

**Theatre of the Self: autobiography as performance**

**This paper is published in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol. 22, No. 4, July–August 2009, 399–417**

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## **Abstract**

This paper grapples with the notion of 'autobiography as performance', specifically in relation to classroom narratives around Lather's 'ontological stammering' (1998: 495) and Cavarero's 'the necessary other' (2000: 88) played out under the practitioner-researcher's gaze. The paper interrogates the shifting landscape of Higher Education, fraught with tensions as discourses of economic rationality circulate around the sector's 'widening participation' agenda and seem uncomplicatedly laced with expectations of teachers to be able to embrace all the possibilities that lie within diverse classroom 'realities'. Using and writing through autobiographical stories as an integral component of reflexivity, attempts are made to interrupt some of my growing uncomfortable-ness as a teacher within this HE landscape by re-conceptualising the subject as always becoming and as "relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined" (Butler 1993: 173).

## Introduction

My experiences as a teacher within the higher education system have become ever more characterised by different dilemmas. I find myself increasingly less comfortable as a teacher, no longer able to lean on well-rehearsed versions of myself that used to flow familiarly amongst the subjects I teach and the students I encounter. I find that increasingly, the shifting landscape of teaching is becoming fraught with tensions as discourses of economic rationality circulate around the sector's 'widening participation' agenda and seem uncomplicatedly laced with expectations of teachers to be able to embrace all the possibilities that lie within diverse classroom 'realities'. I also find myself bewildered as a practitioner-researcher who can no longer rely on a unified reality, nor singular or knowable self to reflect upon in the classroom. This paper offers a space to open up these dilemmas as I endeavour to write about some of my growing *uncomfortable-ness* as a teacher via reflecting upon past and more recent autobiographical narratives in order to begin re-shaping how I might engage with my own emotionality within the vital tensions of race in a classroom encounter.

As this paper lies within the process of practitioner research and more specifically 'writer as teacher', I turn to MacLure who suggests that, '... When researchers foreground the crafted nature of what they have written – when they point to the written-ness of their arguments.... they draw attention to their own presence in or behind the text. They are often accused by critics of putting themselves before their subjects or before the demands of knowledge or meaning, hence the charge of self-indulgence.... unhealthy self-absorption...' (2003: 111). Recognizing the growing cultural, socio-economic, racial and religious diversity within the higher education classroom, I refer to Derrida in order to address the importance of intentionally grappling with notions of the written-

ness of myself as teacher throughout this paper, ‘...There is not narcissism and non-narcissism; there are narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended. What is called non-narcissism is in general but the economy of a much more welcoming, hospitable narcissism, and one that is much more open to the experience of the Other as Other...’ (Derrida, 1995: 63). With intentions to wrestle with aspects of Derrida’s welcoming and hospitable narcissisms that attempt to find different ways of relating to the Other, I frame my writing around the notion of positioning in this paper as my ‘crafted’ gaze’, recognizing it as a curated series of viewing relationships ‘...characteristic of a particular set of social circumstances’ (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 76). Being a teacher writing through practitioner research, I also lean to Wolfreys’ interpretation of Derrida’s double act of inscription (1998: 76), where ‘...the subject is read as writing of herself writing...’ and will endeavour to ‘foreground the crafted nature of what is being written’ by writing through my gaze, as an act of gazing at myself, gazing at past and more recent texts. Particularly, I consider within these texts, how my gaze could be understood as increasingly tired, resting on constrained ‘performances of self’, always and already entangled amongst a complex web of relations.

### **Destabilizing smugness**

Giroux discusses the West’s attitude towards its own advocacy of democratic education as a ‘... political smugness that presupposes that... the West has reached its culmination...’ (1993: 41). The university system seems increasingly tied to a growing capitalist economy, with the university becoming a supportive mechanism contributing to the construction of internationalization and globalization. Usher and Edwards describe the education system as the ‘dutiful child’ (1994:24) of the Enlightenment project, which needs to bring out students’ potential. I ponder how this might position the teacher’s role and wonder what it assumes of the ways she needs to operate as a

vehicle of deliverance. Although widening participation is an agenda priority in the UK (Department of Education and Skills, 2004), I am perplexed that university systems, structures and pedagogical practices may still be understood as homogenizing vehicles. Within this context, I find myself in the classroom, becoming increasingly *uncomfortable* as a white, female teacher, reflecting and contributing to the mistaken stability of ways to understand cultural and structural relationships that characterise a particular version of western-style education. For example, Worth's notion of 'pedagogical terrorism' (1993: 26) castigates postmodern educators for rendering students invisible in the teaching and learning encounter and by doing so, undervaluing the problematic nature of the relationship between students' desire and the critical enterprise (*ibid*: 8). She argues, 'Students must become visible to themselves and to each other and valued in their differences...' (*ibid*: 8). Therefore, in relation to the teacher perpetuating practices of homogenization, Worth seems to be suggesting that educators need to recognize the complexity of attempting to mobilize students' desires as part of a pedagogical approach. This is particularly pertinent for me as I work with students on an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Studies who will themselves go on to work with children. The ways I could potentially teach students to 'bring out' or produce an appropriate work force and an economically-viable product could become a legacy as they go on to reciprocate their understandings and experiences of this process of 'training' in their work with children. Students who are trained to 'add to the economic success of the country' (Stevens, 2004: 4) might be students who are discouraged from questioning, problematizing and disturbing the status quo of the dominant discourses that currently characterise and influence the ways children and childhood are understood (Hultqvist and Dahlberg 2001). I believe that in their 'preparation' for work with children, students need to be challenged to engage with complex constructions of the child, become mindful of the ways in which political systems affect these constructions and how they impact upon the work they will go on to do in different early years contexts. For students, this requires them to

