

Coming to writing

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Abstract

This paper attempts to engage on a practical and theoretical level with Laurel Richardson's (1997) notion of 'writing as a method of inquiry' and 'transgressive data' as defined by Elizabeth St. Pierre. The author has employed an autobiographical/biographical approach to explore the nature of academic writing from both her own perspective and from that of an undergraduate student she worked closely with in her role as study skills coordinator. Through the interweaving of the two narrative voices, and by embracing data that is subjective, personal and emotional, this piece of writing questions the privilege discourse bestows on traditional forms of writing, research and data analysis, and demonstrates the transformative potential of a more 'heartfelt' approach to academic research.

Keywords: narrative data; transgressive data; embodied texts; autoethnography; academic discourse.

Introduction

'The sweat of the heart is sweet' (Cixous, 1997, p.109)

Last night my head was filled with Helene Cixous. As I lay in the darkness, listening to the strange and unfamiliar sounds of the Spanish night, the introduction to this piece flowed around my mind. This writer, my 'unhoped for other' will, I know, permeate my writing. Inspiring me to write in a way I have never dared. I am indebted to her. Thrilled by her.

I am holding a pen. A biro. Transparent body. Black cap. I am intrigued by the clip. Why is that piece of plastic there? A poor imitation of a more expensive pen. One that you might wear proudly in your breast pocket. I had a fountain pen as a child. I loved to write with it.

But I was too slow. It took too long for me to form the letters. Nowadays I prefer a fine-nibbed Bic.

What am I trying to achieve in this piece of writing? I am not sure. Mireille Calle-Gruber says that in writing 'there is a necessity of abandoning oneself, of abandoning a conventional image of oneself, of letting oneself go, of practising a permeability, a vulnerability' (cited Cixous, 1997, p.111). I want my writing to stand as a challenge to writing. To my own writing. To writing that conforms and conceals. To writing that is readily accepted and acceptable. The kind of writing which I hide behind because I don't want to feel vulnerable. Exposed.

My story/Gill's story – narrating the personal

I was always 'good' at writing. Whatever that means. I like words. I love reading. I have always found it easier to express myself in the written form. Gill is the opposite. A natural talker. Open and honest and unafraid to express what she feels. How she feels. She doesn't need to hide behind the pen, or use the keyboard to protect her. Her words aren't filtered, diluted, constructed and arranged on a page. They come tumbling out of her mouth, fully formed and ready to go. And that is how she writes. A tumble of words. Ideas scattered across a page. Thoughts voiced. You could always hear Gill's spoken voice in her writing. But we can't write as we speak, can we? Gill knew that. And yet, even in the academic world she now found herself in, she wrote as she spoke. She couldn't help herself. Together we would go back and try and mould her words into something a bit more 'academic'. Until she felt she had disguised herself enough. Until her words no longer betrayed her. Exposed her. Who did she think she was anyway? Doing a degree at her age. Let me introduce Gill.

I met Gill not long after I started my new job as a Study Skills Coordinator at a small University College. She came to me for help with her writing. 'I can't do it', she said, 'I know what I want to say but I can't get it down on paper'. I didn't know then how often I would hear those words over the next two years. And not just from Gill. But from all those students, 'traditional' or otherwise, who struggle to access academic discourse.

It was Gill's frustration that I responded to I think. She was writing her dissertation on a Family Support Centre she had worked at and that was being closed down. She was determined to document what was happening. To tell the story of the people who used the centre and how funding issues had been put above their needs. But Gill was tired, tired of being told her writing was too descriptive. Not 'academic' enough. That her punctuation was faulty, her structure poor. What did it matter when these families, vulnerable and in need of support, were being farmed out, palmed off, ignored? And so we met. Sometimes over a cup of tea, often hungry. Our stomachs rumbling in unison. Me the 'expert' writer, the one with the 'skills' Gill desired, required. Gill, full of passion and honest compassion for her fellow (wo)man. But convinced that she was 'crap at writing'. I read one of Gill's essays once. She wrote about her husband who had died of cancer and how it had nearly crushed her. And how she had picked herself up off the floor for the sake of her daughter. It made me cry. I didn't think she was crap at writing at all.

