



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

What did I say that was wrong? Re/worlding the word

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to interrogate practice of research and discursively problematize the role of the researcher in relation to the ways in which knowledge is constructed and represented in and as a centre/ periphery relation. It considers the ways in which research practices can refocus attention on claims made about knowing and speaking about the lives of Others and within the academe.

Design: Underlying this interrogation is Spivak's (1998) work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Methodologically, I reflect on, and address my experiences of research in the context of re-reading ontology as a signifying presence from which to address, contest and rearticulate the methodological norm in qualitative inquiry.

Findings: The paper suggests that it is relevant to attend to the ways, in which qualitative researchers, in the process of making the Other culturally intelligible and subsequent representation, acknowledge the process and product as a contested epistemic space.

Value: The paper problematizes the notion of 'giving voice' to ontological understandings of being and speaking as a unified subject.

Keywords: Identity, Subjectivity, Sexuality, Criticality, Ontology

Introduction

I have found throughout my research endeavours that grappling with the rough trade of normalising academic protocols can be an unsettling endeavour. 'Stammering into knowing'

(Lather, 1997), from a critically queer perspective, has involved a great deal of intellectual uncertainty and methodological messiness when making particular claims about self and the lives of others. Repeatedly rehearsing my entry on to the page, I learned from life to always be mindful, to genuflect at the normative centre, and such an experience has me ever cautious of falling foul of the proper and the straddling uncertainty that comes with the territory of speaking from being betwixt and between.

Russell & Kelly (2002) have noted how subjectivity in research information originates with both the researcher(s) and participant(s), each of whom brings individual experiences and pre-existing perspectives into the research event. However, within legitimising institutional discourses, “Sexual identity is regarded as part of one’s private life, and therefore, according to the prevailing norms of academic culture, not supposed to intrude into ones’ professional life” (Wafer, 1996, p. 262). Foucault (1981) has considered sexuality to be rendered silent by educational discourses and articulates this experience when he says: “We know quite well that we cannot speak of just anything in any circumstances and that not everyone has the right to speak” (p. 52).

Much like another queen, my anxiety in speaking out of a particular set of identity experiences is that:

You'll never be wanted," [a draft board official] said, and thrust at me a smaller piece of paper. This described me as being incapable of being graded in grades A, B, etc., because I suffered from sexual perversion. When the story of my disgrace became one of the contemporary fables of Chelsea, a certain Miss Marshall said, "I don't much care for the expression 'suffering from, ' Shouldn't it be 'glorying in'?"

(Crisp, 1977, p.110)

Some might argue that the very act of making a critical claim to, derived from, and out of a

particularly located speaking position is 'glorying' enough and, thus, have considered whether I am remaking an essentialist space for myself in methodology. Am I too being much? However, Luke, (2004) has noted:

To be critical is to call up for scrutiny, whether through embodied action or discourse practice, the rules of exchange within a social field. To do so requires an analytic move to self-position oneself as Other even in a market or field that might not necessarily construe or structurally position one as Other... This doubling and positioning of the self from dominant text and discourse can be cognate, analytic, expository, and hypothetical, and it can, indeed, be already lived, narrated, embodied, and experienced (p. 26).

Increasingly attentive to how research practices constituted in and by the researcher/researched dialectic are a be/coming epistemic relation, my methodological orientation refuted the grand narratives of neutrality and objectivity: an expedient fiction of the research process (Spivak1990). I prefer instead to put my trust in the stories that people tell of and off their lives, as they invariably reveal a 'complex layering [of understandings] formed and informed through discursive practices and social interactions' (Sikes 2006, p. 21). Hannah Arendt (1979) comments how a: "story reveals the meaning of what would otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events" (p. xx), and in my story of coming to qualitative educational inquiry, I have had to carefully consider the terms, conditions, implications and claims that come with 'giving voice' within 'a rich tradition of alternative, progressive, critical and humanist educational theory' (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009, p. 7). I have too much knowledge of how:

SILENCE can be the deadliest weapon and safest shield.

It is what I turned to and what I did when cornered by identities I never wanted to claim.

Retreating into **SILENCE** was a way to grin and bear it.

I heard my calling by age 7; they had a word for boys like me

SISSY!

PANSY!

POOF!

I now had names for something that I had hardly ever thought of at all.

At age 11, I graduated to a new knowledge

HOMO!

FREAK!

QUEER!

HATE

SHAME

REPRISAL.

I understood how my life got discounted each day.

I felt

SHY

CONFUSED

ALONE.