think and talk critically about the process of education and schooling and to go on to act on ideas that disrupt the re-production of legitimized and privileged forms of knowledge. However, this poses particular tensions for me as a white, female teacher, constructed as part of a system that seems to legitimize and privilege certain forms of knowledge. These mistakenly stable notions of 'knowledge' lie amongst *unstable* and always shifting classroom 'realities' of widening participation, within which as a teacher, I aspire to foster students' criticality. To unpack some of these tensions, I intend to reflect upon a series of autobiographical narratives, exploring how, as a practitioner-researcher, I am able to disturb my understandings of a classroom encounter, by moving towards writing an 'incomplete frame' (Stronach, 1996: 365) that otherwise might 'enclose' particular understandings of myself as a teacher, and of students in the classroom.

### **Writing reflexively: autobiography as performance**

Having begun to sketch a university classroom landscape potentially fraught with mistaken stability and a degree of complacency and within that, my own growing *uncomfortable-ness* as a white, western teacher, I want to turn to how MacLure's sense of written-ness might enable me as a teacher and practitioner-researcher to open up and menace some of these lingering issues. Returning to Derrida (1976, cited in Royle 2003: 64),

...a 'text' is ... no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it ... making them more complex...

In anticipation of thinking and writing about myself as a teacher and practitioner-researcher in ways that 'overrun all the limits' and continue becoming 'more complex', I consider how particular ways of knowing versions of myself could be perceived as 'a finished corpus of writing', as 'enclosed' or 'comfortable'. I also consider how this 'knowing' might contaminate and fix how I am able to understand something of my teaching and my gaze as a practitioner-researcher. In order to destabilize ways of 'knowing', I lean to Butler's notion of the subject as always becoming (1993). In her theory of gender as 'performative' (1990: 15), she writes,

...what gender "is", is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined. As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations...

Furthermore, Butler (1990: 173) contemplates, '...that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality...'. By conceptualising notions of the practitioner-researcher's gaze as 'relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined', becoming narratable within 'the various acts which constitute its reality', my interest lies in how I might write about, and re-engage with those 'constructed relations' and 'various acts' as unstable and always shifting. By using Butler's ideas, I look to different textual representations of 'enclosed' understandings of myself, for example my 'emotionality' and consider how these understandings might inform how I 'look' upon and interpret something of different classroom and practitioner research contexts that fold back into each other, but also how this 'looking' could be opened up and interrogated in relationship with 'the necessary other' (Cavarero 2000: 88). I refer to 'performances' here, not as abstract entities, nor fixed points of agency but as

attempts to capture a sense of subjectivity as permeable identity categories, often constituted through ‘... a stylized repetition of acts...’ (Butler 1990: 140).

### **Teacher as writer, writer as teacher**

I want to attend to how autobiographical narratives could be understood as useful to reflexive practitioner research. Put simply, I understand such narratives as a series of scattered stories of my life written by myself and moving between the personal and the political, the local, the historical and the cultural. As I construct them as performative texts, they also assume an active audience, as Denzin and Lincoln suggest, they ‘... create spaces for give-and-take between reader and writer...’ (2003: 8) and as Richardson writes, ‘... you become more aware of the poststructural insistence that all readers are writers, that the text is constantly being reinvented by readers...’ (2001: 37). Alzbouebi (2004: 2) suggests that ‘...As researchers we need to maintain an informed reflexive consciousness to contextualize our own subjectivity in data interpretation and representation of experiences in the research process....’ and furthermore, ‘...since no research, using any mode of inquiry, has no point of view and since research is not a value-free exercise, the challenge is not to eliminate but to document the effects of personas that influence our ... positionality....’.

Bearing this in mind, the literary genre of autobiographical writing has been reflected upon by many, including Eakin (1999), Ashley, Gilmore and Peters (1994) and Porter (2002), where ‘... autobiographical discourse seems to promote an illusion of disarming simplicity when it comes to self and self-experience...’ (Eakin 1999: ix). My intentions herein are to complicate and problematize my autobiographical self by re-positioning the idea of stories written by myself as a teacher and practitioner-researcher as I move in and out of what might constitute my constantly re-