I wonder if my writing has ever moved anyone to tears? I am sure not. Gill had made me cry. Elizabeth St. Pierre too. I cried again yesterday reading Laurel Richardson on the train. The story of Louisa May a single mother born and raised in the deep South, written not as prose, but in the form of a poem. Louisa May's words. Laurel Richardson's poetry. Beautiful. Serious. Challenging. Intensely moving. Like Elizabeth St. Pierre and Laurel Richardson, I felt there was a deep ethical sense of purpose to Gill's work, a desire to tell the story of a vulnerable group of people whose lives had been profoundly affected by the closure of the Family Support Centre. In order to do these lives justice, Gill had applied academic rigour to her work. She had read and researched. She had identified and contextualised procedures and policies. She had talked to those directly involved, and given them the opportunity to speak. She had recorded their words and represented them fairly and accurately. But the dissertation was hard for her. Hard to write. Hard to structure. But the hardest thing for Gill, I think, was to make her impassioned words fit into the academic straightjacket. She brought me her supervisor's feedback: 'Too descriptive. Too personal'. Her writing had failed to create the 'illusion of objectivity' demanded by the academy (Richardson, 1997). Well, for Gill it was personal.

Early on in the writing of this piece, I asked Gill to read what I had written about her. This is the e-mail she sent back to me:

Dear Helen

Wow what a great begining and so personal and by the way i think of you has a friend too.

LOL punctuation and grammar shocking HA HA

It shows a relationship between a tutor and a student developing in a very informal way within a formal environment great.

And your right there were definately times i wanted to throw in the towel but refused too and your support help with that decision

you know helen i have had to overcome many personal perceptions and barriers in achieving the goal of gaining a 2:1 degree.

Personally my life has been filled with various family issues were my early self belief was pretty low, losing my husband, family issues, were all issues that at times played a role in my disbelief in being able to achieve gaining a degree and now those same issues are still placing doubt in my abilities in turning this degree into a career i will overcome my doubts and i will succeed and the support i have gained via study skills services has helped me to realise i can do this and if i need to ask for help it is not a negative but a positive aspect in moving forward.

frustrations at uni = when a tutors would not return essays for collection in on time... because i wanted the feedback. when essays were misplaced and my placement folder was only found when i had completed my dissertation and the folder contained all my background information for my dissie very annoying.

hope that helps anything else just ask ok

Gill ☺

I am not sure whose story I am telling; mine or Gill's. I am not sure that it even matters, or even if they can be separated. Why Gill and not any of the other students I worked with?

Perhaps it is just that we get along, that I liked her from the outset. That we shared something, our age, our gender, our passion. Does that compromise the telling? Or enrich it? I hope the latter. I hope that the bond that we have formed over the past two years gives my writing more validity, not less, a sense of the 'radical reciprocity' that friendship as a method of enquiry demands (Tillmann-Healy, 2003).

Lost data – evidencing lived experience

Yesterday I realised that I have lost the recordings I made of my early study skills sessions with Gill. I swore. Then I cried. How can I finish my essay? I have lost her words. I have no hard data. No proof. All I have left are the audio files Gill recorded for me at home while she was working on her dissertation. I had given her a digital recorder and had asked her to talk through her thoughts and feelings. Gill knew I was hoping to use some of the data in my writing and she seemed a bit nervous when she brought the recorder back. 'I hope it's alright' she had said. When I play them back I understand the source of her anxiety. The voice is Gill's, but it is another Gill. 'Academic Gill'. Talking herself through her essays, justifying her research, analysing her data. Her language is formal, stilted, her accent muted. This isn't the Gill I wanted to present. The warmth, the passion, is all missing. Gill is performing to the recorder, in the same way she felt she had to perform in her writing.

