Invoking Mnemosyne

Art, Memory, and the Uncertain Emergence of a Feminist Embodied Methodology

Kelly Clark/Keefe

Appalachian State University, Boone, USA

What would it mean to map out the possibilities of a social scientific inquiry that makes the relational, creative, and embodied dimensions of storied knowledge and its production prominent? How might researchers engage memory, affect, and the arts in order to intentionally and meaningfully blend the cognitive acts of discursively conveying and receiving story with the somatic states of both the researcher and participants? Across this volume, readers encounter the author’s qualitative inquiry into the lives of women academics, including herself, who originated from working-class or poverty-class backgrounds. Unconventionally conveyed, these encounters take shape as a self-speculative critique of the author’s feminist research practice, moving readers into the folds of the work to consider what constructivist, poststructural, and material feminist theories and methodologies do to the story she was able to tell at the time that she told it. Art is implicated throughout as a site for provocation, theorization, and encounter, with nine original works of visual art, including the book’s cover image, accompanying the text. Written in a tone that is at once rigorous and accessible, the book expands theoretical perspectives about the role of bodies and creativity during the social scientific process generally and about identity research specifically. Invoking Mnemosyne will be an important text for faculty who teach and/or conduct social research, as well as graduate students and advanced undergraduates taking courses in sociology of science, philosophy of science, ethnography, feminist methodology, women and gender studies, and qualitative research in education and related social science fields.
Invoking Mnemosyne
Bold Visions in Educational Research
Volume 31

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Kelly Clark/Keefe
Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA
DEDICATION

For Corrine Glesne
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**

I would like to extend my appreciation to RMIT Publishing and to the Editor of the their journal Creative Approaches to Research, Julie White of Latrobe University, for permission to reprint a slightly revised version of the following article, which appears as Chapter 4 in this volume:


Similarly, I would like to thank Appalachian State University and Sage Publications for permission to reprint the work titled Dance of Dissonance, appearing in Chapter 1, this volume. This poem and accompanying painting first appeared in print as:


The poem was also published in the following article:

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\(^1\) All images in this book can be viewed in an enlarged, full-color format by visiting the author’s website at: http://faculty.roe.appstate.edu/clarkkeefeka/kellyswebpage/scholarship.html
ENCOUNTERING QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed. In this sense it is opposed to recognition...

Second character: that which can only be sensed (the sentiendum or the being of the sensible) moves the soul, ‘perplexes’ it—in other words forces it to pose a problem: as though the object of encounter, the sign, were the bearer of a problem—as though it were a problem. (Deleuze, 1968/1994, pp. 139–140, emphasis original)

To recognize an object, a concept, a subject is fundamentally different than to encounter it. Recognition is characterized by resemblance, repetition, “a first step towards a much more general postulate of representation” (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 138). In the act of recognition, we reconfirm our beliefs, our knowledge about ourselves and our world, as that which we already understand. When we recognize, we see “that which offers itself as common-sensical, obvious, natural, given or unquestionable” (MacLure, 2003, p. 9) and, that being the case, we’ve no real need, no inclination to think. With an encounter however, we are forced to think. Encounters disrupt, dislodge, disconfirm or usual modes of being, our habitual sense of the ways things are or ought to be, including our sense of our selves.

Three Encounters

Qualitative research can be the object of an encounter and the name of the encounter itself, where a breach or rupture of the social world or its inhabitants as we know them occurs, pressing open the possibility of seeing differently, of differently seeing and creating, of inciting another encounter, of forcing thought anew. Qualitative research can also, of course, be the object and subject of recognition, a work of and for establishing what we view as different only in terms of a perceived similitude, a judged analogy, an identification, a comparison to what we understand and believe to be its opposite, its ‘other’.

This book explores three encounters with qualitative research that I have had—or that have had me. These encounters have shaped and been shaped by my sense of what it means (or can mean) to do social and human inquiry especially in the
context of education. These encounters have had a hand in constituting who I am and how I am in the world. In this way, the book is a methodological and personal archive, a text that traces encounters with qualitative inquiry written from the perspective of someone having been “born” by and involved in giving it life along the way (Davies & Gannon, 2006).

The first encounter that this book tracks is my context for learning and investments in feminist poststructuralism. Through writings that articulate a post-humanist conceptualization of the ‘subject’, one that asserts the discursive, contingent, non-unitary nature of identity, I have been forced to thought, inspired, made mad, and provoked to question commonplace representations of people, structures, and categories. First-generation college student subjectivities is the thematic itch I have long tried to scratch via qualitative methods, and post structural critiques of language’s role in investing categories of ‘first-generation’ identity and related power relations coupled with feminist postfoundational studies of social science have helped me think differently about how I think, about how the world might work, “open[ing] up what seems “natural” to other possibilities” (St. Pierre, 2000b, p. 479).

A second encounter follows from the first, namely one of doubt and an investment in bodies. It is in this vain that especially Chapter 2 can be seen as yet another introduction, one concerned with revealing my affective and aesthetic antagonism toward the language/reality dichotomy that tacitly lurks through much postmodern and poststructural writing, including some of the writing I do in Chapter 1. My attention to the potential circumvention of the material body during what is a decidedly “linguistic turn” in both contemporary feminism and social science studies, sets in motion a challenge to explore the epistemological murky yet I argue productive middle between material feminism and poststructuralism. A dog, some dreams, doing data differently, and Deleuze all force me to thought during this encounter, setting the stage for a particular set of methodological desires and incitements that work to expand the rules for engagement in qualitative research.

A third encounter therefore follows from, or more accurately pushes through, the first and second. This encounter involves my theorizing and practicing art as a complex ‘event’; as that which “moves the soul, ‘perplexes’ it—in other words forces it to pose a problem” (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 140). The “problem” that art poses, especially in Chapters 3–5, brings us back to the potential of the material-discursive subject, the murky middle, and does so with figurations (Braidotti, 1994; St. Pierre, 1997a, 2008) and figures (Deleuze, 1981/2003). My maneuvers with, for example, a muse and the monstrous, function as aesthetic and conceptual incitements, provoking to the fore art’s asignifying and affective potential for rendering “imperceptible forces” (Deleuze, 1968/1994)—for opening our recognitions to scrutiny and to possibilities unaccounted for.

Attitude and Intentions in what Lies Ahead

Affectivity plays a big role in the work that lies ahead. Most times intentional other times incidental, I express myself throughout this text in a “conceptual style that refuses to engage in negative criticism for its own sake and acts instead from
positive and empowering relationships to texts, authors and ideas” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 205). I write with a cognitive brand of empathy and compassion, an “intense affinity” (Braidotti, 2006) for people, the planet, and ways of inquiring about both. In this spirit, I write, think—encounter—with less concern for getting a feminist embodied inquiry, Deleuze, affectivity, or anything else for that matter ‘right’ than in producing incitements and alliances. I am interested in engendering a pack among social scientists interested and willing to venture another way of thinking social and human inquiry, a way where creativity and affection have a place in better understanding, indeed living, a researcher’s life.

