

Telling Feminist Truths: Research and Writing About Feminist Organizing ¹

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ABSTRACT

Ways of re-thinking problems and doing research on organizing are suggested by the post-structuralist insight that existing discourses simultaneously circumscribe what we do and say, and provide contradictions which disrupt dominant ways of doing and speaking. This article examines some data collected by the author with women organizers in an attempt to demonstrate some moments where such circumscription and disruption occur.

RÉSUMÉ

De nouvelles façons de traiter des problèmes et de faire des recherches sur l'organisation sont suggérées par la perspicacité post-structuraliste qui dit que des discours contemporains circonscrivent ce que nous faisons et ce que nous disons, et créent des contradictions qui remettent en question les façons d'agir et de parler dominantes. Cet article étudie quelques données ramassées par l'auteure et par des organisatrices dans le but de démontrer certains moments où on retrouve ce genre de circonscription et de remise en question.

A popular form of feminist research asks women to speak the "truth" about their lives; similarly, many of us have set out to write "the truth" about "our own experiences." This work has made an important intervention in the long invisibility of women. At the same time, however, the notion of "experience" as the basis of knowledge tends to ignore how experience is situated in and organized by the social order in which we live. This social order includes the organization of language, which constitutes the limits of possibility for understanding, expressing, and indeed "experiencing" our experience (Gore, 1992: 37; Scott, 1992).

The most common--and commonly unquestioned--theories about language, discourse and subjectivity derive from liberal-humanism. In this paper, I want to revisit some data I collected in the late 1980s and early 1990s with women organizers, in the light of poststructuralist theorizing. I give some examples of how the liberal-humanist mindset can limit and distort the ways feminists think about "the human," as well as our efforts to organize and to reflect on the process of that organizing.

Much has been written about feminist organizing practices (Adamson, Briskin & McPhail,

1988; Wine & Ristock, 1991; also selections from Carroll, 1992; Cunningham et al, 1988; Ng, Walker, Muller, 1990). This literature argues that ideology and power operate through traditional forms of organization (Leidner, 1991), an insight which has guided feminist organizing since the beginning of the second wave of feminism. Thinking through the implications of alternative methods, however, requires a clear sense of *how* practices of ruling and of patriarchy are perpetuated. This in turn necessitates, among other things, challenging the underlying structures of language and notions of subjectivity which sustain both hierarchical and collective organizational forms. Thus post-structuralist theory calls for a self-critique of feminist practices and discourses, looking, as Jennifer Gore says, "for their dangers, their normalizing tendencies, for how they might serve as instruments of domination despite the intentions of their creators" (1992: 54).

Before proceeding with an analysis of some of the data I have collected about women's organizing, I want to clarify how I am using the terms post-structuralism and liberal-humanism in this context. From a liberal-humanist perspective, writing and speaking tend to be seen as a means of transmitting the intention of an author directly to

the listener or reader. Language is seen as a medium, naming a world which exists independently of it; speaker/writer and listener/reader share a relatively unproblematic understanding of the meaning being conveyed. Post-structuralism begins from the perspective that it is language which makes meaning possible, that words do not name pre-existing differences but inform us about what differences are visible and matter in any given situation. While it is never immutable, language provides a set of preexisting structures which have always already framed and organized our world and its meanings (Belsey, 1980; Weedon, 1987). When we speak or write, then, we draw on the particular domain of language use -- what post-structuralists call a "discourse"-- that seems most appropriate for the topic or audience we have in mind. This discourse then provides the limits of what we can think or say. Thus, dominant ways of reading, writing and speaking are ideological inasmuch as they enable the practices of power which mark late twentieth century western societies.

Similarly, subjectivity or identity is much more complex than allowed for by liberal-humanism. "Humanism posits the subject as an autonomous individual capable of full consciousness and endowed with a stable 'self...'" (Lather, 1991: 5). Post-structuralists argue that humanism requires us to imagine ourself thus; as I have argued elsewhere, definitions of normality have taught many of us that we must construct a rational, coherent story from the pieces of our lives, a story which leaves little or no space for fragmentation, desire, uncertainty and confusion (Heald, 1991: 138-39).