At 16, I asked what's a HOMO? And the anger and hurt that had not been given voice

PREVAILED

ACCUMULATED.

Named, I folded inwards and cursively fashioned drafts of possible selves and this is where my interpretive story of self began.

I connected my

DESIRE, trying to touch, reach the lives of

OTHERS. Subaltern, I became inscripted; spoken through a

language of:

MEASUREMENT
NORMS and DEVIATION
that
ACCOUNTED FOR, EXPLAINED:

PATHOLOGISED

~~SISSY!~~

~~PANSY!~~

~~POOFTA~~

~~HOMO!~~

~~FREAK!~~

I retreated into **SILENCE**.

Haunted by the echoes of sounds of words, my desire has a shape. Stories drawn out of a chequered history, in living

SHAME and pride.

Beside myself, I have listened and in my attempts to fracture the singular logic of identity, I listen. No longer speaking to confess but to evacuate the silence I never wanted to claim. (Vicars, 2009)

My methodological dilemmas run deep as I question a logic of being and doing that can routinely create the very conditions for alterity to be reproduced. In my various attempts and struggles with identifying with ‘difference as the grounds for identity’ (Britzman, 1995, p.161), my knowing in the world, I acknowledge, comes through inhabiting what McLaren (1994) has described as ‘border identities’, those ‘intersubjective spaces of cultural translation’, spaces “where one can find an overlay of codes, a multiplicity of culturally inscribed subject positions, a displacement of normative reference codes, and a polyvalent assemblage of new cultural meanings” (McLaren, 1994, p. 65). As I started to dig into the epistemic conditions of the Other with/in, the claims ‘I’ was making of self, I came to realise how I positioned the self/Other dialectic in research required some unpacking.

I had ‘come out’ at the age of 16 and very much embodied a belief in the politics of

identity. However, as I started to lie down in the arms of other men, I quickly came to realise that sharing the same desire did not always mean or equate with sameness and how the experience of difference could be a transforming and transformative relation and began to question the ways in which my confessional speech acts were a “mode of response to the very forms of power that each day reproduces it” (Barker, 1989, p.88).

I had during my initial encounters with the epistemic field of qualitative research some trouble with the rules; and relinquishing a mimetic display of the methodological proper, I struggled to breach an understanding of researcher role and identity. I had spent too many years being the hyphenated Other to not hear differently (Fine, 1994). My Doctoral study: an ethnography of the formative literacy practices of five, middle adulthood gay men, endeavoured to explicate the relationship between literacy and sexual identity by reconstructing life histories of particular experience(s) and narrates a particular methodological story of negotiating the epistemic cracks and fracture lines of methodological uncertainty:

In our first encounter, the collective conversation had not extended much beyond work place bitching, sex encounters and boyfriend troubles. I became increasingly apprehensive as the evening progressed that this was nothing like fieldwork and found myself fighting the familiarity of the situation. The uppermost thought in my mind was, ‘When would I get to collect the ‘real’ data?’ Despite my best intentions, I found myself becoming anxious, clock watching and secretly wishing that we could get to the business in hand. I had driven for over an hour on a cold winter’s night to collect my data and was impatient to get started. I wanted to get the men talking about their reading practices. During the drive back home after that initial meeting, I was somewhat perplexed as to what had been going on and to what extent, if any, fieldwork taken place. I had shared some of my own stories of disastrous blind dates

and doomed sexual exploits, but I remained uncertain regarding the issue of what could be constituted as 'data'. Playing back the recording of the evening a few days later, I struggled to find anything that I considered as being worthwhile. Could any of this be of any use (Vicars, 2009).

Andreotti (2007, p.78) has called for a framework to value and learn from difference and to reconstruct worldviews and identities based on an 'ethical relation to the Other'.

Prising open a way of being is as dialectic as a way of thinking, I became even more stuck by methodological limitations of what I could be, how I could know, and how to write so as to show voice as an ethical relation to others.

Form follows dysfunction

As a qualitative researcher invested in 'queering', my research practice is very much an auto-poiesis of dissent (Vicars, 2016), in which "the processes of self-production . . . self-construction emerges out of a set of relationships . . . thus, in an ontological context meaning emerges not from the thing-in-itself but from its relationships to an infinite number of things" (Kincheloe, 2011, p. 214). As my storied self and those of my participants seeped from out of past fictions of being, our voices proved difficult to tame in the research narrative on the page. The emotional investments we placed in practices of the self (Vicars, 2005) pushed me to question the limits of representation driven by 'the political in queer theory [that] comes from throwing light onto seemingly neutral practices and creating a discomfort about them' (Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 333).

