Women, Literacy, and Agency: Beyond the Master Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The research enterprise, like the teaching and learning enterprise, is saturated with patriarchal expectations. This paper documents the journey of a literacy researcher as she critiques the master narratives for literate women in institutions — in particular, in government and educational settings. Through the accounts of how these women challenge the master narratives in their lives, the author reassesses the master narrative of the research process itself.

RÉSUMÉ

L'entreprise de la recherche, comme les entreprises de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage, est saturée d'attentes patriarcales. L'article suivant traite du travail d'une recherchiste qui étudie l'instruction des gens et qui critique les discours prédominants pour les femmes instruites dans les institutions, en particulier dans les milieux gouvernementaux et d'enseignement. En racontant comment, dans leur vie, ces femmes mettent en question les discours prédominants, l'auteure réévalue même le discours prédominant du processus de recherche.

A S A RESEARCHER AND A WOMAN, I AM becoming increasingly conflicted about my approach to inquiry, the role I can play in the academy studying and working with women — mostly teachers — and my beliefs about the emancipatory promise of literacy. Where once I saw forms, images, I now see kaleidoscopic montages of theoretical moments, shifting and slipping in elusive patterns. I have never felt more challenged, more un-constructed, more awake in my life. Each week it seems another given is taken away.

Rosemary Tong's (1989) reminder that "as bad as it is for a woman to be bullied into submission by a patriarch's unitary truth, it is even worse for her to be judged not a real feminist by a matriarch's unitary truth" (p.

236) speaks not only to an anti-essentialist perspective I understand, but also to a larger, more pervasive pattern in educational research, especially research conducted by women with women: that of attempting to find a position from which to undertake research that is not ethically and morally uncomfortable or repugnant, while trying to resist the inevitable interpellation of current belief systems on who we are and what we think. In short, whether it is midlife resignation or the zeitgeist that is primarily responsible, I find I am less likely now to allow myself to be bullied into submission by anyone else's truth, regardless of the weight of the literature behind its claims.

Yet, whatever sense-making I do about my past or my present inquiry process, I recognize

that the accounts themselves will continue to be "inscribed with dominant idealogies" (Manicom, 1992, p. 374). Our stories and the telling of them are always partial, always selective, always open to interrogation. The threads we use to weave the fabric of our stories will always be saturated with ideological hues.

My work as a literacy researcher, which began years ago with the more simple task of manipulating syntactic variables, cannot be separated from my intellectual life as a woman. I have been variously swept away by positivist and post-positivist approaches, ethnography, case study research, collaborative inquiry, among others — each of which, for its time, seemed to provide the most promise for understanding what literacy is and what it does. I want to see the epistemological and methodological journey as an evolution; I want to write my own authority and agency into my memories of these affairs of the mind, but I am not so sure. An excerpt from Marge Piercy's (1983) poem "Stone, Paper, Knife" may capture best what actually happened:

.........How many men
I have lain with who would only
fit bodies together at one angle
and who require exactly muttered
obscene formulae, precise caresses

until every woman they embraced
was the same dolly of their will
and all coupling mechanical, safe
proceeding by strict taboos whose fabric
no wild emotion could pierce. (p. 138)

Having over the years allowed myself to be "a dolly of the will" of both feminist thought and prevailing research agenda (but being enough of a social constructionist not to feel particularly guilty about it), I take comfort, perhaps even joy, in now seeking, without apology, those inquiry approaches and ratio-

nale which wild emotion can pierce, and in learning to develop ways of doing and thinking about research in literacy that are closer to fusing mind and body, heart and head. At this point, I value theoretical pluralism — efforts to disrupt and expose the master narratives of the academy, those larger stories which write us even as we act out their plotlines — and the growing efforts of feminist researchers to make our work make a difference.

In the last five years, I have been inquiring into the ways in which women in institutional settings use literacy to examine their life and their work. However, as I learn from them how they use literacy to challenge the master narratives of the government workplace, the university classroom, the school, or society at large, and as I describe their growing sense of agency in their work, I must also describe mine — for the master narratives, the many methodologies and ways of knowing with which I have lain, are inscribed in my practices as well. It is my literacy which shapes my understanding of theirs and represents it to you.