A liberal-humanist understanding of language and subjectivity limits ways of describing --orally or in writing--feminist organizing to what Belsey (1980) calls "expressive realism" and others refer to simply as "realism". Realism assumes² that words or pictures can stand in for a thing itself, to the extent that we can claim to "know" something from having seen the picture (Christian, Hansen, Needham, 1989: 76). Examples of realist representations which have been popularized enough to be well-known to those who want to talk or write about organizing are ethnography and

autobiography. Post-structuralist theorizing argues that autobiography and ethnography constitute discourses which provide instructions about how to tell stories about organizing. However, women's entry into conflicting discourses opens up possibilities for recognizing and resisting this overdetermination. I argue that the crisis in representation cannot be solved either by saying that women's voices are capturable and always true, or by saying that women's voices are ever and always trapped within discursive structures that tell us what and how to think about our lives, though there is some truth in both. Thus we need to re-examine the stories of others, which researchers often collect as "data," to see how and if such stories reflect simplistic notions of coherent selves and transparent language.

At the same time, recent work in anthropology and literary criticism is actively critiquing liberal humanist notions of language, meaning and subjectivity and proposing methods for telling stories--of ourselves or others--which challenge the traditions of realism (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Atkinson, 1990; Behar & Gordon, 1995; Benstock, 1988; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Cole & Phillips, 1995; Gonick, 1996; Okely & Callaway, 1992; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Smith, 1987, 1993; Thomas, 1991; Tsing, 1993; Wilson, 1982). While these critiques unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to write or speak about a "self" or a "culture" (in this case, an organization), they are not well-known amongst women organizers who face the task of setting their story to paper or tape. Thus we often describe ourselves using conventional forms:

A text which uses conventional forms in a conventional way is *territorialized*, it embodies the majority discourse and reflects the obtaining ideology of the society from which it springs. This is the case with most forms of popular narrative even though they may reflect that ideology from an oppositional standpoint (Maclean, 1988: 45).

Arguing that ethnography is allegorical (i.e., "stories simultaneously describe real cultural

events and make additional, moral, ideological, and even cosmological statements"), James Clifford (1986: 98, 101) says that such "allegories stand behind the controlled fictions of difference and similitude that we call ethnographic accounts." These allegories have the effect of narrowing the possible ways we can talk about and understand our organizing practices. Similarly, in autobiography:

...the very forms and language of cultural stories of selfhood are "populated -- overpopulated -- with the intentions of others" in the sense that they carry in them those cultural expectations and systems of interpretation through which a culture makes palpable its effort to understand and makes durable its power to name the world, itself, and others. (Smith, 1987: 48; quoting Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*)

This means then, that, in order to develop and express practices of organizing which are fundamentally different, which interrupt and/or make visible currently dominant practices, we have to think not only about organizing in a new way, but "about language and about meaning, about the relationships between meaning and the world, meaning and people, and finally about people themselves and their place in the world" (Belsey, 1980: 4). As Bronwyn Davies explains it:

...the means for moving beyond the old ways of thinking and speaking...lie with...an analysis both of how existing discursive practices trap us into the worlds we are trying to move beyond, and with the collective development of discursive practices that bring into being those new, almost unimaginable possibilities that are being opened up by the current generation of feminists. Fundamental to this idea is an understanding of the person as in process, and of words coming not from an essential core of the person but from the discursive practices through which the person is constituting themselves and being constituted (1990: 520).

What the following reexamination of my data suggests, then, is that stories women tell about their organizing practices, and the ways researchers analyse these stories, participate both in the traps of dominant theories and in the possibilities of feminisms.