What this book endeavors to accomplish then is a mapping out the possibilities of a social scientific inquiry that makes the relational, creative, and embodied dimensions of storied knowledge and its production prominent. It takes Mnemosyne’s gift of memory and affect and the communal conduit of narration and intentionally blends the cognitive acts of telling and receiving story with the somatic states of the researcher and participants. As foreshadowed above, art is implicated throughout as a site for provocation, theorization, and encounter. Across the volume, I provide readers with the contours of my year-long narrative inquiry into the lives of six women academics who originated from working-class or poverty-class backgrounds. I do so while performing a “self-speculative critique” (Britzman, 1995), moving into the folds of my own work to consider what poststructural theories, material feminisms, and artistic praxis do to the story I was able to tell at the time that I told it. Elaborated are the companion ideas of the failure of my efforts to identify and represent the development of a “self” concept, my own or the women participant’s, as well as my surrender to the relational, contingent, and affective dimensions of our becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) incoherent, partial, joined, and unrecognizable beings.

There are two main themes of the book. The first centers on the discursive, material, nonunitary and intercorporeal (or between-bodies) dimensions of subjectivity in women’s lives, and most especially on how these relational, socially produced, and partially ineffable qualities of experience surface in social research. The second theme explores the role of art and embodiment in feminist qualitative inquiry practices. One objective of the book is to contribute to recent feminist scholarship that privileges the human body as a valuable site for examining the complexity of lived experience (Bird-David, 2004; Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Springgay, 2003; Waldby, 2002; Weiss, 1999). Another objective is to provide an illustration of post-structurally informed arts-informed methods to pose questions about the discursive, material, social, and psychical dimensions of an emerging feminist embodied methodology.

The ideas raised in the book are important for expanding theoretical perspectives about the role of bodies and creativity during the social scientific process generally and about identity research specifically. A well established literature base exists on investigations into the sphere of subjective representations of self and how this sphere of influence proliferates, enriches, and confounds inquiry practices. What is less examined is the status and function of researchers’ and participants’ corporeality, intercorporeality, and embodied creative practices while doing especially
justice-oriented postmodern research. Such an investigation begins to surface how the valorization of language that precedes and extends throughout humanist interpretive inquiry has the potential to lead to absenting bodies, thereby reinforcing the gendered nature of research itself—including many forms of feminist method. Placing material feminist perspectives of relationship, embodiment, and creativity alongside poststructural feminist methodology in practice, this book will bring readers into experimental contact with arts-informed processes and products that interrupt enduring humanist and disembodied conceptualizations of interpretive inquiry.

Part One of the book, Auto/Body Repair, focuses on troubling humanist notions of “selfhood” and conventional practices of social research, critiquing conceptualizations about what it means to be a woman, a researcher, and to develop along individualistic and disembodied lines. The two chapters that constitute this first part of the book together paint the experiential and theoretical backdrop for my practices of a feminist embodied methodology. Written in an immediate voice, readers will encounter my efforts toward repairing the personal and intellectual “damage” caused by theories of identity that continue to hold certain binaries central (i.e., self/other; body/mind) as well as social scientific inquiry practices that maintain a voice-as-verbal bias.

In Chapter 1, Moving Beyond Recognition, readers are invited to take a nomadic journey toward un-studying the self and other. My work that explored identity development among six women academics that are the first generation in their working-class and poverty-class families to have college experience is used to think with and to write over qualitative method. The chapter works to disarticulate some of the many discursive realities that shaped my researcher/participant subjectivity and considers my efforts to simultaneously comprehend, perform, erase, and represent my own and the women participants’ acts of trying to become socially mobile via academe.

Chapter 2, Material Convictions, continues to portray research encounters in an immediate voice, drawing readers into the materially-discursive (Haraway, 2008) dimensions of social and human inquiry. In this chapter, emotional data, dream data, sensory data and response data; what together, Elizabeth St. Pierre (1997b, 2008) refers to as “transgressive data,” combine with and expand Chapter 1’s cartographic gesture toward mapping discursive coordinates that take their shape from the textual, speech, and language dimensions of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and reflexivity. In so doing, this chapter’s line of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) stirs what I refer to as the somatographic; the noticing and noting of the bodily features of discursive subjects involved in and asking questions about social, scientific, and psychic life.

Part Two of the book, Figurations and Figures, consists of chapters 3, 4, and 5, and takes the personal, theoretical, and methodological ideas raised in Part One and puts them to use toward illustrating the contours and possibilities of a feminist embodied methodology. Chapter 3, Invoking Mnemosyne, traces two events and a consequence, with the concepts of figuration (Braidotti, 1994; St. Pierre, 1997a, 2008)
and *figure* (Deleuze, 1981/2003) as ground and force. The two events are developed as short, sharply focused autoethnographic (Ellis, 2004) vignettes about an intense period when I simultaneously gave birth to my son and my academic career. These events then become the focus of my self-speculative gaze, where, using deconstructive strategies, I think about my thinking and about the discursive, material, and relational intentionalities that surround and induce them as meaningful. The chapter then shifts to *Painting the Force of Memory*, an arts-informed consequence of the events and their deconstruction that bring *Mnemosyne* (a painting-figure and a mode of thinking-figuration) into fuller view. This figuration-figure is thought with and about in light of Deleuze’s (1981/2003, 1980/1987) philosophy of art and the possibilities of qualitative inquiry methods informed by creative encounters.

Chapter 4, *Between Antagonism and Surrender*, takes a disarticulative (MacLure, 2003) turn towards the necessary failure of any method to get subjectivity and its production “right” and highlights the importance of researchers expanding the possibilities for meaning-making to include image-based and embodied knowledge. This chapter moves into the specifics of my arts-informed approach, introducing readers to two forms of praxis that help me link material and poststructural feminist theories of subjectivity with creative inquiry technique. Self-speculation shifts to the broader “field” of inquiry, where readers encounter a full-length illustration of arts-informed method through the unfolding of one research participant’s story and my efforts to work artistically with the sometimes discomforting oscillation that can accompany “working the ruins” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000) of conventional qualitative research.

Chapter 5, *Monstrous Methodology*, engages the outer limits and possibilities of metaphor to examine more fully the melancholic, disorienting, and abhorrent affect/effect that can accompany the undecidable positionality of, in this case performing “classed” and “social scientist” subjectivities. In the chapter, I work swiftly and intensely to trace a zombie figure surfacing from the sorcery of Jacques Derrida’s (1993/1994) concept of ‘undecidables’. This zombie figure/figuration stems from and further provokes this book’s exploration of my own working-class-to-academic-life trajectory, my studies of others’ expressions about a similar trajectory, and my mortal desire to engage creative encounters as a methodological medium by which to *become* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) or to think anew and work at problems in light of what *might or could* be rather than what is.

Chapter 6, *Momentary Exits* is the conclusion to the text. This is a brief chapter that brings together the theoretical and methodological issues raised in the previous chapters of the book, surfacing some uncertain ethical intensities related to enacting an embodied methodology. The chapter and book ends, momentarily, with a mini-manifesto; a declaration of my intentions, motives, and views, which sprang from my having glimpsed what an arts-informed feminist embodied approach to inquiry should include and what it should perhaps avoid.
PART I: AUTO/BODY REPAIR
CHAPTER 1

MOVING BEYOND RECOGNITION

A Nomadic Journey toward Un-Studying Self and Other

And so the cultural injunction to be a deep, unified, coherent, autonomous “self” produces necessary failure, for the autobiographical subject is amnesiac, incoherent, heterogeneous, interactive. (Smith, 1998, p. 110)

Those authors who argue for the constitutive discourse analytic version of reflexivity, which foregrounds the limits of consciousness, are generally interested in its power to move us beyond the certainties of what is already known. This entails a certain serious play with language, a play that recognizes its deadly force, its capacity to contain and restrain thought as well as its productive possibilities. (Davies & Gannon, 2006, pp. 91–92)

The problem of this chapter, Chapter 1, is that it occupies the presumptuous space called ‘the beginning’. Really though, it is not. It is a set of momentary exits, pit stops, and pullovers while journeying through a bunch of ‘middles’ in Beginning’s clothing. If I could be sure you read the Introduction (did you?), then I might not be so inclined toward starting this story somewhere logical. No one point, place, or person seems the best, most obvious place to begin.