I read back over this paragraph and I am at once struck by the way I have positioned myself in relation to Gill. My words surprise me in the re-reading. Shock me a little. Disappoint me. There I am, exerting my authority over my 'data'. I am frustrated because the version of Gill I had wanted to present is gone. Lost. Erased. I wonder how Gill would feel about my desire to show her to the world as I see her, when I have no real knowledge of how she sees herself, let alone how she would like to be seen. I refer to her in the extract as 'academic Gill', insinuating that this is some how inferior to 'real Gill'. Yet much of the driving force behind this paper is the desire to underscore the validity of Gill's academic work and to acknowledge how much her writing has helped me develop my own. For me, the lost recordings were a record of conversations that laid the foundations of a friendship and capture, in a particular temporal and spatial context, the developing relationship between two people trying to make sense of academic discourse. For this reason they were valuable to me, but perhaps they are less so for Gill, for they also captured her frustration and disappointment with what she felt was her lack of 'academic'

skills. The other recordings were made by Gill in the knowledge that they were part of my research, and they self consciously demonstrate the extent to which she had learned the language of the academy. They are proof of her success, her hard won 'academic voice'. I think I should send them to Gill and ask her what she thinks. How does she feel now as she listens to herself? I am sure she will not share my frustration that her words at times seem to objectify her out of existence (Richardson, 1997). I am sure she will feel proud. And so she should.

I cook lunch for Gill and tell her about the recordings. She laughs when I tell her that I am going to use the loss to argue for the validity of autoethnographic research, of writing as a method of inquiry, and the value of transgressive data. We talk over how the placement folder she had given to a tutor 'went missing' a few months before her dissertation deadline. In it was much of the data she had collected from her time working at the Family Support Unit. It turned up again in July. Too late for Gill to use in her dissertation. Pissertation. I steal the word from Helene Cixous (1991, p.54) I must remember to tell Gill, I think it would make her laugh.

Thinking about the lost data, reminds me of an incident I witnessed at a Learning and Teaching conference. The keynote speaker had talked at length about the researcher's ethical obligations towards his/her participants. A member of the audience raised his hand to comment. He was clearly agitated and grew more so as he recounted how his own research had been 'sabotaged' at a late stage by a number of the participants exercising their right to withdraw from the study. Who protects me was his cry? All that time, all that effort. For nothing. And I remember thinking, but how can the data be 'lost'? Nothing can take away those people's stories, their experiences. Surely the researcher will forever be touched, influenced, changed by what he had heard? It seemed to me that what really angered him wasn't so much the 'loss' of the data, but the loss of the opportunity to 'use' that data. To present it, publish it, profit from it. By withdrawing their permission, the participants had denied him what he felt was his right to public recognition for his work. His data represented his 'desire for validity' (St. Pierre, 1997a). So I too have lost my 'hard data'. Quite literally it has been erased. So what? It never belonged to me anyway. It was nothing but a few moments in time. A conversation between two women. Perhaps it captured something. The frustration Gill felt with her writing. The bitter disappointment with the mark she had received for an essay she had put her heart and soul into. A snapshot of the dynamics of our relationship. But then, so many of our conversations are equally as

lost. Unrecorded. Unsubstantiated. Untraceable. And yet they are not lost. They are here in this essay. They have shaped, and continue to shape, my thinking. Like Elizabeth St. Pierre, I prefer to think of those conversations as living 'crabgrass' that will forever spring up in my thoughts and writing and research (1997b, p.403). They are part of who I am and how I see the world. I carry them in my head and heart.

Academic discourse – blurring the boundaries

But what of those 'transcendental signifiers' that have shaped academic thought and knowledge production for so long? What of method, validity, truth, power, rationality, and objectivity? Where is my method? Where is my proof? Can these concepts really be put aside and leave anything of any academic 'worth' behind? Elizabeth St. Pierre argues that there is nothing 'nihilistic or apolitical or irrational or relativistic or anarchistic or unethical about the task of resignification' (St. Pierre, 1997a, p.176), rather, by placing such concepts 'sous rature', by questioning the very concepts these words claim to unambiguously signify, what we can do is begin to 'throw off the burden of a life weighed down by the transcendence of 'higher values', values whose worth is not at all self-evident' (St. Pierre, 1997a, p.176). I know Gill often felt weighed down, burdened by a 'dead language' (Bourdieu et al., 1994) that squeezed the life-blood out of her writing, but I have also come to see how my own writing has been constrained by academic discourse. Brookfield (1995, p.28) says that by consulting our autobiographies as teachers and learners 'we become viscerally connected to what our own students are experiencing'. I like the word visceral. I look it up in the dictionary: 'of or affecting the viscera. Characterised by instinct rather than intellect'. Embodied, Cixous might say.