SOME RESEARCH

I now turn to my data, in which I think it is possible to see some of the tensions caused by liberal humanism and the promises of post-structural theories of language and subjectivity. The data to which I will refer here come from two separate pieces of research: interviews with women who work in four different cultural organizations in northwestern Ontario, only one of which identifies itself as a feminist organization, though the individual women would by and large identify themselves as such;³ and interviews with feminist organizers working in the area of violence against women in several different groups in southwestern Ontario.⁴ For the sake of brevity, I refer to the first group as "cultural organizers" and the second group as "feminist organizers," while recognizing both that these terms are sometimes overlapping, and that I am not assuming that all "cultural" or "feminist" organizers are included here. The women interviewed would by and large identify as white, though they differ in terms of ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, class and political orientation.

INTERPRETING "DATA" AND TELLING THE "TRUTH"

Even when women speak using dominant discourses, it cannot be assumed that they are locked into them. It is possible that women being interviewed think that this is what is wanted of them. This was made clear to me in an interview with a cultural worker during a discussion about the meaning of art. I asked whether community creations could be art, and the woman I was interviewing said:

No. Because art has to be a concept by an individual artist, not a collective concept

by a community group. That's the one fundamental distinction.

--Do you agree with that?
[incredulous]

No, that's the funding distinction.

--Yeah, OK.

Yeah, so...I guess if you're asking ...Yeah, I'm not quite sure of the question.

--No, that's OK. It's just that you said that with such confidence.

I'm saying that by rote; it's been drummed into me at every meeting.

I had not intended to make the woman feel confused. Without my knowledge of her from our history together I suspect I would have accepted what she was saying at face value. By questioning her, I came to see that in this instance--and perhaps countless others in this and other interviews--it was possible to speak the discourse and yet "know" something entirely different. Perhaps we were both using what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing refers to as the "guerilla tactics of multiple, uneasily jostling theories and stories [which] can at least disrupt the smug assumptions of comfortably settled monologics" (1993: 32-33).

Perhaps, too, I catch myself here in a moment of assuming not only that the woman I was interviewing would be invested in presenting herself as a liberal-humanist subject, but that she *was* one, that she *was* the author of her words. As Gonick explains this problem, "...stories of individuals can...be read as if their experiences were transparent concomitants of the social category stressed in the account, thus reconfirming unself-conscious assumptions about those categories instead of leading to a consideration of how those categories were constructed" (1996: 9; Gonick is here drawing on Scott, 1992). This, then, is one example of how the dominance of the theory of the liberal-humanist subject can cause problems for feminist researchers.

WORKING A LITTLE HARDER

In the second example from my data, I want to show how the notion of the

liberal-humanist subject created problems for the women organizers I was interviewing. Although women in the feminist organizations tended to indicate that they paid more attention to looking after themselves, to working in a way which took into consideration women's differing life situations, in both groups women felt that the work required more of their lives than would be the case with other kinds of work. The extraordinary efforts which are required of community organizers are not only to ensure our personal livelihoods; the notion of responsibility for supporting the organization, its purposes and its personnel, loomed large in the understanding many of the women I interviewed had of their work. Such responsibility can be liberating, because women have opportunities to do things that they would never be given the opportunity to do in patriarchal organizations, but there is also a burdensome end of responsibility:

With me, I always thought, "If I work just a little bit harder, if I do this, if I do that, then it's going to work, everything's going to succeed," but obviously that's just not true.

"If only I work a little harder"--this is a common theme for women working in small alternative and feminist organizations. It helps to keep in place the liberal-humanist subject in control of her world, responsible for the success or failure of all her endeavours. While there is something positive about this image, since women have not been seen to have this kind of control, it is a dangerous fiction as well: women blame themselves --and each other--for failure. We often interpret issues of politics as issues of personality, and, mired in issues of process, we complain that we are not doing what we might in terms of the initial purposes of our organization, because the *individuals* involved "just can't do it right and get on with it." Perhaps the problem is neither with the process nor the individuals, but with the theory of the individual subject assumed by our ideas about "good process."