Dorothy Smith's (1990) work on the relations of ruling and objectified knowledge is a useful standpoint to understand literacy, especially women's literacy. For Smith, relations of ruling are not the usual structures about which we think, such as the government or political organizations. They are, instead, the total complex of activities in all spheres "by which our kind of society is ruled, managed, and administered" (p. 14). They are those coded behaviours and expectations that mark our activities and that become embedded in language, particularly written language, as a form of objectified knowledge. The objectified knowledge carries authority in the conceptual plane; it governs how we think and talk in the multiple positionings of our daily lives.

Whether women are working as clerks or secretaries, as graduate students or as untenured university teachers, "women mediate for men at work the relationship between [that] conceptual mode of action and the actual concrete forms in which it is and must be realized, and the actual material conditions upon which it depends" (p. 19). In other words, the relations of ruling as we know them confine the majority of literate women to the office housework of society. In so doing, we as women remain outside or subordinate to the ruling apparatus and alienated from our own experiences. Our task, as Smith (1987) describes it, might be to "disclose to women involved in the educational process how matters come about as they do in their experience and to provide methods of making their work experience accountable to themselves and to other women rather than to the ruling apparatus of which institutions are part" (p. 178). While I have worked with women to try to help them become accountable to themselves and other women, rather than to the ruling apparatus, it has only been recently that I have realized how essential it is that I engage in that process for myself as well.

An Ethnography Story from the Workplace

Three years ago, I completed an ethnographic study of writing in the workplace. Hired by a local government department to "fix up the writing problem with the professional staff," as the deputy minister described it, I set about to analyze the habits and processes of the production of reports, letters, and proposals among the largely male middle-management staff. I was granted permission to do research on literacy in the organization as I helped to "retrain" the staff as writers (again, the deputy minister's words). It was a daunting prospect, but a financially attractive one, and one which gave me a ready-made research setting. It was

only after we had completed several group workshops that I realized I was taking good money to be co-opted into marginalizing the support staff, all women, whose efforts, without exaggeration, had been keeping the organization afloat. It became clear that the inefficiency plaguing the organization was caused, in large part, by petty political arm-wrestling throughout the hierarchy of the management staff. The support staff, with all the responsibility for document production but no decision-making authority, were twice victimized; their workload typing, retyping, and photocopying multiple iterations of documents to feed the pecking order of approval wasted their energies and took away from more productive work. Their critiques of time-consuming, redundant, and counter-productive procedures were ignored and trivialized. (It goes without saying, of course, that their salary further victimized them: it was approximately one-third that of their supervisors'.)

Late into the contract, I urged for a workshop for the support staff alone. The workshop time was devoted to drafting a set of recommendations for change. The recommendations were followed a month later with statistics the women had collected to support the recommendations. They tallied time spent on various tasks, calculated cost-efficiency of the outdated equipment, tracked documents to prove their claim that a typical letter took three and one-half weeks to leave the department, and translated into dollars the cost to Nova Scotia taxpayers of this inefficiency. Senior management read the report and, while widespread changes were not made, certain procedures were adjusted and the support staff gained a say that they did not have previously in the production of documents.

As an ethnographer, I came to that setting looking for the meanings: How did people perceive the reading and writing they were doing?

I was dutiful about the interviewing, about field notes, and about triangulating perspectives. A picture began to emerge of a hierarchy, the channels of which were hopelessly clogged with paper generated for purposes of position jockeying rather than communicating. It became clear that the putative goal of my contract — to re-train writers and to make recommendations for greater efficiency — would not be realized because the relations of ruling saturated every piece of paper and every inefficient procedure. Everything I was doing was window-dressing. As a researcher, I began to focus instead on the work of the support staff, for two reasons: their commonsense claims spoke to a desire for order and efficiency not clouded by power politics, and their status as pink collar workers and their perceived lack of authority among the management staff appealed to my feminist sensibilities.