forming understandings of my professional identity and turn to the discourse of writing within contemporary practitioner-research. There is a wealth of literature continuing to emerge which advocates the use of historical and more recent autobiographical and self-narratives within practitioner research, where common characteristics can be perceived to sweep across some of the methodological positions taken. I perceive these commonalities to be around the use of metaphor; narrative telling, writing, reading, re-telling, re-writing and re-reading; the importance of the participant's voice; notions of history and myth; the significance of self-narration within the development of social and personal identity; and the use of self-narration to disrupt and disturb a sense of 'knowing' in relation to time and context (Huber and Whelan 1999, Baumgartner 2000, Richmond 2002, Wong 2003, Sharkey 2004, Dallmer 2004). However, there are also distinguishing features that seem to emerge as different researchers struggle with different tensions and particular areas of interest. For example the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of narrative practitioner-research emerge from the work of Prendergast (2003), as well as Clandinin and Huber (2002). The focus upon tensions faced by storytelling set amongst the university as a locus of knowledge transmission is interrogated with the work of Elbaz-Luwisch (2002) and Wood and Geddis (1999). Brown (1996), Sharkey (2004) and MacLure (2003) tentatively discuss the importance within self-narration of the seemingly mundane 'self-talk' that can become complex political texts when epistemologically and methodologically the self-narratives are open to inquiry and contextual analysis and where particular attention is paid to meanings being dependant upon evolving relationships between words within them. Martínez, Saulea and Huber (2001) and Oberg and Wilson (2002) assume a position that examines the value of co-construction, co-reflection and the mutual exchange of autobiographical and metaphorical writing, exposing the practitioner-researchers to how each relates differently to writing, to metaphorical conceptions of learning, to

autobiography and to the research itself. Given this related, yet also diverse context of approaches, it is towards the interpretations made by Brown (1996) and MacLure (2003) that I lean here.

Brown (1996) introduces a theoretical framework for the use of writing produced within school-based practitioner research built around Saussure's model of linguistics (1974). He goes on to explicate this model, drawing an analogy between post-structuralist work, the meaning of a text being determined via the inter-relationship of individual words within that text, and the sequence of pieces of writing produced by practitioners within a research enquiry. Through this inter-relating of pieces of writing he suggests '... a multiple play of meaning is derived through juxtaposing the various written accounts... absolute meanings are not sought... rather meaning evolves as new contributions are introduced' (1996:263). Amongst his cautionary notes he discusses how built into the language used within each piece of writing, are '... the layers of assumptions endemic in that society's view of the world' (1996:263). I want to move these ideas into an exploration of autobiography as performance and turn to Butler (1993: 123) who uses a bracketed (I) to denote something of the diffidence of being socially constituted. She suggests that this '...idea does not censor or prohibit the use of the "I" or of the autobiographical as such; on the contrary, it is the inquiry into the ambivalent relations of power that make that use possible...'. She also suggests that the '... performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names...' (1993: 13). Therefore, I am suggesting that the narratives herein attempt to disrupt any understandings of myself as a 'finished' teacher and seek to probe at negotiable ways I might be understood as being socially constituted and 'always becoming' within contexts of undecidability (Derrida 1982:93). Perhaps by writing through narratives, they become discursive practices that enact ways of knowing or remembering and in doing so, somehow produce something of myself that becomes named, but

it is within the context of undecidability and ambivalence, that perhaps I am able to re-negotiate those names as I use fragmented historical, fictional and more recent stories to disrupt what could be understood as 'stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1990: 40). By re-conceptualising data to lie within what Denzin and Lincoln (2003: 6) describe as 'editing of cinematic images', I will attend to how a montage of autobiographical narratives might offer opportunities to re-negotiate understandings of my gaze as practitioner-researcher. My intention is that this paper becomes a text (gaze) entangled amongst other texts, somehow complexly involved in each other's perspectives. Shifting between author, spectator and reader of these texts (gazes), I become a storyteller, telling a story about other stories and reader, reading myself as storyteller. I tell three stories, namely the quilted dragon, the therapy session and the classroom encounter that all become *contexts* for self-interrogation. Different characters become 'the necessary others' (Cavarero, 2000: 88), portrayed as storytellers within the stories I tell. I want to consider what I can learn about myself (as a teacher) in relationship with those 'necessary others' as I engage in telling stories about those story tellers. I intend to use the first two stories (the quilted dragon and the therapy session) to find ways of re-reading the third story (the classroom encounter) differently in order to loosen some of the habitual and sedimented ways I have come to 'know' or understand something of myself as a teacher.

### **Story one: the quilted dragon**

I have vague recollections of my grandmother knitting a patchwork quilt. When I was a child, my mum often retrieved this knitted quilt from a drawer beneath her bed, laid it out on the lawn and it became the most wonderful multicoloured tapestry. Underneath was a great place to hide. Through the loosely knitted stitches, the apple tree becomes distorted. I can't quite see the entire tree at any

one time, but through the tiny holes I can study the bark, I can follow the curvature of the tangled branches and be drawn into the delicacy of the leaves. Through the tattered and frayed edging, I can create a different landscape, one that doesn't follow linearity, but undulates and obscures as I pull taut at the corners. The intermittent rays of sunlight change colour as they flare through the patchwork, finding snags that create a sharp and focussed array of scattered stars on the grass beneath.