The liberal-humanist subject understands the resolution of conflicts to be within her power: "if only I work just a little bit harder." Or better, or

smarter, or if I were just a better feminist. Here we can see feminist ideology playing a role in circumscribing feminist organizing practices because certain feelings or experiences are contained within the notion of "not feminist enough."

In part, feminism accomplishes this the same way other discursive practices do, by authorizing certain subject positions/ identities, and disenfranchising others. As many women have pointed out, feminism has privileged the notion of a singular identity "woman," claiming that unity is necessary in order to provide protection against "the other" (cf, Mohanty, 1991; Riley, 1988; Spelman, 1988). These practices obscure issues of power. United against a common enemy, the only differences which can be recognized are those between "them" (men) and "us" (women), thus obscuring other differences, for example, race, class, sexual orientation and physical ability. Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty show that:

When one conceives of power differently, in terms of its local, institutional, discursive formations, of its positivity, and in terms of the production rather than suppression of forces, then unity is exposed to be a potentially repressive fiction. It is at the moment at which groups and individuals are conceived as agents, as social actors, as desiring subjects that unity, in the sense of coherent group identity, commonality, and shared experience, becomes difficult. Individuals do not fit neatly into unidimensional, self-identical categories (1986: 204-205).

Clearly, to have successful organizations, we need a different understanding of what it means to have differences, a different conception of power and a new sense of "community;" I am suggesting we also need a different understanding of what it means to be a human subject.

The organizer I quoted earlier ended her thought about working a little harder with "obviously that's just not true." As obvious as it might be, it did not appear so at the time. The

theory of the subject over-rides what is "obvious", and leaves many organizers overburdened by the idea that they need "only work a little harder."

GETTING INVOLVED

Women have spoken out, have given testimony as if the "truth" of their experiences were transparent and straightforward. But--is it? (Wilson, 1982: 153)

Much of the burgeoning interest in autobiography, particularly women's autobiography (e.g. Benstock, 1988; Okley and Callaway, 1992; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Smith, 1987, 1993) has come from feminists wanting to question "that disengaged, self-critical, self-distanced, and self-scrutinizing brand of autobiography we have been taught to read and critics have come to expect" (Kolodny, 1980: 241). This kind of autobiography would appear to be possible only for people capable of imagining themselves to be the liberal-humanist subject, an individual whose coherence is assumed.

Faye Ginsburg, in her study of abortion activists, both pro-choice and pro-life, shows how they construct a life story in which their activism is a logical outcome of their life experiences. Ginsburg (1989: 65) claims that these tales represent a "counter-discourse," inasmuch as they have "the capacity to *situate*: to relativize the authority and stability of a dominant system" (Terdiman, quoted in Ginsburg, 1989: 65). To that extent, I would agree that they can be seen to be a challenge to what Okley calls the "Great White Man tradition," in which "the lone achiever has felt compelled to construct and represent his uniqueness, seemingly in defiance of historical conditions, but actually in tune with the dominant power structure which have rewarded him." On the other hand, they do not challenge the liberal-humanist view of the rational, self-directing individual. According to Sidonie Smith:

As she examines her unique life and then attempts to constitute herself discursively as female subject, the autobiographer brings to the recollection of her past and

to the reflection on her identity interpretative figures...Those figures are always cast in language and are always motivated by cultural expectations, habits, and systems of interpretation pressing on her at the scene of writing. Cultural scripts of signification, the figures of verisimilitude and lifelikeness reflect privileged stories and character types that the prevailing culture, through its discourse, names as "real" and therefore "readable" (1987: 47).