Implicit in the work of what has been termed the "queer turn" has been a paying of attention to the 'doing' and the dialectic to 'being'; furthering deconstruction of the "ways these various conventions and rules incite subversive performances, citations and inconveniences" (Britzman, 1998, p. 213). Located as a political and discursive postmodern

(poly)tical praxis: a paradigmatic conceptual interruption to meaning-making, I have become increasingly attentive to what Kottman, (1997) has noted is:

...the relation between the self and the narration of ...life story... [as it] unfolds in a given language, within a given style, employs certain terms, and draws upon relatively determined conventions-historical and otherwise...-we could say that this 'life' becomes a 'character,' one which is open to infinite interpretation or resignification... (p. xxi)

Dramatis personae

MOTHER - Flamboyant, all singing and dancing host for the occasion.

AUNTY – Mother's ex-lover, a butch(ish) top.

INGENUUE- Mother's protégé and work colleague

RESEARCHER- Friend to Mother.

Act One, Scene Three

[The men are sat in Mother's front room. All are relaxing having emptied a bottle of red wine and three quarters of a bottle of gin. Mother gets up and crosses over to the CD player and inserts the Greatest hits of Burt Bacharach. As the sound of 'What the world needs now is love sweet love' filters the room he lets out a sudden shriek, points to the window and declares...]

MOTHER: Oh not again, that's twice this week.

(Aunty and Ingenue rush over to the sofa and arch their necks in the direction of the window).

NOVICE RESEARCHER: What is it? What's going on?

MOTHER: The couple over the road, they like to put on a show.

INGENUUE: Oh my he's gorgeous!

[Novice Researcher joins Aunty and Ingenue on the sofa and all three start to shriek with laughter at the sight of a muscular handsome young man displaying his naked buttocks in the upstairs window of the opposite house. He is joined by a young woman who suddenly disappears from view and as all three jostle for position as the curtains are abruptly drawn.]

AUNTY: Spoil sports.

MOTHER: Well, they are not usually that shy. Anyone for another gin?

AUNTY: You drink too much.

MOTHER: Oh shush! (To Novice Researcher) Is that it? Have we done or is there anything else you want to squeeze in?

NOVICE RESEARCHER: Errrm... I think we can call it a night; I have lots to be going on with for the moment that is unless anybody has anything else that they want to say or add to what has already been said. Are there any questions you want to ask me?

AUNTY: Why gay men? Why choose gay men for this? Why not lesbians as well?

NOVICE RESEARCHER: I wanted to focus on specifically gay men's experiences of texts. Besides, I felt I had to limit the size of the sample otherwise I would be drowning in data and it would take me years to write the thesis.

MOTHER: I am quite enjoying doing this talking about different things and hearing all the different point of views.

INGENUUE: We've revealed quite a bit tonight'.

MOTHER: Some more than others.

INGENUUE: Yeah but it has been on more of an emotional level.

NOVICE RESEARCHER: Is this idea of our focused discussion useful in terms of your understanding of what it is I am trying to do? Is it equitable? Do you feel involved?

INGENUUE: It s not a problem, it's not stopped me talking

MOTHER: I thought we were going to have a one-to-one session?

INGENUUE: I think that it is going to be harder. Doing it this way we get to bounce ideas off each other. I do think you should ask us more about our attitudes to sex and relationships because then you will understand more about what makes us tick.

MOTHER: I am more than happy to talk about myself and I think it's fabulous to talk in a gay way.

INGENUUE: Yeah.

AUNTY: I think we should stick with the way that we did it tonight that is if you haven't got any objections. I think the texts will come if you let us talk...yeah, I think the texts will come. You know what I found interesting about this evening and you know what I really liked was the few moments when we talked about the things that we have all shared and we all went 'Oh God, yeah, yeah!' That TV series about the two Liverpool boys, the One Summer programme and we all jumped in and started talking at the same time. Tomorrow I am going ask my boyfriend if he watched but as for tonight I have got to love you and leave you. I have an hour drive home and I'm feeling sleepy.

MOTHER: Oh boo and hiss! You are such a party pooper! Anyone for a stuffed olive or a vodka jelly?

Act One, Scene Four

[The men are sat in Mother's front room. The remains of paella and sangria are strewn across the floor and as they stretch out, relax and make themselves even more comfortable they sink back in to oversized armchairs, stretch out on sofas and start to make fun of the Novice Researchers antiquated tape-recorder.]