It was through my discussions with these women that my scripted stance as an ethnographer began to be revised, but only slightly. Although I had accounted for my own subject positioning in previous research (Neilsen, 1989), for the most part I was enacting the master narrative of Rosaldo's (1989) Lone Ethnographer: I was the literate recorder of utterances, the gatherer of artifacts. "In accordance with imperialist norms, [the] natives provided the raw material ['the data'] for processing.... After returning to the metropolitan centre ... the Lone Ethnographer wrote his [sic] work" (p. 31). In keeping with the loosening of the codes then apparent in the field (Geertz, 1989; Stoller, 1989), I even experimented with literary form by writing my account of the so-called fieldwork in the form of a play framed by quotes from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

What insinuated its way into my mind and my gut as I worked with the support staff and what began to change my inquiry process was my identification with them, and it was from that standpoint that we were able to engage in productive work. I was most useful not as a writing consultant, but as a researcher who was also a woman. Together we brainstormed strategies to make the case for improved procedures and I was able to bring to the table my experience in various forms of data gathering and statistical methods which they eagerly applied to the problems at hand. That was my most explicit and obvious contribution. What was left unstated until now was perhaps the most salient contribution: that of being a woman who has spent many years doing various forms of office housework, as a clerical worker, a receptionist, a keypunch operator in a bank, a graduate assistant and, most recently and better paid, as a writing consultant to institutions. As a consultant, I work largely with male managers and it is common to be teased about being the "hired English teacher." Ph.D. or not, my literacy and my work as a teacher help to further instantiate stereotypical perceptions of women who work with words.

This recognition of my partial identification with the support staff is key to my discussion here, for it speaks to the dilemma that we all recognize in our work as feminist researchers. When I brought my written account of the work to a public audience, the work represented a researcher stance which Fine (1992) has described as "voices." One step beyond ventriloquy, in which "the author tells Truth, has no gender, race, class, or stance" (p. 212), the "voices" stance allows us as researchers to "hide, unproblematic, just under the covers of those marginal, if now 'liberated' voices" (p. 215) of the participants, or subjects of the research. This stance typically involves "a delicate tailoring of texts" (p. 219), using just the words of the individuals with whom we work to make the point we intend to make,

or intended to make all along. Writing about the support staff, their concerns about collaboration and voice, I found it was easy to cut and stitch fragments of field note conversations to stretch over pre-fabricated frames provided by Carol Gilligan, Nona Lyons, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, and the literary work of Henrik Ibsen. While I was not exactly ventriloquizing the women, neither was I working from an explicitly activist stance — at least what I would today call activist.

The dilemma for the support staff was that they were perceived as Other, were alienated from the ruling apparatus even as their work supported it. My dilemma as a researcher was that I perceived myself as Other, believed my obligation as a scholar — indeed my very success — was dependent on my ability to maintain that separation, although the emancipatory work I was able to foster, in some small way, depended upon my being able to identify with them as women.

The Researcher as Teacher

A second strand of research that informs this discussion involved a graduate seminar in reading theory in which twelve women, all of whom are classroom teachers, chose to explore their own reading process as they read the works of theorists such as Polanyi, Vygotsky, Rosenblatt, Smith, Piaget, Iser, and Halliday, among others. They kept journals to track in detail their daily reading, wrote accounts of their school experiences, and delved into their recollections of their reading experiences as children at home. As teacher-researchers, their goal was to understand better the roots and the growth of their own literacy in order to inform their classroom teaching. As they worked through an understanding of the theories espoused by others, they expressed the desire to develop their own theories of the reading process, or at least to articulate the degree to which these theories were reflected in their own experiences of working with children.

We agreed as a group that while they explored their reading as individuals, our discussions would provide a forum to discuss their discoveries, to make connections and comparisons, and to allow common themes and obvious disparities to emerge. As the course instructor, I would pull together those themes and offer a meta-analysis of their individual analyses of themselves as readers. "This is what I think is going on here," I would say.