As part of taking into consideration the constructedness of the world, the contingency of knowing, and the place of the irrational and unconscious in our knowledge, it is important to recognize that the forms in which we can tell "our story" have already been severely circumscribed, both by the traditions of autobiographical "telling," and by the claims that expressive realism exerts on our reading and writing and hence thinking and talking. As such, the life stories Ginsburg created with abortion activists participate in supporting, rather than challenging, the dominant order. They appear to have participated in autobiography's "discursive arena in which individuals worked to coordinate the colorfulness of their specific experiences with the bland neutrality of a universal selfhood. In effect traditional autobiography became a way of accomodating and containing colorfulness." (Smith, 1993: 19) We need to ask, then: How does our experience come to be known, even to ourselves? If language is *not* transparent, if identity is *not* coherent, and if understanding our experience in these ways is an ideological practice accomplished at some cost, how can we experience --and then tell--our lives differently? A partial answer lies in the contradictoriness of the subject positions dominant discourses make available for women. In this third example from the data, cracks can be seen in the hegemony of the theory of the liberal-humanist subject.

In answering questions about how they got involved with the organizations a few of the feminist organizers explained their involvement as a conscious result of their feminism:

When I take a look at the work that I have done, it has meant dedicating my life, in a sense, in terms of my career to working for the betterment of women, and that is something that I do consciously, because I am a woman, because I am a feminist, because of my awareness that although it is difficult work, I cannot imagine myself doing work that does not involve making a difference, or making a change in what is presently.

I think all of the work that I've chosen to do, I've chosen it because it's got some form of a feminist context in it. I'm really careful about where I want to work because where I work says who I am and this to me says who I am because I've chosen to work in a place like this.

The cultural organizers in my study generally did not see their decisions as quite so deliberate. They also did not portray themselves as somehow "gifted" or "creative," doing this work because they were "artists," or even because they felt that art was important. In fact, in both groups the majority explained their involvement as at least partially the result of some kind of relationship, often with a man:

D was a really good friend, and he approached me the first year to be a stage manager, and I'd never done anything like that before but he knew me through the family and thought that I could do it, and I really enjoyed it.

My older brother is a director now, a theatre director, and when I was about 13, he being in high school, he just kind of dragged me along. I did costumes, and helped paint sets and I caught the bug.

I had a chance to get married and I was quite worried about getting married, I thought it was a fairly dangerous thing to do and I was moving to [a different town] in order to be with my husband. I wasn't

moving to a job, I wasn't doing anything except pursuing that relationship and it seemed really...not all that safe. So I decided to pull around me a group of supportive women and I joined [the organization].

A common explanation had to do with meeting others who were involved, liking what they saw, and deciding to join in:

I started working in a whole foods business and a woman came to work with us--it was a cooperative--as a bookkeeper and she was a lesbian-feminist and she had many friends who were as well and I think it was through becoming aware of that group of women and what they were doing that I started to do things.

I answered an ad in the paper. At that point in my life--three years ago--...my children were all in school full time...[and] I wanted to do two things: I wanted to earn a little bit of money because I'd always done it on a voluntary basis before and more primarily I felt that it was a time in my life where I get to do something that gave me something.

Often there was also the factor of "being asked," of discovering that a job needed to be done and feeling they could perhaps be the one to do it:

I think I was asked to run for the board but I knew a lot of those people and vaguely about [the organization]. I don't remember who asked me, but I thought, yeah, that's probably something I'd like to do--I was involved in the community anyway; and I also thought that what they were doing was valid and valuable.

...partially because I was asked, I don't know if I would have thought of it on my own. I've never thought of myself as having artistic skills...I've always thought of myself as a worker rather than a

creator. So I thought it was something I would enjoy, I was intrigued...

Sometimes, the combination of events, relationships and motivations that leads to a woman's involvement seems completely accidental:

One of the women I was working with came to me because her husband had just beat her up, and I had just been to a community forum where people were talking about different community agencies, and [this organization] was only 6 months old, and the executive director stood up and said, just wanted to let people know that we are doing well, but we need volunteers, and so it twigged, and so I called [the organization] to help [my friend], and then I became a volunteer, and became a Board member, and became a part-time staff member, and gradually a full-time staff member.