As I write I wonder if I am experiencing the same physical and mental frustrations that I often sensed in Gill. I certainly feel unsure and inadequate. Stuttering and stammering in my writing as I try to escape the 'academic' and discover within myself a more 'literary' voice. What is a stammer but a physical manifestation of hesitation, uncertainty, of fear? Gale and Wyatt (2006, p.1126) argue that it is in fact this act of stammering that gives writing its vitality; its power to invigorate, 'eloquence, confidence, and certainty seem, by contrast, to distance, to close down'. I think about the book I am reading, *Divisadero* by Michael Ondaatje. The book is named after a street, so called because it used to form the boundary between San Francisco and the fields of the Presidio. The name is said to

derive from the Spanish word for 'division' or perhaps from the word 'divisar': 'to gaze at something from a distance'. Division and distance. The founding principles of academic discourse. Ondaatje writes so beautifully, so lyrically, that I can only read a few pages at a time. The language is so rich I can only take it in little sips. Helicodal, helix, villanelle. These unfamiliar words call to me. I can't find helicodal or villanelle in the dictionary. But I find helix: 'A spiral. The incurving fold that forms the margin of the external ear'. I like that too. Listening is what I do. I listen to the stories of others. I try to listen 'around' and 'beyond' the words (Ellis and Berger, 2003) and to tell the stories that I hear. And in the listening, as in the telling, I am changed.

Foucault says of his own research, that everything he does is done 'with the conviction that it may be of use' (Foucault 1980/2000, cited St. Pierre, 2004, p.293). I cannot say what use this piece of writing is except that it has been useful to me. Cixous (1997) states that the principle enemy in life is fear and that for her, writing only has meaning if it makes the fear retreat. I have written in a way that I have never written before. And it has made me feel both vulnerable and liberated. My hope was to invoke a 'lived experience that challenges, if not subverts, traditional forms of empirical description' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003, p.4). I wanted to explore the notion of researcher as writer with the literary privilege to be 'experimental, avante-garde, multivocal, transgressing' (Clifford 1986, cited Richardson, 1997, p.16). By weaving Gill's story into my own, I wanted to strip away the hierarchical positions of power inherent in the researcher/participant relationship and to celebrate the validity of 'narrative knowing' (Richardson, 1997). I wanted to embrace St. Pierre's notions of transgressive data both by making space for emotions, senses and dreams, and by inviting Gill to read and respond to what I have written. Sharing my writing has extended and deepened a precious friendship and challenged my own natural inclination to function as a 'lone scholar' (Hood 1985, cited St. Pierre, 1997a, p.184). It has also revealed so much to me about the ways in which traditional academic discourse divides and distances. As a result, I have begun to question the very nature of 'data' and to recognise the vital importance of doing so, for as St. Pierre (1997a) argues, when we put a signifier like **data** under erasure, 'the entire structure that includes it begins to fall apart' (St. Pierre, 1997a, p.179).

And yet I still find myself troubled. Post-modern approaches to social research certainly have the potential to liberate the researcher and I am intrigued and excited by the sense in which the shackles which have bound academic research are being so imaginatively and