The teachers' journals and discussions indicated that reading began for them as an experience associated with feeling, imagination, and a celebration of the senses. Reading was an embodied experience; as early literacy learners, these women were "bodyreading" (Grumet, 1988). As a school activity, however, reading became ritualized and disembodied; it became the Text Out There, the authoritative discourse inscribed in the master narrative of learning to read in school. Their accounts told the story of what reading was supposed to be: their fear in early years of "reading ahead"; their reluctance as adults to leave a book unfinished or to read in a non-linear fashion, skipping about the text; their private concern for unearthing the "right interpretation" in the course readings while they publicly espoused whole language approaches in the classroom. As these women re-visioned themselves as readers, they began to question their allegiance to the narratives that had written their lives as readers to date; it was only a short step for them to make the connection to what they do as teachers in the classroom. Their relationship to the readings in the course changed as well; Louise Rosenblatt and Frank Smith (or at least their textual representations) became two of many participants in a conversation in which

these teachers and their classroom wisdom played a part. The authority these teachers invested in the text was certainly not completely eroded, and there is no telling the degree to which the emancipatory notions offered by theorists such as Rosenblatt or Smith were simply taken up and adopted to support the teachers' emerging constructivist ideas. (Again, we wander in the hall of mirrors that makes it almost impossible to distinguish agency itself from the adoption of an emancipatory stance that sanctions agency.) As Britzman (1991) says, "what must be addressed are the deep investments teachers and students have in the available discourses, and the ways they are borrowed, taken up, and reinflected with subjective meanings" (p. 63).

Where was I as this was going on? In the centre, of course. I was no longer the objective observer, the Lone Ethnographer swooping into a field ripe with data for the picking. I was the course instructor who set the overarching agenda, asked the initiating question that launched their inquiry, coached from behind as they established their goal and their approach. At the time we all saw my stance as participatory, the research they did as emancipatory, my pedagogy as student-centred, not teacher-centred. Because this was the first graduate course for many in the group, the stance I took as an instructor and co-researcher represented a radical shift in pedagogy from what they had experienced as undergraduates many years ago.

My recording of their process, the research I believed I was doing with them, was, in fact, research about them. Our work together was bound by the demands of the institution; my work as an instructor and a researcher was guided by my sense of how I ought to conduct myself and the course to promote student-centred inquiry and pedagogy. The master

narratives continued to hold sway; they were simply more palatable ones. (On reflection, I am loath to name our state of mind "false consciousness" because it assumes that someone out there, possibly me in this case, ought to have since woken up with the authentic version of what happened. The term is objectionable to me because it is rooted in the demands — and the arrogance — of yet another master narrative.)

Something else, however, more important and more lasting, occurred during the course of the semester. We talked about our research, we compared notes, we told stories, we connected. As different as we were in background, age, teaching experience, or education, we were united in common experiences of the school as a patriarchal institution whose top-down text-centred approach to reading instruction alienated us all from our lives in the pages. When Janice talked about her shame at being caught reading ahead in her reader, I remembered. When Carol told about the moment she realized that the right answer was not the obvious one, especially on a reading test, we all remembered. We talked about our collective experiences as graduate students, and I recounted the many love affairs I had had with this theory or that, with my search for the One answer among many, the world view that made sense. Creating a space for the discussion of these common experiences was not necessary; it was what we did and how we worked with one another. The experience of the course and the research we did together was not an event, and certainly not a field setting; it was a relationship.

Maria Mies (1991) talks about the dilemma of being at once separated and united as women work together on research that makes a difference in their lives. She argues that there is a level at which women are bound by their ex-

periences of patriarchy; that level, she claims, is deeper that class, skin colour, language, and education.

> Because this level exists women are in a position to communicate with each other as people across the different barriers. Labelling alone creates no communication. It arranges people together as if they were things. Partial identification is hence possible if we reject the total claim on our existence as a commodity ... if we do not sublimate to commodity relations that part in us where we are afflicted and affected in our human beingness.... [P]artial identification therefore makes possible the necessary closeness to the others as well as the necessary distance from myself. (p. 81)

Mies's comments might be labelled by some as essentialist and, while most will say that the multiply positioned nature of our identities makes an essentialist position untenable, I cannot ignore the experience I have in common with other women, the "womanbeingness" we share by dint of our gender. (Besides, in this radical re-assessment of who I am as a researcher and a woman, I am increasingly impatient with our tendency in the academy to fetishize concepts such as essentialism. My work as a woman is not to contribute to the production of ideology as commodity, but to work to end oppressive relations. Who knows, however... Perhaps I, too, am fetishizing concepts — even now.)