One woman described the story of her initial involvement with one of the cultural organizations as "horrible," a story she said she did not often tell: She was at a party and they were looking for someone to do a job, and she thought: "I could do that." This is, apparently, only embarrassing in the light of a discourse which claims that work is found as the result of travel along a clearly-defined "career path," where decisions are rational, and where the worthy succeed. As this is the dominant story of work lives--one represented for the most part by the life-stories or the activists Ginsburg interviewed--it would be easy to expect the organizers I interviewed to interpret events in such a way as to produce such a story themselves. By not storying their lives in this way, these women produce an implicit challenge to liberal-humanism. In part, I suggest, they could do this because discourses of femininity make a space for women to explain our behaviour in terms of relationships and caring. I am not trying to suggest that femininity has served some women well while feminism has served others badly. Rather, I am suggesting that we attend to the

ways contradictory discourses make conflicting subject positions for women, and leave us able to challenge, rather than try to produce, stories that present us as the kind of subject liberal-humanism assumes us to be.

CATCHING MYSELF IN THE ACT (AGAIN)

Much to my chagrin, as I re-listen to the tapes of the interviews I conducted, I hear myself reinforcing the liberal-humanist theory of the subject, not only by asking women to make a story of their involvement, but also by regularly pushing for answers to rather hypothetical questions--would you have preferred to do this or that? One woman challenged me on this; "I don't know. You're asking me all these hypothetical questions, Susan, and I don't know. Sort of, what happened, happened."

While at one level, I want to argue that "what happened" did not just "happen", at another level I need to realize that my questions were an attempt to impose coherence, to encourage people to make a recognizable narrative for and with me. Why did I ask these questions, in spite of the fact that I was not sure I could answer them for myself? Partly because I always assumed I was the only one who did not have a "five-year plan," whose work life was more accidental -- whimsical -- than organized and deliberate. Again and again in the interviews I noticed the falling-into-ness of life. Again and again I had brought home to me the failure of the perception that people have a fixed set of plans and goals for their lives and the reality that--for women and probably for men too--life is about flowing with the circumstances.⁵ What would a narrative about a social movement look like if it took these things into account? At one level we know that relationships and chance have an enormous influence on what gets done and said in organizing, but we write these things out of our accounts in our attempts to make our stories, and our selves, rational and coherent. As researchers, we need to find ways to recognize, even encourage stories which express multiple, even contradictory, realities, using, for example, what Tsing describes as "strateg[ies] in which curiosity is not overwhelmed by coherence" (1993: 32-33).

WHO ARE WE, THEN, AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Women who work in small, feminist and alternative organizations are not the rational, coherent subjects of liberal humanism. We are constituted in language and discourses which are multiple, complex, interwoven and never static. The project of having to appear to be the subject ideology tells us we are contributes to the failure of "alternative" organizational forms and to the continued dominance of conventional, patriarchal forms. If this is true, then we need to open up a space for different kinds of stories to be told. To begin with, research which aims to understand "experience" could recognize that "experience" is always-already interpreted, and made into an account that its teller has learned *should* be coherent, chronological, consistent. Without these qualities, stories would be considered untrue, or, simply, badly told.

But stories badly told are often what is needed. If the researcher is to take account of the fragmentary nature of the subject, then at the same time as she restores women to their proper place as "knowers," she has to question how it is that we know anything at all. To the traditional methodological problems of how to ensure that respondents tell "the truth" we have to add the questions of why they should, or if they could. We need to try to understand something about the selective processes of memory. And so, the "truth" about the answers we will get and the people who will give them is that there is no one truth, although people may try to make one. They will try to make one because of the deeply embedded claims that the liberal-humanist theory of the subject, manifested in story-telling practices like ethnography and autobiography, makes on our definition of knowledge and "truth."

Storytelling may indeed be universal, but formal narratives of the sort to be found in the novel or the history are certainly not, requiring as they do a certain notion of time, of mind, and of power to produce that vision of human reality which a certain culture finds plausible at a certain

time. If narrative is the reflection *par excellence* of the Western mentality in its broadest sense, it is because of its perceived formal truthfulness, the implicit feeling that we experience the world in the same form as we report those experiences, as stories. Thus, although narrative may at any moment be an invitation to falsehood, it remains the dominant *mode* of truth about human affairs, the "natural" form of *mimesis* (Kellner, 1989: 102-103).