I could start with a story about me, about my antagonistic relationship with education, my love of all-things art, or my upbringing as the daughter of working-class parents. This seems impolite though, even pretentious; the White socially mobile now-middle-class feminist academic putting herself before all else. Perhaps then I should begin with a story about the research project and the six women participants’ narratives upon which many of the ideas in this book are built. That makes loads of sense. Yet, I can hear the postmodern reflexivity police sirens wailing in the distance; nothing about them without you! See how easy it is to end up in the middle? Let us pause here for a moment though, at this point about reflexivity. I believe it a fruitful pull-over, a place to take in the view before moving on to destinations unknown.

In their edited book, Doing Collective Biography, Bronwyn Davies, Susanne Gannon (2006), with their colleagues offer a deeply engaging look at the ambivalent practices of reflexivity and what poststructuralist theory brings to this nervous condition (Stronach & MacLure, 1997) in educational and social research circles. Drawing on poststructural theories of the subject, Davies and Gannon attempt making sense of the “slippery, ambivalent ground” (p. 90) upon
which reflexivity in their own research can and does get done. They begin this complex sense-making by reminding readers that for more than four decades, perspectives on the nature and conduct of social science have, to widely varying degrees, taken the social construction of reality as an unavoidable and necessary aspect of any research. Davies and Gannon go on to point out that a robust and often antagonistic reflexivity discourse has proliferated during this era of positivist decline, arraying our current sensibilities of its purpose and practice along a complicated and sometimes tangled spectrum. They return frequently and helpfully to Denzin’s (1997) observations that post-modernity has constituted theoretically contradictory forms of reflexivity, spawning a self-speculative trajectory, with self-reflexive realist texts taking up one end and discourse analytic texts occupying the other.

Self-reflexive realist texts, to varying degrees, work to uncover or make transparent the elements or qualities of an actual self that holds consequences for research projects and/or participants. Several interpretive assumptions structure these texts as vehicles for exposing to readers the feeling, knowing, introspective individual ‘self’ through, for example; placing emphasis on lived experience, pro-viding access to founding prejudices or dispositions, privileging emotion and emotionality as a textual strategy for producing authenticity and therefore validity, and using language strategically to bridge (or break) barriers between writer and reader as well as the object and subject of inquiry (see Denzin, 1997, pp. 207–216). While acknowledging the crisis of representation that postmodernity has engendered (see especially Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) through offering historically and culturally situated subjective accounts, realist texts tend to tacitly enlist a notion of the ‘self’ that, through self-stories, can provide unfettered access to the author’s experiences and beliefs, lending credibility to study participants’ accounts and authorial interpretation.

By contrast, discourse analytic texts begin with the claim that “there is no pre-discursive (real or essential) self that floats free of discourse” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 110). From that premise, poststructural self-speculative (Britzman, 2000) accounts work to acknowledge how the researcher’s telling is partial, historically positioned, and discursively governed; how discourse and the power relations they engender constitute and effect the telling of researcher subjectivities. For many poststructuralists (Britzman, 1995; Clough, 1992; Jackson & Mazzei, 2008, 2009; Lather, 1991, 2007; Pillow, 2003; St. Pierre, 2000a, 2000b; Stronach, Garratt, Pearce & Piper, 2007; Trinh, 1989; Visweswaran, 1994), suspicions of an unmediated self extend to researcher narrative “I”s that work to erroneously pass along to readers transparency to an unmediated, pre-discursive self; a type of reflexive testimony. Hence, where self-reflexive realist texts work to re-present to readers as authentic and contextually fleshed-out an account of researcher identity as possible, discourse analytic texts provoke self-doubt at every textual turn, disclaiming any ‘real’, unmediated version of a ‘self’ outside of discourse, and going behind the scenes of fieldwork to articulate and disarticulate (MacLure, 2003) the ways in which their situated and historicized subjectivities have come to constitute (and be constituted by) the research narrative and other discursive arrangements.
Davies and Gannon (2006) write about their collective biography groups’ occupancy in a dynamic position of “slippage” between the two ends of this reflexivity spectrum. Through an impassioned and heavily theorized exploration of their research group’s working through, on, and sometimes in spite of reflexivity, readers learn why and how they, at the moment of the book’s writing, sidled much closer to the constitutive analytic discourse end of the reflexivity spectrum. From their place of agreement with Denzin’s (1997) assertion that self-reflexive realist texts and discourse analytic texts “cannot be pulled apart; every text exhibits features of both” (p. 223), Davies and Gannon assert their own position of acceptance that:

the self both is and is not a fiction; is unified and transcendent and fragmented and always in process of being constituted; can be spoken of in realist ways and cannot; its voice can be claimed as authentic and there is no guarantee of authenticity. (p. 110, emphasis original)

Conjuring especially Butler’s (1992) and Foucault’s (1982/2001) poststructural theories of subjectivity, their claim of the ‘subject’ is that it is not removed from discourse analytic texts, rather “it is there as an effect of discourse” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 110, emphasis original). There is, then, a material body in this reflexive work, one that is told about, listened to, and theorized from in an effort to both interrogate the constitutive forces of language and to open the possibility of change in the face of dominant and seemingly deterministic discourses—an idea that circulates throughout the remainder of their (and this) text.

I find this discourse analytic reflexive positioning as freeing as it is daunting. It places any knowledge I may offer about myself as a researcher (or anything else for that matter) circuitously in the textual handling of and historicity of its maker. As both product and process of discursive arrangements, productions, actions and reactions, my thinking about how my thinking has constituted my sense of what it means to be me (subjectively speaking) tosses any narrative construction of my ‘self’ into a state of perpetual dynamism; a place of ceaselessly mediated receptivity and action. My bodymind, and as a consequence, my writing muddles through the middle of this reflexive organism, bringing images, thoughts and feelings into new arrangements, different linkages, all tentative and opaque. Yet I believe this discursive murkiness is worth enduring as I work to hone my critical literacy skills, “knowing well and using competently the discourses through which we constitute ourselves and are constituted as selves and at the same time, bringing a critical consciousness to those processes, seeing their effects… and seeing that they might be otherwise” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 112). Occupying the ambivalent position of “competent agent and transgressive critic” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 112) at this moment then, seems the most reliable point from which to examine the conduct of my conduct (Foucault, 1982/2001), to practice thinking about the governing and governance of my thinking and acting especially as it relates to my research. Unconvinced as to whether or for how long this positioning will hold steady, expand, or somehow come un-tethered from its textual moorings, I will nevertheless get on with the story, glimpsing the effects of discourse on researcher and participant subjectivities, revealing the limits, desires, and constraints of my knowledge, and opening the possibility of productive disarticulations and social change along the way.
CHAPTER 1

Getting on with the Story

I should like to begin—again—with how I am thinking this will go, this attempt at engaging you the reader in some ideas I have about the discursive realities of my relational researcher subjectivities, about social class discourses in especially education, and about the effects of unraveling and rearticulating several personal, cultural, and methodological injunctions. We will journey as nomads do, moving while seated (St. Pierre, 2000a), through written inquisitions that look with curiosity towards what could be rather than what is amidst some research spaces, people, and places that I have conjured. Leaning into Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/1987) nomad or minor science, this mode of thinking about my thinking and actions as a researcher takes its cues from the nomad’s relation to the earth, whereby for them, “the land ceases to be land,” (in the sense of being territorialized or claimed) “tending to become simply ground (sol) or support” (p. 381). For me, in this work, in this moment, the research landscape ceases to be research in the prescriptive or descriptive sense of the term, tending to become projective space for becoming differently methodological, less recognizable, and more a space as Spivak (1993) envisions; “to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing him [sic], persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility” (p. 201).