### **Story two: the therapy session**

I turn to an old diary entry written after a therapy session in 1990:

'We started to talk about me not wanting to come today and I just couldn't find the reasons why. I'm just lost. I was just lost in feelings, but couldn't even find the words to describe or talk about those feelings. I must be ill. I wasn't numb. I wasn't excited or frightened. I wasn't.... I wasn't.... I wasn't.... but what was I? What makes me the woman I am and other women different? What do I understand about me being a woman, other than as the object of other people's manipulations and expectations? Why do I let myself fall into these positions, even in therapy when I feel like a play thing for the therapist and an object of ridicule and pity that the therapist could repair? Why do I feel like I really don't fit the mould? In fact, what mould do I not fit? The mould of a woman? The mould of a patient? Of a teacher? Of a daughter? I don't know. Talking can be such a drag sometimes. Even when I *can* find the words, I realise I could say anything, even if it's not what I'm thinking or how I feel. I could become a comic book character, become anything I want. Perhaps I am already. I suppose the difficulty arises when I'm known already in a particular way and so disappointingly to so many other people, so I can never really escape from being me while I exist in relationships'.

### **Story three: the classroom encounter**

Journal extract documenting my perceptions of university classroom encounters (2005):

'The classroom, Tuesday morning. I asked the students to consider why they thought the Asian community was 'absented' in this documentary ('Last White Kids', Thompson, 2003) and in response, a white student suggested that the Asian voice was not represented because 'most Asian women would stay at home' and would not have 'good enough command of the English language' to talk to the documentary-makers. A British-Kashmiri student immediately responded, suggesting this was a 'ridiculous stereotype' and an 'offensive misunderstanding' of Asian families and particularly Asian women. She seemed agitated and angry towards the white student, who seemed to respond in what I perceived as a defensive way. At this point, I began to feel uncomfortable, conscious that I wanted all students to be able to express themselves, but mindful that the emotionality swirling between students seemed to be moving them towards a confrontation... A further comment came from the British-Kashmiri student who suggested that, as a white teacher I should not allow the 'Asian' community to be constructed as an all-encompassing homogeneity, but rather as differentiated Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian families within the community. I felt 'interrupted'. This interruption to my habitual performance as 'teacher' rendered me feeling vulnerable in the classroom, a place where I do not usually feel inadequate'.

### **Disrupting the crafted gaze: trying to get lost**

This section begins to interweave these edited stories in order to create a montage where I might be able to re-think how these stories can be used to re-negotiate ways I understand the comfortably 'constructed relations' and 'various acts' that have become embedded in my autobiographical past. Within the stories, I read the autobiographical performances as having 'enclosed' something of my past within particular 'stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1990: 40). I observe a child under a quilt exploring landscapes that shift and are fragmented, yet also become mindful of an adult feeling

'lost' and struggling to know something of her emotionality within a therapy session and a classroom encounter. Ideas that seem to stagnate what it means to be emotional also seem contaminated by how I understand myself to be constructed by what I am not. The therapist and students offer interesting conceptual spaces whereby my autobiographical performances find some sense of 'repetition', as I find myself troubled by expectations swirling within the inter-subjective encounters. Within the story of the therapy session, my emotionality seemed 'enclosed' within discourses that re-affirmed my emotionality as a site of female vulnerability. I read my emotionality and feelings of 'being lost' as pathologized. I seemed to be constructed as an emotional woman and furthermore, an inappropriately emotional teacher, which perhaps was played out in my hesitations in the more recent university classroom encounter. However, in order to open up ways to re-conceptualise what seems like an 'enclosed' gaze, tied to repetitious enactments of emotionality, I contemplate how these enclosures also seemed entangled amongst ongoing resistances, which takes me back to the contorted quilt that filtered the ways I was able to 'see' the landscape through the stitches.

Although the quilt remained a filter, a way of 'seeing' the landscape that lies beyond, I was able to pull at the corners, disrupt the linearity, manoeuvre the fabric and explore what might exist in the shifting fold(s) (Deleuze, 1993). The notion of disturbance in relation to the ways I understand something of my emotionality and the ways I experience 'the necessary other', could be conceptualised as an interruption to the landscape that lies beyond the quilt. The pulling, contorting and manoeuvring seems to be a process of re-reading my autobiographical narratives, where I superimpose scattered stories and place them in temporal relationship with one another. Momentarily, this process seems to disrupt the idea of 'repetition', as I begin to notice, attend to and write through these repetitions as played out in relationship with 'the necessary other', thereby re-

considering the discourses that construct a sense of who and what I understand myself to be, and how in turn, I contribute to the discourses I write myself into. Beginning to 'unravel the quilt' and wanting to find ways to become less daunted in my *uncomfortable-ness* about 'being lost' and turn to the therapy session. Here I noted that 'I'm just lost'. The idea of 'lost' could become a metaphorical space that represents my time in therapy, perhaps times when 'performances of self' were unclear. 'Lost' could refer to a positive notion of moving or shifting, not recognising myself, a sense of 'loss'. Not knowing where I was emotionally could have inferred a space of 'free-floating' significance (Zizek 1989: 87). Atkinson discusses how, '... not knowing who I am, rather than being an admission of failure, might constitute a new recognition of the multiplicities of self ... a position where multiple identities may speak more clearly in multiple contexts...' (2001: 307). She refers to Lather's ideas around how 'being lost' could be re-framed positively as a '... stammering knowing...' (Lather, 1997: 299). I also noted how, 'I just couldn't find the words' and was 'just lost in feelings'. These comments seemed to pathologise my perceived unhealthy state, as though I *should* have had a rational self to call upon that was able to control and conform to what I thought was expected of me. Not being able to 'find the words to describe those feelings' takes me to an interesting space. If I consider the constitutive role played by language found within post-structuralist writing, I pause here to re-consider the relevance of the therapy session within the context of Lutz's work (1988: 10), who describes words used in relation to emotions as '... coalescences of complex, ethnotheoretical ideas about self and social interaction... actions or ideological practices, serving specific ends as part of the creation and negotiation of reality...'. I wonder then, what 'ends' were being served by my emotional *inarticulations*, as I negotiated a complex social interaction with the therapist? Perhaps my *inarticulation* and *uncomfortableness* is also a statement in itself about the ways I was negotiating the particular performative realities for me within the therapeutic encounter. By the non-expression of my emotions, was I finding ways to behave that resisted crude