Working with these teachers in the graduate seminar, I became as much, or more, participant as observer. My history in educational settings made my intellectual, experiential, and emotional investment much greater with these women than with the support staff in the government workplace. Because of this investment, the research process became less a con-

scious and applied methodology and more a state of mind. I kept notes, certainly, noted patterns and followed them up, used my literacy in an attempt to understand theirs, and found myself less likely to want to attach their experiences to theoretical frames to validate them, to enable the "findings" to insert themselves into academic discourse with a certain authority. Instead, theoretical frames, such as Grumet's (1988) informed, extended, and illuminated the discourse that emerged. Methodological purity and theoretical consonance seemed less important than conversation, connection, and talk of changed practice, of individual and collective action. The inquiry process was embedded in my relationship with these individuals as women and as a group.

Then, as I prepared to describe the experience for publication, the guilt set in. For years, I have felt uncomfortable about the exploitative dark side of research and of teaching. Knowing colleagues whose publishing career has been built on teachers' voices packaged as empowerment vehicles, and being perplexed at the teachers' willingness to let themselves be so empowered and their reluctance to name or resist it for fear of repercussion, I wanted to resist that impulse. These teachers, these women, our learning, was not to be exploited. Britzman (1991) talks about the dualism created when we believe, as feminist educators, that our work can have an emancipatory effect simply through the creating experiences for women as women to tell their stories:

> On the one hand, if teachers are persuasive, students may take on the desires of teachers as if they were their own. On the other hand, if teachers are successful, students will find their own voice. In this dualism, the only "true" voice is the teacher's voice and thus willingness can only be realized through coercion. (p. 74)

As a researcher, was I not perpetuating the same practice, putting myself at the centre of the work? Fine's (1992) continuum of "ventriloquy," "voices" and "activism" speaks eloquently to the ethical dilemma many feminist researchers face. Fine argues that it is the failure of our methodology "and a flight from our own political responsibilities [not] to tell tough, critical, and confusing stories about the ideological and discursive patterns of inequitable power arrangements" (p. 219). There was no question that, as course instructor and meta-researcher, I was favoured by the power arrangements which were therefore inequitable. However in feeling guilt, in self-consciously watching my feet as I danced, was I not submitting to the same dualism of which Britzman speaks? By concerning myself with my stance, was I not centering a concern for the power arrangement itself, centering methodology, placing on the margins the very substance of our work as literate women composing new understandings of ourselves as teachers? Which master narrative was now guiding my work? Bell hooks's (1990) words, mimicking the colonizer's voice, haunt me:

> "...I will tell [your story] back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject." (p. 152)

If I am truly to be a response-able researcher, the most productive conversation ought to occur not only between me and other similarly conflicted researchers, but among all of us collectively engaged in such research. If I am truly to be a response-able teacher, the conversation must engage us all equally in change, in interrogating our identities and our role in institutions. I must change, too, not merely for the opportunity to flagellate myself publicly in print or to create another new academic commodity, but to "come out" as Fine

(1992) says about the way I work. Also if I am truly to be a response-able human being, I must begin to account for the many identities I live, the shifting power relations in which I participate, and watch carefully the ways in which they dis-able others rather than enable them. Further, I must learn to celebrate, rather than repress or deny, those identities that allow me to be human, to be woman, in my work. Perhaps if my work, if our work, is to have value, it will display, as Grumet (1990) has noted, not the coherence of our theories, but the coherence of our lives.

Institutional Disruptions and Habits of Mind

Jennifer and Rhonna stood out from the class of 58 Bachelor of Education students from the first day of class. A couple of years older than the average B.Ed. student, each has a strong sense of what is just, and what is not. They describe themselves as having different belief systems and different teaching styles; they are close friends.