Three loosely hinged stories or “problematics” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) make up the perimeters of this nomadic inquiry. Working from a place of doubt (P. J. Nelsen, personal communication, September 28, 2009) rather than deducing from a stable essence (my ‘self’ or my totalizing experience with method), I will write to inquire (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), to think from and with “a problem to the accidents that condition and resolve it” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 362). The journey commences with A Story I Couldn’t Tell. Along the way we will encounter A Story I Tried to Tell. Lastly, we will pass through A Possible Story that Wrote the Story I Couldn’t and Tried to Tell. Occasionally, we will consider the nature and utility of some procedural baggage, opening certain ontological, personal, and epistemological belongings to scrutiny and seeing what of it seems dispensable, useful, hazardous, and the like.

A Story I Couldn’t Tell

**Researcher:** Tammy (pseudonym), I really appreciate your agreeing to this interview. As I already mentioned when we spoke last week over the phone, I am interested in collecting the stories of first-generation college students, like you. For a larger study, I am thinking about exploring identity development among several traditionally-aged women college students who originate from working-class backgrounds and this pilot or pre-study is intended to help inform that later work. I have a loosely-structured interview guide that will help us stay on track with the general areas I hope to cover in our time together. Still, I want you to feel free to take the conversation in any direction you wish. Are you ready?

**Tammy:** I guess, maybe. I don’t know.

**Researcher:** Okay. Well, what I think I would like to hear about first is your upbringing as it relates to your decision to become a college student. What experiences
growing up do you connect with becoming the first person in your family to come to college?

Tammy: Uh… Where do you want me to start? I mean, I don’t know what… Do you want me to go way back to when I was little or, … I’m not sure I know what you want.

Researcher: Well, it’s more that you tell me what’s important to you. I am not looking for a specific answer. I am interested in hearing your story about getting to college, about what influenced your decision.

Tammy: Oh, okay. So you’re interested in people, people who helped me like in school and stuff. Is that it?

Researcher: That certainly could be part of what you tell me about. How about we begin with that and see where it takes us?

Tammy: Yeah… Okay, well let’s see. It’s kind of hard, you know, to remember. It’s no one thing; I’m trying to think… I could go way back, but I don’t know how far back you think is good to go, so I’ll just start with when I was in third grade. Oh wait, you wanted people, people in my school. I don’t know if I can… I mean because third grade was bad, I mean my teacher was, is no one I would say helped me think about college. No teacher was really, well maybe one was, kind of and she (silence) well, she… I can’t really say. I don’t really remember though. It is just that third grade was when I remember I started thinking about it, I think. What really got me going was this girl, Lydia. I mean she was like a wicked good friend, you know? Like the sister I never had. I mean I have a sister (laughs), but Lydia was everything I wanted in a sister (silence). My sister was, is nothing like Lydia (long silence). Sorry, oh I just wanted to, I didn’t want to be like… I mean I didn’t want to do any of the things my sister wanted to do, like… oh. She was a mommy’s girl, you know? A total girly-girl and I think I wasn’t. I am so not that. I am so much more like… I don’t know… No, never mind. Maybe that’s why I came here, I mean went to college, ‘cause my sister only wanted to get married, clean house. You know? Anyway, we, Lydia and I did everything together and I mean e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g. I wanted to be just like her, dress like her, I want to talk like her—just everything—Lydia, Lydia, Lydia. I used to write in this stupid little diary about wanting to BE her. (laughs) Now, I think “how lame is that?” I mean she was wicked cool and everything and got totally popular as school went on, but I am, was like infatuated with her (silence). I would never tell anyone here that (laughs), you know? Anyway, so, what I wanted to say about her, to get way back to your question about who the person was who got me to college, is that it is her. Not now, I mean, you know, we don’t even know each other or talk or anything. She’s at a way more fancy college than this one, you know, so we don’t, didn’t keep together (silence). So, it was Lydia and my wanting to be her (silence), do her same stuff. (long silence) And when I would hang out at her house after school, and I did that like almost every day, she would talk about…well, never mind. Everyone in her house is talking about her brother, Jake, who is way older and in, was in college, wicked smart, who was, no he is going to be a lawyer (silence). No, he is or something big like that. Well Lydia, all she could think about, talk about even when we played, well, make-believe and stuff was going to college like her
brother. And I don’t think I even wanted to go, to college I mean, I mean I guess I sort of did, but not really. I mean no one knew anything about this at my home (silence). It was always just “what job are you going to be able to get after high school.” And, oh wait… No, forget it. (silence) So, I didn’t think I could come or anything and probably don’t even want to be here or shouldn’t have, you know? We totally couldn’t, can’t, could not really afford it—but I don’t really know if I want you to really write that. Work Study, my job helps. So, I think I wanted to before, to come to college. I sort of rememb…no, I don’t… never mind. I never think I said anything about wanting to go to my parents back then. But I mostly like it though. Her parents went too, Lydia’s—like a lot, I mean way past the four years I’ll go. We’ll see what’s next though. I’m totally open. I love college and there is, were other things I could, I mean that I remember now, about Lydia, but is that what you wanted?

The above interview fragment is an excerpt of the first of three conversations I had with Tammy. She was one of five participants whom I engaged in a pilot research project, paving the way for my dissertation; a larger narrative study about the construction of subjectivity among women academics that were among the first-generation in their working-class or poverty-class families to have college experience (Clark, 1999). Tammy’s story, similar to each offered by her peers, was a story I could not tell. That it was being told to me, the historical moment in which it was being told, the manner in which it was constructed and conveyed, what she included, what she left out, as well as the implied rules that governed our encounter all mattered and contributed to the impossibility of its telling.

I recognize that pilot projects are not necessarily conducted to be told or disseminated; convention has them undertaken as prefatory, a trial-run for a more ‘formal’ version of an overall project. Yet the underbelly of impossibility, the reflected upon reasons I could not and would not tell Tammy’s story or the stories told by her also-traditionally aged first-generation college student peers foreshadow productive failure on this journey.