categorisations that might disturb, rather than reinforce the relationship I thought had already been established by way of the therapist / patient 'performances'?

### **Lost in feelings**

My writing about being 'lost in feelings' also interests me here. Back in 1990 I was referred for therapy when a colleague suggested that I was 'over-emotional' at work. Was I somehow transgressing expected 'performances' as teacher, suggesting as Lupton (1998: 108) indicates that the work place is still considered a 'masculine' domain, characterised often by having '... a tight rein over the emotions, which are seen to be de-stabilizing to efficient production and management...'. This sweeps me into the more recent classroom encounter as I reflect upon my comments: 'I began to feel uncomfortable' and I felt 'vulnerable in the classroom', which seem to frame my experiences as similarly unfamiliar or perceived as being 'lost' in a negative way. I am curious, had my experiences in therapy informed my understandings of how I was expected to 'perform' as a teacher? Lupton (1998) documents her perceptions about differentiated spheres for emotion suggesting that in the workplace or public sphere, emotions are expected to be controlled. I am drawn into the distinction between what Lupton calls the 'emotional woman' and 'unemotional man' (1998: 105) and how she intimates the shifting dynamics within these oppositions with the emergence of post-structuralist perspectives on emotion. There seemed to be implicit references within these stories to me being in a particular performative role as an emotional woman and to the cultural inappropriateness of my emotionality in the classroom. As I read it against Boler (1999: 22) who suggests emotions are, '.... a site of social control ...', I wonder whether within therapeutic discourses, emotions had remained something that '... the modern rational unitary bourgeois subject strenuously denied or warded off...' (Burman 2001: 347), which suggests a link with Boler's interpretation as I contemplate, was my therapy experienced as social control, the refining or re-

establishing of a particular 'performance of self' as woman? Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990: 11) recognise that there is no division nor separateness between the emotional self and all other dynamics within selfhood, but that emotionality seems to exist as a discursive practice where '... a focus on discourse leads us to a more complex view of the multiple, shifting, and contested meanings possible in emotional utterances and from there, to a less monolithic concept of emotion...'. This raises questions around Lupton's public and private spheres (1998), where emotionality is so neatly packaged as being able to be constrained and disconnected from the complex fluidity of being in the world. Alternatively, Hargreaves (1998: 835) advocates that teacher's emotions are '... at the heart of teaching... they comprise its most dynamic qualities...' and Burman (2001: 347) goes on to explore how within a postmodern context, emotions '... no longer the opposite of reason... are now seen as its indispensable ally...'. These moments of 'being lost' or 'lost in feelings', which could become useful moments of transgression draws me back to Atkinson who discusses Derrida's 'parergon', a kind of incomplete frame (Stronach, 1996: 365), together with MacLure's '... in-between-ness...' (1996: 273), which resist tendencies to tell 'smooth stories of the self...' (MacLure, 1996: 283). Lather's getting lost is theorized as '...a fertile space and an ethical practice in asking hard questions around complicities, inadequate categories, dispersing rather than capturing meanings and producing bafflement rather than solutions...' (2004: 2). Hall (1985) suggests, '[t]he notion that the ideologies [which supply our identities] are always-already inscribed does not allow us to think adequately about the shifts of accentuation in language and ideology, which is a constant unending process' (1985: 113), so perhaps these moments of 'being lost' and feeling uncomfortable that had felt so daunting and inscribed, offer new possibilities of unravelling past inscriptions in order to disrupt any sense of certainty and transgress fixities within my classroom 'performances'.