Most of their classmates, facing a year of intense study and practicum experience, typically enter the program keyed up, on edge, ready to meet the demands of the institution, and prepared to succeed. Their academic and experiential preparation had won them a slot in the program over 750 candidates. They have little prospect of finding a teaching position when the year finishes; most will have to wait a couple of years before a position opens up. Their anxiety about achievement and employment runs high. They want to excel, want to know what is expected. Most are in their early to mid-twenties; some are married and have children.

As the newly hired faculty member charged with overseeing the B.Ed. program, the student teaching course and school place-

ments, along with my graduate teaching load, I was as green as these B.Ed. students were eager. Although my colleagues were very helpful, a combination of factors beyond anyone's control left me without a mentor in my new position. As a result, I was unfamiliar with institutional practices to date, institutional expectations for how the B.Ed. program is run, faculty expectations for my duties, admission and registration procedures, the day-to-day relations of ruling that informed everyone's behaviour, and the details of daily practice that one needs to acquire in order to do one's job. Further, my teaching experience to date had largely been with graduate students, most of whom were middle-aged women.

Over the last year, Rhonna, Jennifer, and I have put into print to one another the concerns we have had to face being inducted into educational communities: they into the university program, schools, and the teaching profession at large; me, into full-time university life and institutional norms and practices. Our notes, journal entries, and letters arose from the challenges each of us were facing; no agreement was made at the beginning of the year to engage in a dialogue; it arose from the exigencies of our institutional lives. From the outset, I admired and respected both these women for their courage and idealism, and for their insight into contradictory and paternalistic practices in educational institutions.

As I re-read these exchanges now and prepare to describe to you some of the issues surrounding them, I have no sense of presenting this as research per se, and yet, I submit that it might be. Perhaps it is just life. Further, although I search for its signs, I feel no sense of the moral hypochondria that I have felt up to this point about telling someone else's story, about presenting these women to you. The work we have done together in the course of living through a very difficult year has earned

us, each of us to the other, the trust and solidarity to tell the stories that implicate us in one another's lives.

If this is research, and if there is a stance I ought to attempt to take in this quicksand, it approximates the Inappropriate Other that Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991) describes:

> Like the outsider, she steps back and records what never occurs to her the insider as being worth or in need of recording. But unlike the outsider, she also resorts to non-explicative, non-totalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure.... She refuses to reduce herself to an Other and her reflections to a mere outsider's objective reasoning or insider's objective feeling.... She is this Inappropriate Other/ Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming "I am like you" while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding "I am different" while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at. (p. 74)

Trinh Minh-Ha argues there is no authentic inside or outside anyway, and when we cease to be impressed and intimidated by the "magic of essences" or the need for an authorial referent from which emanates judgement, we recognize our own constituted nature, and our role in the production of meaning. This is "not to say that the historical 'I' can be obscured or ignored, and that differentiation cannot be made" but that "more or less is always more or less in relation to judging subject" (p. 76). I am, after all, as you are, a fabric of many-textured threads highlighting many different patterns according to the moment. I am middle-aged, academic, first-born child, sister, mother, wife, researcher, descendant of Irish, Scottish, French, and Cree; heterosexual, friend, technology buff, menopausal woman, novice gardener, and so on. My need to tell you this, as Trinh Minh-Ha notes, is not borne

out of a need to be in the centre, to be self-indulgent and/or self-critical. It is borne out of a need to de-naturalize I, the researcher; I, the woman. It is to lay bare the many points at which the relationships in which I engage will always be partial, will always move, like shadows, part of who I am and yet beyond my reach.

The first incident that gave rise to writing about the institutional narratives we questioned arose from Rhonna's student placement. She had been placed in a classroom in which the co-operating teacher used teaching practices and disciplinary strategies that Rhonna found abusive. After three days, Rhonna insisted she could not return to the woman's class. As she wrote in her note to me:

> I still carry some feelings of guilt from when I was a child and witnessed first hand episodes of physical abuse. I remember sitting and begging my mother to call the authorities about the goings-on within this family who were relatives. Of course, my mother was in a position whereby in a small community she would have appeared to be the villain if she were to say anything. I was just a child but I remember feeling very powerless. In that class, the bottom line was that I felt powerless in a situation where I could feel pain. (Jessome, Personal communication.)