Baggage check. What would I be able to do with a story like Tammy’s, which had as much contradiction as it lacked coherence? How could Tammy’s and her peers’ stories help me work toward thematic synthesis when they were so convoluted? I could talk about dissimilarities across their stories, about for example how, for some of these young women, relationships seemed central and yet for others, references to helpful (or even harmful) adults were completely absent. Yet how would I talk about their sense of themselves as first-generation college students and their pathways from their working-class beginnings? What about all the stops and starts—and the silences? What could I say about them if they couldn’t or wouldn’t say it themselves (Mazzei, 2007)? Identity, in all its myriad forms, was what I was after, but the path for describing it through analysis of these stories was fraught with frustration and fear.
Representational roadblocks. At the moment of these stories, I felt helplessly blocked by the forward leaps and digressions in chronology, the contradictions, the silences, the discontinuities, and the concealments. Working within an interpretivist frame for understanding the stories and within a humanist frame for representing them, I did not consider the discursively mediated constitution of the narratives (Sermijn, Devlieger, Loots, 2008) or their mimetic, expected or, above all, falsified telling (MacLure, 2003, p. 157) in the first place. Instead, opting for clarity and coherence, I focused on the traditional ethnographic apparatus of coding for saliency and strength in an effort to tame the narratives. My suspicions that, if pressed, these young women could reveal better (more coherent? more introspective? more truthful?) stories went unexamined. I labored without Kamala Visweswaran’s (1994) insights that “‘Lies, secrets and silence’ were frequently strategies of resistance” and also her unflinching critique of precisely my strategy at the time:

Yet the ethnographer’s task is often to break such resistance. Normative ethnographic description itself is rife with the language of conquest: we extort tales and confessions from reluctant informants (or shall I say informers?); we overcome the resistance of recalcitrant subjects when we “master” their language or “subdue” their insistent questioning. The ethnographer finally arrives when she renders a people or person “subject.” (p. 60)

Coding and categorization imploded under the weight of Tammy’s “refusals” to subject herself totally to my gaze, as did the potentially fruitful mutations and excesses in her narrative construction of her college-bound subjectivities (as well as other subjective identifications including daughter, friend, student, female, etc.). Representation seemed as elusive as ever. All my data, each interpretation of my “subjects” stories, of them, slowly became unsavory, tenacious, and as Derrida might suggest, “monstrous” in the making (Milburn, 2003). From my cryptic coding and initial efforts at representation surfaced a hesitant yet nonetheless authoritative narrative shot through with “a series of reflections and retractions, propositions and rejections” (Lather, 2007, p. 89). Who can have ears for such an ugly text (Lather, 2007)? Why couldn’t I arrest these unruly narrative patterns from the edges of their un-believability, ill-containment, misidentification?

Pull over. Incoherence, suspicion and monstrosity were only a small part of the Story I Couldn’t Tell. Certain only of my doubts in my ability to represent authentic-enough accounts of these women’s experiences given the mutant form of what I heard and understood, I dove head-long into a reflexive mode. I knew of the importance of stepping back, of examining my subjectivity, of reflecting on my positioning and my history as it related to the project I was undertaking. I had done some of this work at the outset of designing the pilot project, but thought it especially important to re-engage in earnest when my sensibilities about how all this should go were rendered nerve-wracking in their press toward resolve and disambiguity.

In my research journal, I wrote as reflexively as I could. I worked to further recognize myself as a qualitative researcher who had been a first-generation
college student from a working class background. I took comfort from this work’s promise of being generative of more deeply and more fully recognizing the “other,” my participants, as simultaneously sharing important cultural and familial attributes, and as “not me” (Pillow, 2003). Engaging this hyper-reflexive commitment felt an act of responsibility and rationality, of desiring to do the right thing as a scholar and believing that when I did so, I would be behaving ethically toward the research community and my participants. I began practicing reflexivity for the same reasons that I ended-up asking the young women to journal their thoughts between interview sessions; I wanted to eliminate at least some of the ambiguity, help them resolve conflicting meanings through re-articulation, and arrest the disorderly conduct of their ‘tellings’ so that the real individuals and their actual college-going motives could emerge from behind the confounded fronts and be useful—to me and them. I did reflexivity, then, as truth, affirming my feminist commitment to relinquish control and to forefront and distinguish my own and research participants’ meanings and voice. Ultimately, I practiced reflexivity as a way to gain transcendence from my “own subjectivity and own cultural context in a way that release[d] [me] from the weight of (mis)representations” (Pillow, 2003, p. 186). Mired in modernist Enlightenment ideals of transcending positionality via confessions of who I was and was not, of where I came from politically and historically, and of asking participants to locate themselves similarly, I wanted to experience a “release from [my] tension, voyeurism, ethnocentrism—a release from [my] discomfort from representation through a transcendent clarity” (Pillow, p. 186).

Comforting from a procedural standpoint? You bet. After all, this tried-and-true practice would help fulfill my desire to use reflexivity to write my research subjects, issues, and settings as “familiar” (Pillow, 2003), as some ‘things’ and some ‘ones’ I had a better, more reliable handle on. And yet it was here, during this reflexive move, where I would encounter the culminating strategic hiccup derailing this project for good. Reflexivity of the sort that I was attempting placed me, make that the almighty “I,” at the center. I was trying and failing at performing what St. Pierre (2000b) cites and elaborates as Ragland-Sullivan’s (1986) “humanist cogito:”

[T]his humanist cogito, “the philosophy of the supremacy of mind and consciousness over the whole of the phenomena of human experience” (p. 10) [is] as follows: “the Occidental subject is still a mixture of the medieval ‘I’ believe; the Cartesian ‘I’ think; the Romantic ‘I’ feel; as well as the existential ‘I’ choose; the Freudian ‘I’ dream” (p. 10) and the empirical “I” of science. (p. 500)

Working to explain myself as identity apart from, preemptive of, and different than the “other,” or the objects or the practices I encountered, I was playing into the humanist hand dealt by Descartes, trying to take account of “I”s that because I could think them, recover them from experience, and link them to my present researcher-self, they (and I) were so. My failure however, with this particular reflexive apparatus, why this was A Story I Couldn’t Tell, had less to do with my
lack of understanding at the time of the poststructural position that insists that the best any of us can do is describe the discursive effects of discourse and the power relations they engender. My particular constraint was amnesia.

I had and still have no memory of becoming college-bound. I do have what is referred to in neuropsychological lingo as “semantic memory,” (Lakhan, 2007), memory based purely on photographs, a yearbook and a diploma and other records that serve as “evidence” of my having been. Completely absent however are source or episodic details surrounding these received memories; I have no memory of discussions with my peers, parents, teachers, or others about whether to go to college and how, about taking the required Standardized Aptitude Test for applying, about seeking government-based financial aid, about visiting campuses pre-admission, or of actually arriving there one day late in August of 1983. At the time I interviewed Tammy and her peers, it was/is not at all clear to me how or why I chose to be among the first generation in my blue collar family to enter college. However it happened, what discourses and cultural practices were circulating at the time, whatever the motivations; I cannot remember.

That I had (and continue to have) no memory of my transition to college was/is no small matter, especially when the reflexivity rules I was working under assumed self-awareness in relation to the phenomenon under study. Since the postmodernist declaration of a crisis in representation, design and analysis in qualitative research has required admission of our remembered sense of history, our subjective intersections with our topic under study (see especially the Introduction in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, pp. 1–32). From a humanist frame of reference, reflexivity is a practice built on the premise of presence and retrospection and since I had no idea how I got to college, I had nothing to attach my reflexive practice to. This lack of an autobiographical thread was/is distressing; a lack that left me speechless. When my efforts to have Tammy and the other pilot project participants “journal” their memories about becoming college-bound (an act I now believe was an attempt steeped in my desire to have participants “do” reflexivity for me) surfaced failure (their writings focused almost exclusively on the present and were filled with ‘irrelevancies’), I abandoned this research trajectory in favor of another, more methodologically tidy (and psychologically safer) project—or so I thought.