MOTHER: *Have you plenty of batteries dear?*

NOVICE RESEARCHER: *Oh belt up, I've searched high and low for one of these, they don't sell them anymore. I have had to borrow this one.*

AUNTY: *I've enjoyed tonight! It has been good to look back I think that unless you live in a world of philosophical academia which very few of us do, that there isn't time to reflect with a group of like minded people about who we are. I think tonight has been very useful for me because I have been able to say what I am. In the discussions we have had tonight I have had to think more carefully while I have been talking and about what I have been saying. I think that through talking together...erm...I think I know myself a little bit more than previously because in my head my mental voice tend to give out disjointed ideas but by saying them they have become almost physical and I have been able to see what I think. Does that make sense?*

MOTHER: *I've enjoyed the commonalities. We have all had common experiences and since the last session I have thought about that quite a lot.*

NOVICE RESEARCHER: *(To Ingenue) What are your thoughts about participating in this way?*

INGENUUE: *I would say that our commentaries on what each of us has had to say have made me think.*

NOVICE RESEARCHER: *How?*

INGENUUE: *Oh...about stuff that happened in my past, I suppose...nah, it doesn't matter.*

AUNTY: *Well, for a start I don't feel it has hindered us doing it this way and that is the best you can get. At the outset I thought that you might have had a set agenda that you had a list of research questions you wanted us to answer. What has happened from letting us talk is that things have come out and I guess that you will be able to pick from that what you need. I think it important that this kind of research goes on because academia becomes stale without the human element. So often you get to read stuff that is supposed to be what is in people's minds, how they feel but it reads like those doing that research haven't actually asked the people. It is the same in education with all that carry on and talk about psychology of education and the philosophy of children but as a teacher if you lose sight of that seven year-old who comes in to your class in the morning with a snotty nose and a bloodied knee and... if you forget that child you might as well fucking light a match with your research because if it doesn't impact back on the peoples you are talking about. Don't kill the fucking rain forest to do it. I will be very interested to read this and see what you get from it. I think that what*

you might get from it will be different from what I get. I am getting to have interesting evenings talking about somebody I don't usually talk about me. I don't often do that.

MOTHER: I think I assumed that this would be quite easy because we have lots of things in common ...but (To Aunty), I think your sexuality and personality as a gay man is very different to mine in respect of your experiences of growing up. I don't think that hinders, I think that in many ways it has helped.

INGENUUE: Had it been a straight woman who had approached us in the same way as you have they would probably have got the same from me. I don't know?

NOVICE RESEARCHER: What about a straight man?

MOTHER: No!

AUNTY: No!

INGENUUE: No!

NOVICE RESEARCHER: Why?

INGENUUE: I don't like straight men and I would have been suspicious. Besides I couldn't talk to a straight man about some of the stuff I have talked to you guys about.

AUNTY: I don't think I would have signed up if I knew a straight guy was doing this. It is too risky.

MOTHER: I don't think it would have worked. I mean just listen to some of the stuff we have said and also it wouldn't have been any fun. This way we have not only told you about ourselves but we have had fun and camped it up. You couldn't do that with a straight guy, so, no it wouldn't have worked. I think it would have been the same with a straight woman; we have lots in common so it would probably have worked.

AUNTY: I think we would have to have tempered who we are. Mother is quite showy anyway and ... unrestrained. I think with a straight guy we couldn't have been as flamboyant, we would have been in danger of being a cliché.

INGENUUE: Oh my God is that the time? Look I could go on for this all night but as it is a school night I had better make tracks. I am rehearsing the Christmas musical.

MOTHER: Shall we say same time in a fortnight? How does linguine sound for main course and deep fried mozzarella for starters?

Act One, Scene Five

[The men are sat in Mother's front room examining photographs of Mother's latest boyfriend]

MOTHER: Isn't he adorable? We met at mutual friends wedding. Who says straight occasions can't be fun.

AUNTY: Always a bridesmaid and never a bride!

MOTHER: Have you run out of padded coat hangers dear? Well, you will all get to meet him; he is going to join us after work?

INGENUUE: What does he do?

MOTHER: Mental health worker.

AUNTY: Perfect. How compatible. A marriage made in heaven.

NOVICE RESEARCHER: So...how do you feel that tonight went?

MOTHER: Well... how do you feel that tonight went? I think that you are getting a lot more than what you anticipated. I think what we discussed has exceeded that brief you gave out at the start. I think we have gone way beyond that.