We talked about a new placement, and I encouraged Rhonna to speak to the classroom teacher to let her know her reasons for leaving. Professionally, it was the responsible thing to do as a courtesy to the teacher, but, more importantly, Rhonna's comments would provide a necessary mirror to the woman's practice that could result in the classroom teacher's reassessment of her methods. It was difficult for Rhonna, but she met with the teacher. Later, I visited the classroom informally to discuss the issue with the teacher and,

within a few minutes, found myself startled by the teacher's tone and manner with the children. I, too, left the room with a knot in my stomach, recalling, not coincidentally, my own experiences with a verbally abusive mother.

Rhonna's refusal to return to the classroom forced me to confront our institutional practice. Students typically have no say in their selection of schools and their criticism of co-operating teachers is usually considered a result of their anxiety of entering a classroom in the first place. Rhonna's complaint, her resistance, was different.

Placement issues continued to emerge that term. As the one charged with organizing placements, I heard endless complaints — some of which I perceived to be valid, others trivial. Our commitment as an institution to placing student teachers in culturally diverse settings means that students often have to travel great distances to the schools to which they are assigned. I grew impatient with requests for transfers to more convenient locations not only because my political beliefs supported diversity, but also because I felt a pressure to follow institutional practices to date. Such expectation was never explicitly presented to me, but I felt the imperative in my first year to do what had been done before, to play out the master narratives guiding institutional life until I understood them well enough to be in a position to change them. My impatience also arose from what I perceived to be whining on the part of the students. They seemed, at least from my conversations with them, to be more concerned with ease of transportation than with the opportunity to work in a classroom radically different from their schooling experiences to date. During a class early in the term, their anger and my frustration came together in an unpleasant incident. After a barrage of complaints, I cut off conversation by saying,

"This is the real world. The jobs you are offered may not be in a convenient location. You can't all be placed in white, middle-class schools." Later, in a letter to me, Jennifer noted: "In one line, you insulted the intelligence of everyone there, and totally disregarded a reasonable statement." The next term, I placed the decision for location with the students themselves and received a sharp rebuke in a memo from a colleague who described my actions as "imprudent."

During the year, after many conversations and many words in print, Jennifer, Rhonna and I developed shared understandings of our individual and collective attempts to live out the expectations of the institution, at the same time holding to our beliefs about just and equitable behaviour. I became the Inappropriate Other, Professor Insider/Outsider, believing with the faculty that some practices ought to stay as they were and that many challenges the students made to those practices were borne out of their high anxiety, their learned dependence on evaluation, and their collective lack of so-called real world experience. At the same time, I came to recognize that there were few spaces for students to develop independence and autonomy within the program; they had little power or authority — because of their so-called station in the institution — to challenge the sexism they saw in one class, the neurotic power-plays they experienced in another, the inefficient registration process they endured that year, the overcrowded timetable, the exploitative practices of certain school administrators who believe student teachers are extra pairs of hands, and the most insidious master narrative of them all: the evaluation practices.

During their entire academic lives, these people have been living by the grade. Evaluation holds great sway, to the extent most prefer silence over resistance: they are not going to rock the boat until the grades are in. Jennifer and Rhonna are two exceptions, regularly questioning, offering alternatives, challenging, arguing and, to a few faculty including me, writing their thoughts. Their grades are important to them, but naming and challenging injustice is more important. Together, as each incident arises, we have worked at change. Their work offering insights and critiques and representing the opinions of others to the faculty at large has resulted in several changes for next year. Jennifer, for example, will head a group to provide counsel and assistance to incoming students in next year's program.