_A Story I Tried to Tell_

Wriggling through my stymied state brought on by the humanist press to tell what my version of the case was for these young first-generation college students despite its mutations and my amnesia, I found relief and release in a newly-focused research project. Adjusting my selection criteria to participants with potential for maximum retrospection, I sought out women _academics_ that had experience being first-generation college students. In my earlier review of relevant literature, I had noticed the deficit perspective shaping and propelling almost exclusively what we knew about first-generation college students generally (see especially, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004) and what we did not know about women’s experiences more specifically. Now, faced with the prospect of better
behaved, more historically detailed participant narratives, the din of pseudo-gender neutral disadvantage surrounding this sub-population registered not only as woefully inadequate and potentially damaging, but also rich theoretical ground worthy of cultivating. I made the decision to adopt a critical theory frame for my work, jumping astride with pride ideologically liberal tenets aiming toward a more complex and inclusive version of the often repeated story of academia’s most at-risk and under-prepared. Compatible with my feminist agenda, I sidled close to liberatory discourses of critical theory as described by two leading voices in qualitative research, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2005):

The critique and concern of the critical theorists has been an effort to design a pedagogy of resistance within communities of difference. The pedagogy of resistance, of taking back “voice,” of reclaiming narrative for one’s own rather than adapting to the narratives of a dominant majority… [points at] overturning oppression and achieving social justice through empowerment of the marginalized, the poor, the nameless, the voiceless. (pp. 625–626)

I had to show people that the current view of first-generation college students was limited and limiting and, as evidenced by my participants, wrong—at least some of the time. We were not always the deficit side of the college-going coin, and when we were, it was not our fault. My new desire became to move beyond describing what people recognized as the ill-equipped college-bound ignoramuses portrayed in dominant scholarly discourses and to instead offer more complex, multi-vocal portraits of this sub-population alongside critiques of the historical and structural conditions that fostered our reproduction. I believed it possible to provoke critical self-speculation on the part of researchers and higher education policy makers interested in explaining this marginalized group. I went looking for structural trouble, found it, exposed it, and tried to w/right the wrong and incomplete deficit interpretations along the way.

Baggage claim. As I worked through my critical theorist frame on the less monstrous, more mature narratives offered by the women academics participating in my larger study, thematic analysis became the handmaiden to cultural, social, and critical constructions at their juiciest. The coup de grâce was member checks with the women, who reflected agreement and in some instances empowerment from my “findings.” So why did I feel like a fraud? Efforts to fill-out the other side of the binary, to search for salient and strong reference within and across the narratives that stood as rebukes to the often-heard accounts of disadvantage came across to me as petulant, insincere, and only occasional compared to thick descriptions of difficulty. Of course, when pushed through frames of structural oppression, gender bias, cultural theories of reproduction and the like, the occasional contradiction, the slippage between, for example, mentor-as-savior and mentor-as-monster, made sense; their comments evidenced meaning in the ideological direction I was shooting for. Now silences, slippages, contradictions, and the like were fodder for the critical mill that, through careful critical analysis, was legitimate.
Still, writing about the collectivity of the women’s phrases, including their heterogeneity, as potentially reflective of being fundamentally mediated by power relations, about their stories as possibly emblematic of capitalist production, or reflective of how structural oppression was functioning in especially their lives as academics felt *awkwardly* potent, intuitively *too* straightforward and more, well, critical, than I believe the women would have claimed was the case. But at least this trajectory was possible compared to the analytic train-wreck I experienced with the pilot project, with the *Story I Couldn’t Tell*. My sense of representational inadequacy gained methodological momentum from reading feminist critical theory and with ambivalent but targeted ambition, I placed my attention on freeing the women’s voices and “creating dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 433). This did not make *A Story I Tried to Tell* wrong. It did not make it right either. It produced the version I was hoping for, but obscured the reproductive nature of my efforts. I was ‘giving voice’, filling out the other side of the binary. I was giving it up for the critical team, for the sanctity and security of ethical and disciplinary guidelines that constituted me as justice-oriented. And yet…

**Security breach.** During a 2004 National Public Radio special report on recent neuropsychological research findings related to memory, Alex Chadwick reported that “some scientists now believe that memories effectively get rewritten every time they are activated.” In the absence of episodic memory related to my being college bound, where “the details surrounding the memory (i.e., where, when, with whom the experience took place)” (Lakhan, 2007, p. 3) were not preserved, “memory distrust” can set in, leading to a “propensity to accept information from external sources” (Lakhan, 2007, p. 4). Unable to recall (form?) my own memories about being college-bound, these interviews with women academics, related scholarly discourses, and critical liberatory ideologies slid over my bodymind like a low-grade electric shock. “External sources” (Lakhan, 2007) circulated, sparked, and pressed like mad on my *becoming* working-class academic. I listened and began to feel *how* my first-generation college student subjectivities were indeed disadvantaged by macro structures and striations of higher education in a capitalist United States. I also felt empowered by the way the women expressed their tenacity in spite of the odds, how they so passionately performed in their roles as women academics from differently classed backgrounds. Subjectivity was being constituted in the very act of listening, watching, and feeling Derrida’s (1967/1976) *trace* of embodied memories travel, as if searching for connective tissue, “different linkages and new alignments” (Grosz, 1995, p. 126). I felt at once doomed and agentic within this hyper-constitutive fold and began to privately consider its messy yet potentially productive dynamisms.

Energized and intimidated by this psychologically dissonant space, I re-entered the analysis project, taking my critical theorist on walks with my disadvantaged subjectivity. Most times these encounters were not amiable and I would return with a headache, desperate to put one or both of these analytical characters in a time-out. Still, the physical and psychological exercise was fruitful and a
decision was reached that despite running the risk of theoretical incoherence, small glimpses of my researcher and personal “identity as a state of emergency” (Britzman, 1993, p. 24, emphasis added) could coexist (mainly in art form) alongside the socio-cultural and critical analyses in my account of what I understood the women’s stories to mean.

_A Possible Story that Wrote the Story that I Couldn’t and Tried to Tell_

The discursive encounters that I allude to above in the _Story I Tried to Tell_ held an importance beyond what I was prepared for or could explain at the time—they held me _becoming_ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) with them. Living Walkerdine’s (1990) claims that “an individual can become powerful or powerless depending on the terms in which her/his subjectivity is constituted” (p. 5), I felt exempted and constrained by the varied and heavily disciplined boundaries of the discourses I was attempting to deploy as well as being subjected by. Try as I might to, especially through my writing, reconcile the tensions and settle the subjective and reflexive disputes, I could not. The women’s narratives, the ethnographic enterprise, critical ideology, feminism, and especially the discourses of disadvantage that frame/d 1st-generation scholarship were _writing over_ (yet not fully eradicating) subjectivity that was deeply mired in the physical, psychical, and emotional complexities of “hybridity,” (Lucey, Melody, Walkerdine, 2003) of “the constant negotiation of discursive doubleness” (p. 287). Lucey, et. al. (2003) note how there are “no easy hybrids” and how:

The uneasiness of hybridity in terms of social mobility through educational achievement for young women from the working classes stems partly from the difficulties of negotiating the emotions, negative as well as positive, that are aroused when aspiration and success mean becoming and being profoundly different to your family and peer group. (p. 286)

I was “uneasy” as my amnesiac subjectivity, the lacuna that acted (acts) as powerful bookends supporting what was better left unattended to and therefore unspoken, was being confronted and constituted by the immediate and distant discourses of my researcher responsibilities and the relevant identity “texts inside which [I was] simultaneously born” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 94), and which I soaked in and spat out, as if capitulating to and refusing the veracity of Lucey et al’s (2003) pronouncement;