creatively shed. Even so, I am still a little afraid that I haven't succeeded, that I haven't the talent to evoke what Clifford (1986, cited Richardson, 1997, p.16) terms the 'higher values' of literature; 'taste, aesthetics, ethics, humanity and morality', and that as a result my work may come across as simplistic and self-indulgent. I am also concerned that I possess the **authoritative** voice in the research, that I have objectified Gill, that I am still the 'voice above'. Still divided. Still distant. I wonder how Louisa May feels about her words becoming the poetry of Laurel Richardson. The lyrical beauty of the work is undeniable, yet Louisa May is not so much the co-constructor of the text as the supplier of the raw materials. In the same way, I have chosen to construct Gill from the words she has given me in the way that reflects and reinforces my own agenda, my own narrative. I begin to wonder if the only story I can really tell is my own. Can I, can anyone, write another without doing at least some harm? There are, of course, ethical dilemmas inherent in all 'research', in all attempts to represent another, even oneself, as St. Pierre (1997b) points out, little that drives us is ever truly 'innocent'. She argues that traditional research has circumvented these thorny issues by hiding behind the rituals of consent forms and conducting member checks, but for poststructural writers there is no such hiding place. As the traditional binaries of researcher and participant dissolve, so a new, or at least different, moral space emerges. What might fill it? Foucault (1972) talks of 'care of the self', the ancient Greek concept that requires us to take full responsibility for our actions. Unlike the Christian belief in morality as deriving from obedience to a code of rules, 'care of the self' requires us to recognise that what we do is who we are. Only in this way, Foucault argues, may we begin to 'construct ourselves as ethical subjects in relation, not only to others, but to ourselves as well' (St. Pierre, 1997b, p.410). I hope I have done justice to Gill, and, as I embark on my fledgling 'academic' career, I am acutely aware that if I am to retain any intellectual and spiritual integrity with respect to myself and my students, I must continue to seek out and celebrate academic approaches that favour 'exteriority, motion, chance, and variation outside the contrived confines of a [traditional] text' (St. Pierre, 1997b, p.409),

Gill, and the wonderful writers who have inspired this piece of work, Laurel Richardson, Elizabeth St. Pierre, Helene Cixous, Michel Foucault and Ron Pelias, write from the heart. But as Gill found out, traditional academic discourse doesn't value the heart, only a 'bloodless prose' (Stoller xv, cited Pelias, 2004, p.10), and textualized data that can be 'coded, categorized, analyzed, and interpreted' (St. Pierre, 1997b, p.411). My hope, then, is that this piece of writing goes some way towards reflecting my own deeply held

conviction that there can, and should, be an opening up to difference, a deeper questioning of the value judgements imposed on teaching and learning practices, and a final recognition that the heart has a central place in academic writing. If those of us working in education wish it to be 'more worthy of and...not betray those who come to it with hopes and dreams of splendid transformation' (St. Pierre, 2004, p.293), then we need to embrace academic writing as 'an exquisitely brazen, ethically astute rhizome that deterritorializes subjects and method' (St. Pierre, 1997b, p.414).

I send Gill what I have written so far. This is what she wrote back:

hey helen

wow i think your essay is fabulous, im just sorry it took me so long to reply
 new email address my old one freespirit i think wouldnt go down well when
 applying for work haha..... i love the way you write and what your words say
 about me is true i did feel that the academic world was frustrating for me to
 truly write what i felt was relevant to my essays and now that i have a
 degree i haev been afraid to apply for a lot of work because i didnt feel qualified
 enough and felt the agencies wouldnt think i was good enough.....
 so even though i know i could do the work i was still fighting an inner battle of
 confidence i believe i am getting over that now and an applying for work
 more often now so hopefully i shall get work soon i
 would love to meet up again before crimbo if tha is possible as i know you are busy
 you should come over one evening and ill crack open a bottle of
 wine..... if you need anything else from me dont hesitate to ask ok :-)

The e-mail makes me feel a little sad. As she prepares to enter the workplace once more, Gill no longer feels she can identify herself as a 'free spirit'. There is the ongoing battle with her confidence, the cracks in her dream of a 'splendid transformation'. Elizabeth St. Pierre writes of data that transgresses. I wonder if data can also transform. I go back to the audio files that Gill recorded for me and I am struck by the way the language resonates in different ways. Many of the recordings capture Gill talking herself through her academic assignments, the outline for her presentation, essay plans, the data analysis for her dissertation. I realise that I had never listened to them all, for when I listen to one of the

later tracks, it knocks the breath out me. It is so personal, so emotional, a cry for help that I never heard.

To transcribe or not – dis/embodied texts

I have thought a lot about Laurel Richardson, and her use of poetry to represent Louisa May's words and experiences. I listen to the track again and in the rawness of Gill's words it suddenly became clear why the poetry has such value. Written as prose Gill's words are lifeless. Written as a poem, they take on a different quality. A greater emotional intensity. Cixous (1991) says that for us to hear the vibrations there must be silence.