## The necessary others

A second area of interest that seems interwoven with emotionality and lies within these stories is my expression of who I am in relationship with others and I wonder in what ways am I comfortable with how I 'know' myself as a consequence of what I am not. Gosse discusses a double-voiced autobiography (1965), similarly to Dahlberg (1964) who suggests autobiography that incorporates other figures into their lives, becomes a composite autobiography and biography. Sarrante (1984) considers how the self as represented in autobiographical writing becomes a series of competing and contentious voices and similarly Fraser (1984) argues that self cannot be constituted solely by self, but includes the perceptions and interpretations of others. Interestingly, the dynamics of different relationships characterised as 'the necessary other' are perhaps being re-positioned in these stories as I am in the process of re-configuring my 'performances of self'. This 'necessary other' seems to have become an absent presence in the inter-subjective spaces between myself and the therapist and myself and the students as shifting, dichotomous and fictive performances. I seemed to feel constrained within the positions of patient and teacher, woman and emotional, enclosed by how others expected me to be. In terms of the constitution of identities, Derrida (1978) discusses how the present is only present on the condition that it alludes to the absence from which it distinguishes itself. Every present, in order to know itself as present, bears the trace of an absent which defines it. So how was I being defined, but perhaps also constrained by absences? Derrida's inquiry into the difference within presence and absence or Self / Other leads to the recognition of a certain irreducibility of the Other with respect to the Self. Self's own identity is a function of its demarcation from the Other. Lying this against Cavarero's 'the necessary other' (2000: 88), I could begin to locate narratives that circumscribe both the *who* and *what* I thought myself to be in relation with others and perhaps sense the struggles and vulnerabilities that this seemed to create for me. Perhaps I am not the stable self I thought I was, similar to the Lacanian mirror disappointment,

where identification is a 'misrecognition' (Lacan 1968). Arendt (1958/1977) suggests the subject, '... constructs a scene where she paradoxically appears *to herself* in the only way in which she can appear – to the gaze of others...' (cited in Brightman 1995: 294). Perhaps this sense of misrecognition, instability and vulnerability are suggestive of what Bhabha (1994) might describe as 'mimicry',

... in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference... mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal... the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the... subject as a 'partial presence'... both 'incomplete' and 'virtual'.... Mimicry is at once resemblance and menace... (Bhabha, 1994: 86).

Bhabha's ambivalence around mimicry as resemblance and menace, allows me to contemplate ways to engage with the deflections and fractious moments of misrecognition, the intricacies of representation, 'representation-as-digression' (Taussig 1987: 441) and re-presentation of 'performances of self' that become useful within the stories I write myself into.

### **Mimicry: resemblance and menace**

Within the therapy session and the classroom encounter, it was as though I did not feel I was the *who*, nor the *what* that the other expected, which creates tensions as I re-consider my therapy session writing, '... I can never really escape from being me while I exist in relationships...'. Perhaps the dilemma needs to be re-configured here to enable a consideration of who or what this

unstable construct of 'me' is, or could be. I seem to have been striving to remain camouflaged as a woman, as a teacher, yet menaced by the absences, the slippages and the disavowals that seem to persist. Perhaps I need to shift my attention to moments where, in relationship with 'the necessary other', the deflections and fractious moments of misrecognition or slippages leave me feeling uncomfortably tense, for example when the therapist and the students seem to confine the *who* to the *what* they understood of me. I turn here to the struggles within the confines of resemblance, trying, but always already failing to camouflage something of the 'performer' and the 'performances'. The terms 'woman' and 'emotional' had come to signify positions that for me embraced particular expectations. However, in story three for example, the student who made reference to me as a 'white teacher' (the classroom encounter) could present a particular tension. As the 'teacher' (resemblance), the student seemed to express her expectations of me to confront the emotional and racially-motivated struggles within the classroom. However, as 'white' (menace), perhaps she was not surprised, but nevertheless troubled that I did not confront what could be understood as 'tacit intentionality.... an act of white supremacy' (Gillborn 2005: 485) in an attempt to disturb homogenizing tendencies and reductive critiques embedded within the classroom discussions. In this example, something menacing around being a 'white' teacher ruptured the classroom discourse. This tension leans towards Biesta's ethical space, where I seemed to feel already 'hostage to the other' (Peperzak 1991:62). Had I positioned 'the necessary other' in a policing role, keeping a watchful eye that I remained within the 'performances' they expected me to 'mimic' and remained the *who* that perhaps allowed their own sense of themselves in relationship with me, to stay similarly stable? Were these discursive autobiographical narratives enacting something of what I remember or 'know' of myself in repetitious ways and by doing so, producing something of myself that has become menacing or misrecognised? I am drawn to how the terms associated with me such as 'emotional', 'teacher' and 'white', by others and myself are beginning to

be re-negotiated here within this context of undecidability and ambivalence. These ideas of misrecognition and undecidability also seem to relate to a sense of 'being lost', which perhaps begins to offer opportunities to re-imagine myself as a teacher.

### **Resistance and intertextuality**

Taking these positions into consideration, I contemplate how I am beginning to build a more disruptive text that is beginning to circulate within alternative discourses, perhaps disturbing Butler's 'stylized repetition of acts' (1990: 40). Drawing from Ellsworth (1997), who describes 'coming up against stuck place after stuck place' (1997: xi) as a way to keep moving with "the impossibility of teaching" (1997: 9), Lather suggests an 'ontological stammering' (1998: 495), a critical pedagogy for new historical times, where we learn from ruptures, failures, breaks and refusals. I now want to pursue this idea amongst notions of 'getting lost' and 'refusals' by using my disruptions of stories one and two in order to return to story three, the classroom encounter and re-consider how I could begin to think and write about what I 'read' and 'see' within this story in different ways. Story three is taken from an encounter with students studying an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Studies. The session I reflected upon was part of a series of units called 'Explorations', which provide an integrating mechanism at each level of the degree programme for studying the different ways in which children and their families have been and continue to be understood. The aim within these units is to create an evolving context for engaging with discourses that both reflect and construct something of the child. Their 'purpose' is to explore ways to deconstruct narratives and visually symbolic representations of the child and seek to facilitate the students' reframing of deeply embedded concepts and understandings. In Explorations sessions, I often use film, photographs and documentary as provocative stimuli that portray particular characterised 'performances' and could also potentially disturb the habitual and inter-dependent 'performances of self' swirling

between myself and students within classroom dynamics. I would suggest that the use of film, documentary and photographs within the classroom lends itself to intertextuality, where previously 'known' texts are disturbed and students might engage in discussions that question the ways they 'know' these texts.

