions I was posing, and to pursue them wholeheartedly. Creating an inquiry of the research experience as it continued to unfold seemed like a direct move towards the kind of authenticity I had been seeking. Ostensibly, I was unlearning some of what I had learned over my life in formal educational settings (Le Guin, 1989). How was I doing this? By beginning with myself. As a feminist, using my own experience as the ground for my research practice is a deeply subversive and political move that is enacted by naming "that location from which I come to voice – that [embodied] space of my own theorizing" (hooks, 1990, p. 146) – autobiographical writing.

As my story illustrates, there are different realities and other paths to follow as we learn to conduct research as part of our graduate education. This narrative then "takes place," marking the territory that is the ground for meaningful action (Grumet, 1987). Reflecting on the tensions and contradictions experienced while doing qualitative research with other women, leaving the ethnography behind, and subsequently writing an autobiographical narrative about these transgressive moves are meaningful actions. In doing so, I reconstruct myself in ways that call into question dominant understandings of what constitutes research, who the subjects of research might be, who does research (and for whom) and how it gets done.

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