I am panicking like crazy here
 Less than 8 weeks to get everything done
 Feels like I'm running a marathon
 I've hit 23 miles
 I've hit a brick wall
 My brain seems to stop functioning
 I'm ignoring what I've got to
 I'm too scared to do it

I select three audio files and ask Gill to listen to them again and record her responses a year on. St. Pierre talks of the importance of response data, how its 'sprawling tendrils' have the power to 'creep into and dehisce the staged unity of every research project' (St. Pierre, 1997, p.186). As I listen back to Gill's responses to the original three recordings, I am overwhelmed on so many levels by the richness of the data. The possibilities it offers for insight, expression and transformation. Another poem makes itself heard through Gill's words as she travels back to a time and place which she remembers but no longer recognises.

It took me back to
 The fear
 Working towards a dissertation
 The workload
 Earning money

Keeping a house
Giving time to my child
My voice
Out of breath
Talking rather fast
It didn't sound like me
But it was
And how important you were to me
At that time
Like an anchor
I don't know how I would've got through

'A poem masquerading as a transcript and a transcript masquerading as a poem'
(Richardson, 1997, p.139). Gill's words. My 'poetry'. Cixous (1991) says that we write with our ears. When I write Gill's words as a poem, I can hear her.

I become fascinated, not just by Gill's words, but by the very act of transcribing. The process itself is so revealing. It begins with my first scribbled notes, in pencil. Capitalised and apostrophised, almost no full stops, and only a few commas. Commas and full stops, the written 'pause for breath'. Some of them do fall where Gill paused. But most do not. I transcribe again, this time I work on the computer, I use three dots to indicate the pauses.

I am panicking like crazy here I've got less than 8 weeks to get everything done ... I've still got to get my dissertation together ... I've got to pull together one PowerPoint that I've done for Race and Racism ... I've still got the portfolio and essay to do ... Welfare I've got a PowerPoint and a report to do ... and I'm just lacking in time ... it feels like I'm running a marathon and I've hit 23 miles and I've hit a brick wall ... my brain seems to stop functioning ... I'm ignoring what I've got to do because I'm too scared to do it ... I've got such little time ... and I've worked constantly over the last couple of weeks to get some money in ... which I need um I'm going to go and see Helen tomorrow ... hopefully she can structure me a timetable and ... I can have a continual link with her along the line so ... I can get my motivation ... I might be asking her to go beyond what she's paid to do but I'm hoping she will ... kick me up the rear end ... and give me what I need

Does the transcript reflect the spoken word any more for that? Not really. Although somehow it looks less 'written'. I take out the punctuation completely.

i am panicking like crazy here ive got less than 8 weeks to get everything done ive still got to get my dissertation together ive got to pull together one powerpoint that ive done for race and racism. ive still got the portfolio and essay to do welfare ive got a powerpoint and a report to do, and im just lacking in time it feels like im running a marathon and ive hit 23 miles and ive hit a brick wall my brain seems to stop functioning im ignoring what ive got to do because im too scared to do it ive got such little time and ive worked constantly over the last couple of weeks to get some money in which i need im going to go and see helen tomorrow hopefully she can structure me a timetable and i can have a continual link with her along the line so i can get my motivation i might be asking her to go beyond what shes paid to do but im hoping she will kick me up the rear end and give me what i need

I work on the words again. No punctuation, no pauses, a tumble of words.

iampanickinglikecrazyhereivegotlessthan8weekstogeteverythingdoneivestillgottogetmydissertationtogetherivegottopulltogetheronepowerpointthativedoneforraceandracismivestillgottheportfolioandessaytodowelfareivegotapowerpointandareporttodoandimjustlackingintimeitfeelslikeimrunningamarathonandivehit23milesandivehitabrickwallmybrainseemstostopfunctioningimignoringwhativegottodobecauseimtooscaredtodoitivegotsuchlittletimeandiveworkedconstantlyoverthelastcoupleofweekstogetsomemoneyinwhichineedimgoingtogoandseehelentomorrowhopefullyshecanstructuremeatimetableandicanhaveacontinuallinkwithheralongthelinesoicangetmy motivationimightbeaskinghertogobeyondwhatshespaidtodobutimhopingshewillkickmeuptherearendandgivemewhatineed