### **Disrupting democratic dialogues**

In order to re-consider ways I might look upon my emotionality as entangled within my 'performances as teacher' in story three (the classroom encounter), I turn to Zembylas' writing around the postmodern enactment of emotion (2005: 31). He suggests that,

...(the) teaching experience is deeply imbued with normalising power, yet the negotiation of subjectivity and emotion might provide spaces for self-reformation and resistance... An interrogation of emotional discourses, performances and practices might provoke new ways of understanding ... subjectivity....

Within the classroom encounter, rather than my vulnerability and inadequacy, I could re-read some students as disrupting notions of comfortable and containable pedagogies. Lorde (1984: 63) links '...the conceptual and political work of confronting racism with the capacity to be angry and to tolerate and use anger...', which seems provocative amongst Zembylas' suggestion (2005: 33) that, '...the role emotions play in the fabric of practices in our everyday lives... motivate and accompany the performances of subjectivity...'. However, I also turn to Mayo (2001) and her discussions around civility in public spaces, '... some forms of multiculturalism are closely bound up with efforts to minimize intergroup conflict by improving interpersonal relationships.... closely tied to instilling or cultivating a particular sort of civility...' (2001: 78). She suggests that the discourse of civility asserts

that teachers and students ought to be respectful and tolerant of everyone, which serves to neglect issues and aspects of emotionality that appear to be in and of themselves uncivil or distasteful. This suggests there is a 'civil' discussion to be had, one in which everyone in their tolerance, wants to know and be known, wants to understand and to be understood. Such a 'civil' discussion is also suggestive of what Berlak (2005) describes as a 'democratic dialogue' (2005: 143), which could be understood to foster a form of repetition that stabilizes the common wisdom. However, it might also function to suppress strong emotions and confrontation in the classroom. According to bell hooks (1994), dialogue is often confined to the standards of acceptable bourgeois decorum, which operates to undermine constructive forms of confrontation and conflict that emerge from intense, and often aversive, responses. hooks reflects upon the class biases that seem to determine pedagogical processes in the classroom,

...as silence and obedience to authority were most rewarded, students learned that this was the appropriate demeanor in the classroom. Loudness, anger, emotional outbursts, and even something as seemingly innocent as unrestrained laughter were deemed unacceptable, vulgar disruptions of classroom social order... (1994: 178).

Furthermore, perhaps this democratic tolerance and respectfulness is tainted by what Jones (1998) claims is a cannibal desire to 'know the other' through being fed by her. Lather (1998) suggests that there is a voyeuristic refusal at work, one which refuses to know that the Other may not want to be known. This classroom encounter has pushed me to contemplate Lather's ideas, but also contemplate that the Other may not have a choice, but may find herself assuming to be known in particular and reductive ways. As teachers, Jones (1998) calls for a politics of disappointment, a practice of failure, loss, confusion, unease, and limitation for dominant ethnic groups.

Interestingly, Lather discusses notions of getting lost as ‘...what it means to be not in control and to try to figure out a life...’ (2004: 1). This sense of not being in control might disturb my classroom practices of civility that otherwise, ‘...will necessarily leave out those whose presence disrupts the bias that presumes their absence...’ (Mayo, 2001: 79). Therefore, in story three by constituting something of my white, western identity as a teacher, was I denying the presence of voices who might disrupt the comfort of certain absences? Given my own cultural practices and the discursive discourses that swirl amongst dominant white narratives of race, did I police what I thought was appropriate for the classroom and by doing so, collude with the white student, failing to interrupt her constructions of all non-white families as ‘Asian’? The British-Kashmiri student took the opportunity to disrupt my habitual ‘performances’ as teacher in her challenges to the ways I was ‘performing’ being white and being unemotional around what could be described as emotive issues of race.

### **Pedagogies of discomfort**

I consider how this classroom interaction could be moved into more consensual engagements with ideas, in order to begin to address the ‘...problematic issues around sanitised oppression and its dirty work...’ (Reay 2002: 2). I could re-read this classroom encounter as a moment that disturbed the normalising tendencies of sanitised classroom discussions by moving towards Boler’s ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (1999: 176). Boler discusses how a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ invites educators and students to emotionally ‘... engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others...’ (1999: 176). I also return to Butler (1997b: 71) who suggests,

... language can hurt us because it also forms us... the wounding power of words is... a consequence of our constitutive linguistic vulnerability and ... to the interpellative effects of discourse...opening us to hurt, or affected, by 'what' we are called... might even be that which gives us the sense, through the pain or shock we feel, that *what* we are called does not correspond with *who* we feel ourselves to be....