I do not want to be misunderstood here. Feminist organizing is hard and important work, and telling stories about how we have tried to fight the economic and social circumstances which grow out of the sexist, heterosexist, racist, able-ist, classist, etc. practices of our culture is an important project. But, rather than seeing research with and writing by organizers as an opportunity for "authentic" expression by an individual or group who stands outside of the dominant social forms, we need to try to see how we are formed by and within the social formation, to understand how larger understandings of truth, of importance, of relevance, of how to speak and how to write influence the story which an organizer "chooses" to tell. I do not mean to suggest that there is an obvious "solution" to the problems I am trying to raise. Any social/political practice faces questions of how much to participate and how much to challenge; what lines to toe in order to make what points. Many feminists find their days so full of the constant and very real demands of immediate pressing problems that there is no energy left to think about interrupting the ways they are understood or thought about. We need to work in solidarity to find ways to change not only the evident material conditions of our oppression (experiencing violence, not having control over reproduction, etc.) but also those which are buried within the dominant forms of meaning-making (here autobiography, ethnography) and their essential tool -- language itself.

Feminists are not unfamiliar with the idea of engaging a doubled strategy "of both rendering problematic and provisional our most firmly held assumptions and, nevertheless, acting in the world, taking a stand" (Lather, 1991: 29). Further, both our

organizing and its representation share with many other attempts to challenge dominant practices the need to walk a fine line between radicalism and recuperation. Many an action falls into the trap noted by Susan Willis: "Either it is so different from dominant culture as to have no impact on the rest of society, or it includes points of attraction for capitalism, in which case it is readily co-opted and assimilated" (1991: 34). What I want to do, then, is to critique the tendency towards assuming that our words and meanings are transparent when we write, talk about or research organizing, exploring where we might go if we stopped making these assumptions while at the same time recognizing that we must continue to organize, to organize differently, and to extend what we learn through this into the public domain by writing and talking.

Polkinghorne (1988:183) argues that narrative attends to the temporal dimension of the theme or point of the narrative. Narratives organize events into wholes that have beginnings, middles, and ends." The Canadian feminist musician Ferron tells a story about being told that a song, to be a ballad, needs events, that happen in order. "How many of your events happen in order?" she asks her audience. "Usually, they all happen at once."

I wish I could tell us all how to talk about our events as if they all happened at once. I wish I could say what would happen if we stopped buying into the fictions of subjectivity which dominate current writing and thinking. But I feel sure that if we don't pay attention to the ways we can tell our stories differently, if we don't try to uncover the effects of the theory of the subject and the theory of language which underly *both* the organizing work we do and the ways we talk about it, then we cannot create fundamental change. We can make individual lives more bearable, we can change some of the legal and institutional structures which organize women's lives, but we leave even our successes open to recapture by the dominant. This means that constant vigilance is required to maintain the gains we have achieved. Since the work we do as organizers and researchers is already difficult enough, it is my hope that by recognizing and challenging the theoretical underpinnings of what we do, we can bring about real and lasting transformation.

ENDNOTES

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2. Ethnography: "written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)" (Van Maanen, 1988: 1). Autobiography: written or verbal communication that takes the speaking "I" as the subject of the narrative, rendering the "I" both subject and object (Smith, 1987: 19).
3. This research was conducted with the assistance of a Social Science and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Fellowship.
4. This research was funded by a Wilfrid Laurier University Short-Term Research Grant. I thank Anna Toth for her work as research assistant.
5. Here we can re-enter debates about women and autobiography. A common claim is that women do not tell their lives in the same way men do, because they do not live them in the same way men do. However, here I want to turn that around in two ways: while my data show women struggling with the fact that they cannot tell their lives the way men do, it would seem important to question the very differences we are taught to expect in men's life stories.

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