It feels, perhaps looks closer to a stream of consciousness. No elaborate transcription format to reveal what is 'really going on' (Davies and Gannon, 2006, p.1). But why transcribe at all in the digital post modern age? Are we not just hanging on (surely by our fingernails by now) to the modernist view of 'data'? Davies and Gannon (2006) and Richardson (1997) argue that transcription is an attempt to make sense-making more 'scientific' by engaging in elaborate forms of coding and quantifying. Underlying the process of transcription is:

The belief that the purpose of the text is to convey information, as though information consists of facts or themes or notions that exist independently of the context in which they were told, as if the story we have recorded, transcribed, edited, and rewritten as snippets is the true one: a 'science' story. (Richardson, 1997, p.140)

She argues that traditional modes of representation serve only to conceal the 'lived, interactional context in which the text was co-produced' (Richardson, 1997, p.139) and that poetic representation is not only more accessible in that it resonates as speech, but that it can also give us a 'greater chance of vicariously experiencing the self-reflexive and the transformational process of self-creation than do standard transcriptions' (Richardson, 1997, p.143). I look at the other transcripts, but I find no poetry there. But they aren't empty of meaning either. No language is. All interaction is situated in 'the context of an ongoing relationship where the personal and social identities of both interviewers and interviewees are important factors' (Ellis and Berger 2003, cited Gubrium and Holstein, 2003, p.159). When I listen, I hear Gill the person, I hear Gill the student. I hear Gill talking to the institution, as part of the institution, in the language of the institution. I hear Gill speaking to me. But who am I to Gill? She refers to me as 'an anchor', an 'avenue of support', a way of getting through. She calls me her 'study skills lecturer'. But I also hear her call to me as a friend.

Insiders/outsideers – natives and migrants

Gill sometimes refers to herself as a 'right janner'. I am not sure what she means. I think it is something to do with her accent. What I do know is that she is positioning herself as inferior. Inferior in terms of her language. Disadvantaged in terms of her background. I suppose it was partly this sense of inferiority that drove her to seek study skills support. I suppose it is also this perception that drives the widespread belief that such support is needed. That 'non-traditional' is inferior. According to Sarah Mann (2001, p.11), in recent years we have seen a kind of 'mass immigration' whereby a new breed of students now occupy a position 'akin to the colonized or migrant from the colonized land', and it is clear to both the students themselves and to those charged with 'educating' them, that this

'migrant's' place is at the bottom of the hierarchy. Gill talks a lot of the difficulties she faced re-entering education:

Being a single parent um and always being independent and not relying on others and going into university asking for help was a massive thing for me to do...

We can also sense her feelings of inferiority. Of otherness. There is the underlying issue she has with self-confidence:

I don't know if I can do another two years I want to but I just don't know whether I'll have the motivation the ability there's times that I feel I'm not even clever enough to be doing what I'm doing now I'm doubting myself which I don't particularly like to do.

She talks of the problems her and her fellow students experienced trying to balance their lives and their studies. Mostly they are women, most of them have families. Some work, others have a long commute. Time is an issue. Responsibilities weigh heavy. But in the recordings I can also hear Gill's pleasure in her achievements. Her pride in her 'hard won' academic voice:

um listening to myself here and working on an essay...concerning immigration...I ...broke it down it showed that I've sort of got a wider knowledge of understanding and I'm using language that...I wouldn't use or have used in my daily life before I entered university...um...and that's that's quite a nice feeling actually...to think that...I've gained a...broader knowledge...within an academic sort of world

The difficulties and frustrations that Gill, and others like her, experience in higher education, seem to me to have less to do with background, language or lack of 'study skills', and much more to do with the way particular educational discourses are constructed. Davies and Gannon (2006, p.147) argue that it is only by recognising the ways in which discourse works on us, and we on it, that we can begin to initiate some kind of change, to begin the vital process of 'disturbing and destabilizing sedimented thinking' (Davies and Gannon, 2006, p.147). And not just the thinking of others. But our own. What we can claim to 'know' 'is shaped as much by what we are **able** to think as by whatever our 'data' might be' (Davies and Gannon, 2006, p.3). I wonder what I am able to think. I suppose if we want to talk in binaries, then I am positioned on the 'positive' side of the

academic/non-academic divide. But I believe that I am also able to think, to 'know', what it is like to be on the outside, at the bottom of a hierarchy (Mann, 2001), and to be excluded by language. I have literally been a 'stranger in a strange land'. Perhaps in some ways I still am.