The opening up of this pedagogical discomfort could be understood to disturb the normalising classroom practices that implicitly suggest, '... we will only interact with you on the terms that you are not actually present...' (Mayo, 2001: 80). By bringing difficult and complex issues such as race into the public shere of the university classroom, the notion of neatly packaged 'performances' being artificially banished from the inter-subjective space of the teaching and learning encounter seems an interesting idea to pursue. Perhaps emotionality as a classroom practice does render the uncomfortable messiness of problematising multiple and discontinuous voices and differentially situated knowledges as a dialogical pedagogy.

## **Footnotes**

This paper has begun to disturb ways I understand particular 'performances' in relation to how understandings of myself might inform ways I have available to me for 'seeing' as a practitioner-researcher. By leaning to intertextual 'performances', it has provided conceptual and metaphorical spaces for me to turn towards my 'performances of telling' to disrupt persuasive arguments that might otherwise remain affirmed as being as they appear to be. I turn now to implications of my written-ness for teaching and for practitioner research. In relation to the implications of this paper for teaching, I am left contemplating a number of difficult issues. If 'being lost' becomes an opportunity

to embrace ideas around a 'fertile space... producing bafflement' (Lather, 2004: 2), then the classroom becomes a more dangerous space as I interrogate 'performances of self' alongside difficult issues, de-stabilising and politicising taken-for-granted 'knowledges' about self and other. If I recognise that dominant regimes of truth (Foucault 1977) cannot be left undisturbed, and that a move to 'democratic dialogue' can serve to reinscribe particular absences, then how *uncomfortable* or '*uncivil*' should it become in the classroom? How could I perceive and regulate the boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable emotionality in a different, less 'enclosed' ways without constraining emotional engagement and expression? Tying ideas around the emotional teacher into teaching aspects of 'race' as a white teacher, I turn to Ahmed who suggests that,

... to hear the work of exposure requires that white subjects inhabit the critique...the desire to act in a non-racist or anti-racist way... can function as a defense against hearing how that racism implicates which subjects, in the sense that it shapes the spaces inhabited by white subjects...the desire for action... does not necessarily involve the concealment of racism...such a question rushes too quickly past the exposure of racism and hence risks such concealment in the very 'return' of its address...(2004: 81).

Ahmed's ideas return me to emotionality in the classroom. Minha-ha (1989) suggests that we need to '...practice ways of reading and writing, speaking and listening, in which one's authority comes from one's ability to confront one's own privileges rather than to merely confront the privileges of others' (1989: 193). If I perceive my 'whiteness' as a privilege, then I must also consider how '... white privilege can be painful because it means giving up the myth of meritocracy...' (Goldstein, 2001: 9). What could be described as the painful and lingering work of exposure, together with the

difficult notion of declaration as the 'admission', which '... itself becomes seen as good practice...' (Ahmed 2004: 71) seem to become complexities I need to address within this landscape of myself as a white teacher. I would want to encourage students and myself to be challenged by our mutually critical, albeit stammering gazes that obstruct and resist our comfortableness as these moments could provoke both students and myself to re-think our assumptions. It also must be noted that there is potential for some students to become tokenistic gestures within a liberal educational discourse. However, if the students and I avoid these emotional risks, we detract from the possibilities of Boler's *discomfort* (1999), rendering the barriers that protect hegemonizing white practices and practices of emotional capital firmly secured within classroom behaviours. As I reflect upon the comments made by the two students, I have begun to consider how the shifting racial dynamics within the classroom space interacted and could take this on further to contemplate my own responses to this interaction as I consider how I might begin to enable student desires to be mobilized within this pedagogical practice. As the multiplicity of 'social realities' begin to create interesting tensions in the classroom, I realise that I should not leave them unattended or unprovoked.

With reference to my practitioner-research, I find the intricacies within this paper are suggestive of being able to produce certain types of readings of particular contexts at particular times. By bringing together different autobiographical texts, I have attempted to represent my self-narration as 'representations-as-digression' (Tausig 1987: 441). This shifting process of representation seems to have dislocated my understandings of myself from 'enclosed' conceptual positionings and I now find myself entangled amongst Derrida's 'folding back' process (1981:104), using writing as a process of 'dis-covering' (1981: 154), where the text becomes a tissue, a web or a tapestry. I find possibilities within what Derrida (1981: 83) describes as, '...the same tissue, within the same texts,

we will draw on other filial filaments, pull the same strings once more, and witness the weaving or unraveling of other designs...'. Boyne suggests that, '...Derrida's thoughts are like some mischievous lubricant which...searches through the cracks into places formerly unknown...' (1990: 91). This paper has allowed me space to speak *within* particular discursive practices about things not generally spoken of, or only spoken of in particular ways before. For example, I feel that my practitioner-researcher role has begun to be re-imagined as I re-consider the emotional character of the deeply interwoven teaching and research processes. Burman intimates that '... emotional matters belong to the researcher at least as much as the researched...' (1998: 14), which opens up possibilities and potential to understand myself as embroiled within the process, being cognisant of my own presence in or behind the teaching and practitioner research 'texts'.

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