AUNTY: Why the question about camp? I looked around straight away to look at how people were sat. (To Mother) You were completely at ease, you were quite happy with being referred to as camp. I don't know whether you noticed but the second after asking the question I got on the defensive. I have to say something about that now. The discussion at the time was going round in circles and I couldn't get it back to make the point to you that I wasn't happy being called camp. You might not have noticed my reaction but I want that noting on tape. At the moment, I am in a very female orientated work system. Being a primary school teacher there are no other males, the only other male is the caretaker so I suppose the reason I balk against the campness or the feminine side of some gay men is that I want constantly to assert maleness, otherwise I could go under with discussions about tampons and fibroids.

MOTHER: You are so sexist, absolutely unbelievable. I feel sorry for anyone who works with you.

AUNTY: (Ignoring Mother) I think of our conversations as being akin to free verse poetry. If you had started to restrict the stanzas of our speech by the way you formed the question then you are not going to get out of it what I think you want. Whereas when you let people talk within a loosely based frame, as we are doing, then I think we all get more out of doing this. Looking back, I think the second group session was when we got started because in the first meeting you interrupted us with questions whereas in the second time we met you just let us get on with it. While we had to go round the houses I think that you got a much more rounded and broader response not just the 'yes' and 'no' answers and while they have their place you are not going to get full marks for 'yes' and 'no' answers. I think that we have got to continually refer to texts and my text is my experiences. Unless I am allowed to revisit quite a few of them there is no way I am going to bring out the one that I think is the best one. Revisiting my experiential texts is really a way about talking about my life in general.

MOTHER: Mmmmm..Yeah, I endorse that. We go through life, we start when we are born and we finish when we die and sometimes it's difficult to analyse each moment of it. Perhaps

it is at times like this that we have a chance to go back and think about that which was really quite important and how from looking at our lives again we are able to actually see how we started on another path. I think that so often because we have to face forward we seldom have the space to pause to see what is in front. By doing this we can look down or to the side. I for one have not necessarily verbalised some of the stuff before but it has been there, I haven't verbalised it because there hasn't been the forum or the need to actually say it. By saying it, it has actually opened something up and got me thinking.

(A knocking is heard at the window and Mother yelps and leaps to the curtains)

MOTHER: He's here. (To Novice Researcher) Now then clear all that stuff away. (To Aunty) Open some more wine- make it a white.

(Mother goes to unlatch the backdoor)

INGENUE: Make it red and straight to bed.

AUNTY: I don't think I could bear listening to that. Give it ten minutes and we can make our polite goodbyes.

(Mother's voice comes sailing through the thin walls)

MOTHER: How are you? Oooh you are all cold! Let me get you a drink. OH!

(The distinctive sound of snogging is heard coming from the kitchen by Aunty, Ingenue and Novice Researcher)

AUNTY: Five minutes and then I am off.

INGENUE: Me too.

(Vicars, 2009)

In Correspondence

Even before revealing the meaning of a life, a biography therefore recognizes the desire for it. (Cavarero, 1997, p.4)

How I have subsequently come to an understanding of what it means to do research cannot be easily or neatly divorced from how I choose to make sense from the positional, the perspectival as an informing relation to critically frame the process and product of research. To make coherent, re-shape, and reconfigure the research stories we tell of others is to show and acknowledge ourselves as an inseparable element of that story and to put to work the relational ruins as a space where methodology happens. As one of the participants in my

study commented:

...telling you about my life is difficult because it is putting me in a position to truth and I feel that telling anyone about my life is the highest form of trust. It is about believing that one is not going to be betrayed. I don't like being probed deeply and these are not pleasant experiences, I have put them behind me and dragging up some of those times nasty times in my life is not at all enjoyable. So when you say "Tell me about that" I think do I really want to?' However, telling some people is a risk worth taking. Being gay is private, having a private life, except with you, we have a shared common experience and there are times when one has to recognise the context of the telling (Vicars, 2009).

My desire to work with "the so-called secondary material...[is derived from an understanding how it] is not a simple adjunct to the so-called primary text...[but of the ways in which] the latter inserts itself within the interstices of the former, filling holes that are always already there" (Spivak, 1976, p. xxiv). To work with/in this dialectical relationship necessitates researching with an understanding of the privileging of speech and how in representation that can be so tightly intertwined with silencing. To respond to Spivak's (1988) question of *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is to think with, how in speaking as gay/queer man it is virtually impossible to extricate a single thread of how issues of power, transformation, action, agency, and the ways in which these are discussed exist independently of the epistemic Other. Between the perilous play of speech and silence, the lines of appearance and disappearance continue to tease, puzzle, and perplex my desire to remake meaning, and in my research practice they are an articulating presence from which I hesitantly attempt to narrate the intersubjective and intertextual dimensions of humanity.

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