I am sitting in a bedroom. The windows are shuttered against the bleach white sunlight. The bed is tightly made. Everything in its place. I sit with Maria at her desk. Her essay is in front of her. We are looking at it together. Checking over her English. I move to pick up a pen. It is a fountain pen. Maria's not mine. She takes it from my hand. I look up surprised. She looks back at me. I see myself reflected in her glasses. She doesn't want me to use that pen. She doesn't think I know how.

I wrote this at a collaborative writing workshop. We had been asked to write on the theme of (mis)recognition. It took me a while to think of something 'safe'. Something that was not too personal or revealing. I began to write about a time, many years ago, when in order to fund my travels I had given English lessons to a young Greek girl named Maria. We had rented a cheap room on the roof of an apartment block for the winter and part of the deal was that I went down once a week to 'teach' the landlady's daughter. I wrote about the time Maria refused to let me use her fountain pen because she didn't think I had ever used one before. In that moment, I realised that I had not been 'recognised'. To Maria, I wasn't a British graduate with a bright future taking a year or two out to travel. I was a foreigner, a nobody, a 'stranger' who lived in a studio flat on the roof of her family home. To her, I came from a place where they didn't have fountain pens. Or know how to use them. I have never forgotten that moment. What it feels like to be stripped of your identity and to suddenly find yourself at the bottom of the heap. Because you are seen as other. Because you don't speak the language. When I read what I have written to the group, I cry.

Conclusion

There are difficult times ahead. Higher education funding is set to be cut by 449 million (Nash, 2010), and despite widespread opposition, the current government has lifted the cap on fees. The fallout is likely to impact upon the very courses and support mechanisms that were introduced in response to the widening participation agenda, silencing once again the voices from the margins. Gregoriou (2001, p.135) says that it is 'not so much

whether others can speak from positions of marginality but more whether we can receive what is different by creating margins (intervals) of discontinuity within our own pedagogical practices, narratives and genealogies'. As we move into a new era of cuts and cutbacks, I wonder if we will we begin to display even more of the 'governmentality' that Foucault (1980, p.155) argues leads the individual to exercise 'surveillance over, against himself'. If we are fearful for our jobs, if university places are squeezed, if graduate unemployment continues to rise while the economy continues to decline, then it is likely that there will be even less room made for the challenging and the experimental. Which, of course, is what makes such practices all the more important.

Foucault (1972) says that he writes so as not to have a face. I know what he means. This essay is my attempt to lift my own veil. To show my face. Conventional academic writing is a powerful discourse that conceals and excludes. In opening up my 'academic' writing to include other tropes, poetic, literary, narrative, I have tried not to hide behind an 'illusion of objectivity' and I have tried to write in a way that tangibly invokes my belief that 'an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study' (Pelias 2004, cited Gale and Wyatt, 2006, p.8).

One of the transcripts makes me smile. Listening back to her analysis of an essay question, Gill says, 'wow, look how clever I am'. She hears herself using the 'language of the academy' and I think she **is** proud. She talks again of post-graduate study. And I am happy. Perhaps in my writing, if nothing else, I have 'heeded the call' and I have given something useful back to Gill (Ellis and Berger, cited Gubrium and Holstein, 2003, p.159).

Deleuze talks of rhizomes. Elizabeth St. Pierre of crabgrass. It is spring and I think of daffodils. When I was very young, my mother let me tend one of the flower beds that lay in the shadow of our back terrace. Nothing grew in it but daffodils. In the autumn I used to help her tie the fleshy stems into knots. Through the winter they would yellow and wither. But every spring the flower bed would be filled again with audacious yellow heads. More every year. Why do daffodils grow in groups, my youngest daughter asks me. I am not sure that I know, but I think I do. I like to call it 'tuborescence'. Under the cold dark earth, when there is no outward sign of life, they grow and multiply. Split away a clump of daffodil bulbs and they will grow and multiply elsewhere. And so, I hope both in my writing and my work I can continue to champion the rhizome. The crabgrass. The daffodil. Narcissus. The flower that grew where vanity died.

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