Because it is not the working class girls’ destiny, the motivation to remain on [the academic] path must be generated from within. There are no structural reasons why they should succeed and therefore they have to rely on their own inner resources… The girls who have not done so well in school at least do not have to face the difficulties that choice can bring. How, then, do any working-class girls at all succeed in education when they are regulated to be produced as ‘docile subjects’ who in the present ‘government of freedom’ must remake themselves as autonomous, reflexive subjects? (p. 297)
Oscillating between “hybridity” and the allure of emancipative potential in critical approaches, between the historical folds of traditional ethnography and postmodernist arguments against any possibility of unmediated representations, my inheritance and identification as both a subject and as a qualitative researcher was giving way to “the poetic self [that was] simply willing to put itself on the line and to take risks” (Denzin, 1997, p. 225) 

_Dance of Dissonance_

My blue-collar beliefs
meet academe
bashful, mingling
on the fringes of crimson desire
for a chance encounter
with the discordant sights and sounds
that pull and pull.

What I knew
inconsistent with
what I do
clashes with
what I need
to know
moving across the floor
beyond recognition.

Slide home again
now, going back
my rearview mirror
clicks off the miles between
objects that appear smaller
than they actually are,
subject
to one’s views
about everything
and nothing can stop me
from returning
over and over
to this dance of dissonance.

Academe, academe
sublime and seductive
you draw me in
and let me out
only to know
that soon I must go
home again
now, going back
my rearview mirror
clicks off the miles between
subjects that appear smaller
than they actually are.

Lost luggage. In the absence of salient memories of my own departure to college, scholarly discourses of first-generation college student identity development reified aspects of my subjectivity in terms of being underprepared (Pascarella, Eirson, Woliak, Terenzini, 2004), having “survivor guilt” (Psorkowski, 1983), and being disadvantaged (London, 1996). Critical theories of social class reproduction via schooling (Willis, 1981) displaced the problems of perceived inheritance, essential characteristics, as well as bad luck, and centered instead on ideologies of structural oppression and social discrimination. And yet, this well-meaning agenda invited other haunts, where power felt confirmed as being enacted hierarchically, where oppression in all its forms had to be over-turned in order for emancipation to be realized, and where agency took the form of individuals acting within groups on other (oppressive) groups to strive towards freedom—as if it were a necessary and permanent possibility. Agency, of course, is a complicated and much debated concept, especially among critical theorists and feminists sympathetic to critical theory’s aims. Feminists skeptical of what some regard as “absolute moral and ethical truth clams” (Gannon & Davies, 2007, p. 78) have carefully revised the concept of agency viewing it as “radically conditioned,” to borrow Butler’s (1997) term, meaning that while the social subject is a site where power acts to constitute identity in limiting ways, ambivalence is part of the effects of these same power relations.

Listening, watching, writing, and painting the discursive and the emotional terrain of “upwardly mobile” working class subjects was for me, an enactment of and a resistance toward “the terrifying invitation to belong to a new place” (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 238). This “new place” was hardly class or gender neutral and
as Walkerdine (2003) explains, its promises could simultaneously register as “an invitation to feel shame about what one had been before and indeed to understand the people with whom I had grown up as part of a growing political problem, a conservative and reactionary force” (p. 238), especially where opportunity and the value of a liberal education were concerned.

Pull off. Using poststructural theory to re-read and re-tell how these discourses possibly wrote me as a subject of the phenomenon under study and as a researcher responsible for seeing and saying it like it was helped me see the perils and the possibilities of my desires to construct what was “missing” through a constructivist and critical framework. These desires and their constituent discursivities were the effects of the various discourses I was working within (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 110) in the researching moment and in the long stretch of history. In an attempt to “give an account” of oneself, of myself, I have found “that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration” (Butler, 2005, pp. 7–8). Still, it is fruitful to have worked to search the all-too predictable and familiarized storylines that constitute me and other first-generation college students and working class academics as disadvantaged and underprepared and/or as lucky and tenacious. I have worked to disarticulate and rearticulate some of the concrete detail that has been at least partially obscured by clichés about egalitarianism and education-as-exit ramp away from disadvantage. I am working to refuse the notion of the unitary subject, of me alone at my keyboard, with only my words and my received ways at the know. I am not alone in my efforts. I have learned to un-study the self and other and to be much, much less desirous of recognition.

Discursive toll road. I am here and no longer here as I write about this leg of a journey with no end. My ambivalence as a researcher, my gestures toward un-studying self and other, my working class academic “hybridty,” and embodiment of the neoliberal subject (Walkerdine, 2003, 1991; Lucey, Melody & Walkerdine, 2003) all carry the marks of resituating the subject as discursive. These ideas make my telling of this story partial at least, impossible at most. It and I have been erased, with still a trace, rewritten, and resignified in the writing. Slippery, isn’t it? Still, it (the story) and I are all we have in the moment so we will stick with that, with each other, and again, “get on with the story” (Davies and Gannon, 2006, p. 112), carrying on with efforts to “write, and then analyze my writing to see what I have done and not done” (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 329). Here, I have pushed toward an “uncomfortable reflexivity,” which as Pillow (2003) cautions “is not about better methods, or about whether we can represent people better” (p. 193). Citing Visweswaran (1994), Pillow helps us hear that reflexivity—and perhaps the entire enterprise of qualitative research—should be about “whether we can be accountable to people’s struggles for self-representation and self-determination” (p. 32) —including our own selves” (p 193).

Poetic detour. Where language did and remains at once injurious and agentic—that I need to use it to explain the effects of its enabling violations is not neutral. With Patti Lather (2007), “I am paradoxically attracted to wandering and getting
lost as methodological stances. …I am simultaneously stuck against the humanist romance of knowledge as cure within a philosophy of consciousness, while turning toward textual innovations that disrupt humanist notions of agency, will, and liberation” (p. 94). It is here, nowhere, and everywhere then that I travel the discursive toll road, moving beyond recognition, and exiting wherever a poetic detour emerges:

*The Word*

Penetrated by master orators, pontificating educators, narrative masturbators,
I give birth to the Word.

Heeding the need
for them to see
their working class schoolgirl
determined to succeed,
I say what I heard,
I write what I read,
I repeat every big Word that he said.

Still, I know not exactly what I should.
Alas, I really would if I could…
Perhaps, just this once, I’ll go out on a limb,
resist maintenance mimicry that cements me below Him.

Take that nebulous contour of ‘same’ ideas
push lines, select details, imbue it with fears,
craft shape that doubles ‘blab’ speech on itself.
Thank the muses and monsters who help un-know thyself.