As I struggle to understand myself in the institution and the changes I hope to effect, I see myself as both student and teacher, resister and oppressor, friend and faculty member, insider/outsider. However, I am not comfortable even with those dualities, because the work we have done this year, unless I am deluding myself again, more closely approximates an ongoing dialogic relationship that accepts our conflicting identities. Yes, it would seem that, on the surface, I hold the institutional power over Jennifer and Rhonna, for example, but I, too, am being evaluated, reminded of my transgressions, neither fully inside the faculty nor out of it. It is the very ambivalence about identity that I share with the women who are called students, and it is only from that ambivalence that I believe I can do the work that needs to be done. Like the idealistic politician who hopes to change the system only to be co-opted by it, I fear the more I become "institutionalized," the less I will be able to see what the students see and feel what they feel. Perhaps Jennifer's comment, in response to a faculty member who said, "You should be glad you are here at all," is one I ought to place on the bulletin board, along with the dream-catcher from Rhonna: "I am an adult, I have done a lot of good things with my life. I

will be a good teacher. I deserve to be treated respectfully. You should be glad that I am here."

Beyond the Master Narratives

Michelle Fine (1992) talks of the emergence of a new generation of epistemological dilemmas and possibilities: "what makes this research? when does intervention stop and reflection begin? how do I/we 'know' what I/we 'know'? what are our grounds for disproof?" (p. 230). Susan Lytle and I have explored not only what counts as research, but also where it begins and ends and what lives beyond it (Neilsen & Lytle, 1992). Madeleine Grumet's (1990) reminder that we live values first and describe them later makes me think that perhaps the same is true for our inquiry processes. Perhaps even the naming of activity, particularly activist work in any setting — as "research" or as "inquiry" — jeopardizes the very work we hope to do, for these terms are still so saturated with androcentric assumptions. Suzanne Chandler (1992) wonders why "rather than tell about human lives, we speak of theories, methods, and designs" (p. 130). She talks of the theory adoption practices that foreground research, and argues for a theory adaption practice that foregrounds "the lives, stories, and emotions of real students, real teachers, real schools, and real communities" (p. 130) — a practice, it would seem, that embraces "the wild emotion" of which Marge Piercy spoke, and which we know lives in our work.

At this dis/juncture in my work, I find myself wondering whether I am more comfortable living my research processes than thinking about them or describing them. Is the work that I do called research, or is it simply called life? I know that as I reflect on the writing and talking with Rhonna and Jennifer, as I am challenged to change the institution as a result

of our work, and as I sift again through their notes to me and jot down my own, there is a systematic examination of critical issues that, in some circles, could be called research. In other circles, however, it is simply called untenured university work. Yet are the important questions not what our inquiry is but what it does? Is it worthwhile to consider that, after years of attention to research methodology and issues, we can, in great measure, adopt habits of mind — inquiring habits of mind — that become second nature, that are lived before they are described? Am I now, because I am more at home with dilemmas and more resistant to being swept away by mechanical demands of the paradigm of the week, more literate as a researcher, more free to reject the strict taboos that lurk in patriarchal hallways? Is my academic respectability more vulnerable the further I remove myself from fashionable and/or recognizable theories, and does that matter? I have no answers. At this point, I am comfortable that I do not.

We write; we are written. If we are to have a sense of agency, to change the world as we know it, the writing must be done together. Each of us alone has difficulty, I believe, challenging the stories that presume to tell our lives, whether those stories are of the how to do research, or the how-to-be-a-teacher, or the how-to-be-a-student, or the how-to-do-school variety. As women, I believe our shared experiences do meet at some fundamental level in our common and visceral understandings of what Alice Walker calls "womanist" things, even though we are, in so very many ways, different. However, it is in the strength of those shared histories, as tenuously as they might cross, that resistance to everyday, unexamined stories begins.

In an examination of modernism, hyperliteracy, and the colonization of the word, David Smith (1992) offers a compelling thought:

Preparation for writing inevitably lies as much in the realm of existential preparedness as in the practice of "the writing process" or "word processing." Being prepared to write involves an attunement or attentiveness to reality most closely allied not to epistemology (knowing how to write) but to wisdom (knowing what should be said). Writing is a holy act, an articulation of limited understanding.... (p. 256)

There, I believe, is where I am in this exploration about narrative and identity, about agency and theory. I am no further ahead in my work, but I am deeper and perhaps more fully attuned to its mystery and complexity. I hope that through greater identity (yes, identity) with the women with whom I am challenged and privileged to work, we can together use the wisdom we have earned to know what should be said and done to get on with remaking our worlds.

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