NOTES

1 I am using the term realist here to signal the ontological belief circulating through many, but certainly not all, interpretive texts, that the subject (researcher and/or participant) functions as an autonomous, essential being; an “I” or an “other” that through study, can be made transparent and present. Many qualitative research accounts are postmodernist in terms of refusing the omniscient stance of the researcher, creating multi-voiced, historically and culturally situated accounts that blur traditional, humanist boundaries about what counts as science, evidence and truth. Yet, with a lack of interrogation of claims of self-transparency or the tacit evocation of a ‘self’ construct that is left largely unexamined, readers who have adopted an especially poststructuralist perspective take up and interpret “I” and “other” stories as realist tales. Authors Elizabeth de Freitas and Jillian Paton (2008) offer a particularly useful and, I believe, fair read of the complexity surrounding what, at first glance, can be viewed as an opposition between texts that appear “realist” evoking a humanist version of the self, and those that are non-humanist by way of deploying disruptive and interrogative techniques that refuse or de-center the self.
In this chapter and throughout the book, I endeavor as a reflexive researcher to find a way to express myself—that, as Davies and Gannon (2006) compel: Makes visible the technologies of self and of researcher—selves that engaged in analysis and writing; reveals the limits of [my] knowledge, particularly in the research act; makes clear the political orientation driving [my] work; reveals what discursive and textual framing shapes [my] work both in practice and in writing; opens up the possibilities of thinking otherwise once old interpretive certainties are made visible, and finally; acknowledges that at some points it is necessary to get on with the story, in which the effects of the discourse are made visible, since otherwise there would be nothing on which to cast our reflexive gaze. (p. 112)

As Colin Nazhone Milburn (2003) explains; “Monsters, denizens of the borderland, have always represented the extremities of transgression and the limits of the order of things. In the work of Jacques Derrida, the figure of the monster embodies a means of thinking otherwise” (p. 603).

This refers to the “I think therefore I am” principle stated by Rene Descartes. His still profoundly influential framing of human existence purports that because man (sic) thinks, he is present. If your encounter with the strikethrough of some of the words in the subtitle is that it is a mistake, an untidy reflection of my ambivalence over certain terms that copyediting did not obscure, you would be mostly right. What I am attempting to employ by crossing out certain words is what Derrida (1976), following Heidegger, referred to as sous rature or putting ‘under erasure’ words that point to key metaphysical concepts, concepts referring to a present self that has had and can retrieve real experiences. This gesture is more radical and complex than meets the eye and my explanation here is undersized given the concept’s philosophical reach and worth. Far more than a canceling out or a negation of a words meaning, this writing effect brings into play key aspects of Derrida’s (1967/1976) science of writing (of grammatology), aspects that denounce the authority of writing (or speech) as possessing “a direct or essential relation to meaning” (Bradley, 2008), or the unified subject, or presence and the like, while at the same time pointing out that “it is not possible to think and write outside of metaphysics altogether” (Lucy, 2004). Here then, a word remains visible, but struck through.

Employed sparingly, here and towards the end of this story, ‘erasure’ is intended to signal or remind readers of the shifting, discursively constituted, indeterminable self and narratives, including this one and the previous two tales, which I am able to tell. Rather than being a possible story about what happened and what experiences caused me to write the two previous stories the way that I did, this account attempts to “reflexively map the multiple discourses that occur in a given social space” (Denzin, 1997, p. 225) and the effects of those discourses on the ambivalent processes of subjectification. This story will always be always multivoiced; no matter my refusal of the subject (St. Pierre, 2008), will critically recognize that “it is the story” “will always return to the writerly self—the self that spills over into the world being inscribed” (Denzin, 1997, p. 225).

The following is a telling, albeit lengthy quote offered by researchers who are arguably among the longest-standing and most authoritative voices in scholarship related to first generation college students. First the quote, followed by a few brief deconstructive comments that get re-enlivened in Chapter 4, this volume. The research team of Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini (2004) state the state of affairs surrounding the condition of and for first-generation college students. First the quote, followed by a few brief deconstructive comments that get re-enlivened in Chapter 4, this volume. The research team of Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini (2004) state the state of affairs surrounding the condition of and for first-generation college students like so:

First-generation college students have been the focus of a growing body of research. Generally this research falls into three general categories… The first category consists of studies that typically compare first-generation and other college students in terms of demographic characteristics, secondary school preparation, the college choice process, and college expectations… The weight of evidence from this research indicates that, compared to their peers, first-generation college students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education (e.g., costs and application process), level of family income and support, educational degree expectations and plans, and academic preparation in high school.

A second general category of research on first-generation college students attempts to describe and understand the transition from high school to postsecondary education…
As summarized by Terenzini et al. (1996), the evidence is reasonably clear that first-generation students as a group have a more difficult transition from secondary school to college than their peers. Not only do first-generation students confront all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions.

The third general category of research on first-generation college students examines their persistence in college, degree attainment, and early career labor market outcomes. These investigations consistently indicate that, compared to students whose parents are college graduates, first-generation students are more likely to leave a four-year institution at the end of the first year, less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be on a persistence track to a bachelor’s degree after three years, and are less likely to stay enrolled or attain a bachelor’s degree after five years.

Although we appear to know much about first-generation college students with respect to their academic preparation, transition to postsecondary education, and progress toward degree attainment, surprisingly little is known about their college experiences or their cognitive and psychosocial development during college. The only study we uncovered that addresses these issues directly is Terenzini et al. (1996). (pp. 249–251)

Characterizations of first-generation college students as underprepared and disadvantage as the inevitable consequences of pre-college conditions and conditioning are common, but they rest on an assumption that adversity and success are binary, irreconcilable opposites that cannot work together in a ‘both/and’ kind of way. In conventional student development theory of this student sub-population, adversity is allied with “at-risk,” success with academic and social “prowess,” and each side of the pair is mutually exclusive. A multitude of other binary oppositions permeate this and numerous other accounts of first generation college students, including ‘more likely/less likely’, ‘took more/took less’, ‘better access/handicapped in accessing’, ‘bigger gains/smaller gains’, ‘other college students/first-generation college students’, ‘higher levels of growth/lower levels of growth’, ‘have social & cultural capital through family relations/have lower stock of social & cultural capital’—each with privilege and a positive connotation following the first term (which is host to the ‘other college student’) and the second term being subordinate, deficient or lacking by comparison (host to ‘first-generation college student’). Hardly unique to this research report, this student population, or to student development theory more broadly, binary structures or “unfair pairs” as MacLure (2003) refers to them, “are a pervasive feature of argumentation and of the making of identity claims” (p. 10) in much of educational research and in Western discourse generally.

7 The concept of ‘hybridity’ was first developed by Homi Bhabha (1994) to, as Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine (2003) explain, “identify and understand new patterns of ethnic identity in a ‘post-colonial’ context of globalization, shifting forms of international relations and processes of migration” (p. 287). When Bhabha and others describe hybridity as a “constant negotiation of discursive doubleness” (Lucey, Melody & Walkerdine, 2003, p. 287), he is not intending to refer to binarism or duality. As Lucey, et al point out (quoting Bhabba); “For Bhabha, ‘the hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation is neither assimilation or collaboration’ (1996, p. 58) but an opportunity to take up and develop a critical stance towards hierarchy” (p. 287).

8 My “poetic self” that wrote (and was written by) The Dance of Dissonance as well as many other poetic and visual art expressions that followed was less than “simply willing” to put herself “on the line and take risks” (Denzin, 1997, p. 225). Put simply, there was nothing simple about my willingness. It was, I believe, through the loving power relations conjured and enacted by my 3 feminist dissertation committee members, that I became increasingly willing to “put myself on the line,” let art happen, and become more powerfully and fully constituted along the way. This group worked off-center with me, revolution-style, to constitute a new-breed of validity that took risks and cared that I cared about the women involved in my study, including myself and my mother, about
what their and my own difficult and demanding experience with listening and telling was about, what effects this work was producing for them, for me, and for others implicated directly and indirectly in the inquiry encounters. Rigorous affection defined (and continues to define) our relations.