

## EXCERPTS FROM A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL: One Narrative Exemplar in a Search for Praxis

*This narrative is a personal story culled from a journal kept throughout a ten week graduate course in qualitative research. Here the "practice of change" centers on transforming the ways in which one understands the melding of theory and practice that resonate with one's own position in the world. The multiple identities of the author interface with a crisscross of personal experiences, academic literature, news items, and reflective analysis to produce both in content and in form a tapestry reflective of what it might mean to "do" qualitative research.*

by  
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### Introduction

I am currently teaching graduate courses in social work at a large university in the Midwest. The journey here began several years ago when, after spending fifteen years as a social work practitioner in various areas of mental health, my increasing desire to pursue an academic teaching and research career led me to begin doctoral studies. I was already a middle-aged woman, unused to the intellectual rigors in which I soon found myself immersed. I quickly concluded that my brain had been in the refrigerator for many years. Still, I found

irresistible the challenge of ideas new to me. I began to examine what it might mean to "do social science" and signed up for courses in qualitative research. During one of those ten week classes, I kept a personal journal in an effort to ground theory in life experience and to chronicle my attempts to better understand and develop paradigms and practices commensurate with the values of social work. I wanted to exercise a "practice of change" by reflecting on the ways one meaningfully melds theory and practice into something akin to Paolo Freire's\* notion of praxis. The following excerpts, reconstructed and reworked from the journal, are meant to convey the content and process of my germinal efforts.

"Transparency"

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I embark on the second leg of this journal with a feeling of having been drawn into the Laurel Richardson (1988) article "Writing Sociology". I wonder if there is a comparable article on writing social work. While I'm not a sociologist, this fact didn't seem to delimit my grasp of

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\* Paolo Freire in his 1970 *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (New York: Herder and Herder) develops this notion. See also Richard Bernstein's 1983 *Beyond objectivism and relativism: Science, hermeneutics, and praxis*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

many lucid points, though most of the references were unfamiliar. The introduction was a concise summary of relevant issues for postmodernist writing. She says (p. 5) that "researchers face 'a crisis of representation'" because "there is no such thing as a 'neutral language'". She argues that "language is not simply 'transparent,' reflecting a social reality that is 'objectively' out there. Rather, language is a constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality" (p. 5).

When I work to connect these phrases with my muddled ideas about truth and social science research, I am reminded of one of C. Wright Mills (1959)'s comments and his wry call for all of us to remain eternally skeptical of the power of social science research. "To tell them that they can know social reality only by depending upon a necessarily bureaucratic kind of research is to place a taboo, in the name of Science, upon efforts to become independent...and substantive thinkers" (p. 189). In spite of the resonant veracity of Richardson's words, there remains a part of me that still clings to the search for transparency, believes in the "window pane theory". Perhaps her article represents an integrated text (articulate and documented) of my own internal dialogue. It evokes a sense of foolishness to witness the labeling of an old, comfortable, familiar part of my life as seriously misled: "the logic of inquiry is a seriously

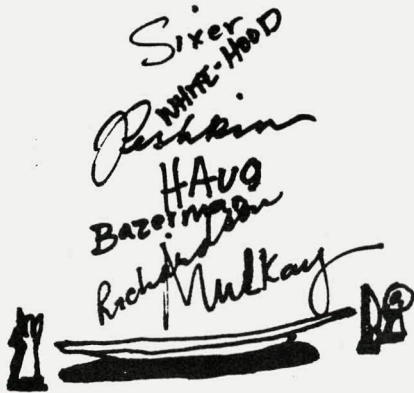
misleading conception of research" (Nelson, 1987, quoted in Richardson, p. 204) and "blind to the actual practices of science" (Richardson, 1988, p. 11). What fascinates me is that this same part of me (the one schooled in the logic of inquiry and windowpane theory) is the one seduced by the logic of Richardson's carefully presented argument: paradoxically seduced with "rational" argument for its own demise. *Is this my same old artificially constructed dichotomy of heart and mind, emotion and intellect?*

Richardson's discussion of metaphor in the social sciences intrigues me. "Imminent in these metaphors, Derrida\* argues, are philosophical and value commitments so entrenched and familiar that they can do their partisan work in the guise of neutrality, passing as literal" (Richardson, 1988, p. 125). I enter this subject at the more immediate level of its relevance to my dissertation topic: (involuntarily) infertile women. The metaphors of fertility/infertility are fraught with values and power politics. *What values might be parading as neutral givens in this arena and how can I design and conduct research to expose them? I have my own troubles figuring out which metaphors are relevant, but how could I begin to incorporate a metaphorical deconstructive process into the research itself?*

Bazerman's (1987) article on codifying the social scientific style of writing makes the point early that there is no single, correct, absolute way of writing science, and "any model of scientific writing embeds rhetorical assumptions" (p. 125). Beginning with the February 1929 *Psychological Bulletin's* issuance of the first "Instructions in Regard to Preparation of Manuscript" (a stylesheet of merely six and a half pages) and culminating in the 1983 third edition of the *APA Publication Manual* (comprised of approximately two hundred oversized pages of rules), Bazerman traces the history of the *American Psychological Association's Publication Manual*. This guide the author maintains now "symbolizes and instrumentally realizes the influence and power of the official [scientific] style" and "conveys the impression that writing is primarily a matter of applying established rules" (p. 126). His graphic use of a familiar and powerful manifesto for scientific writing is very effective. Particularly engaging was Bazerman's descriptions of early authors who "believed that psychological phenomena were internal, subjective events and that the measured data were only external indicators of what was going on inside" (p. 131). The "philosophical thrust of the discourse" was initially paramount (and clearly these early authors weren't self deluded

\* Jacques Derrida, contemporary French philosopher and deconstructionist who stresses the primacy of the written over the spoken text.

about the correspondence between some sort of absolute reality and their "scientific" data), but a divorce between philosophical and empirical work was on the horizon.



Bazerman proceeds to outline a gradual historical transition in the APA manuals to a more descriptive mode wherein the scientific writer nonetheless remained an active problem-solver and the implied audience varied and wide. Analyzing a classic article by J. B. Watson and R. Raynor (1920), Bazerman suggests that the readers are invited to participate, to make choices between Watson's interpretations and the Freudian straw dog he constructs. "The choice rests on the audience's response to a first-person account of a single incident: in essence, a short story" (p. 136). Developmentally, the period in which Watson's work was written saw the increasing objectification of the research subject. The rise in behaviorism between the two world wars produced a narrowed rhetoric consistent with behaviorist assumptions, an evolution consistent with the contemporaneous popularity of logical positivism. No longer "a

reasoner about the mind", the quintessential writer of science becomes "a doer of experiments, maker of calculations, and presenter of results" (p. 139). Engagement of the audience in a measured and persuasive argument is diminished; the readers become passive recipients of "the results". Bazerman's work opens a whole can of worms: investigative versus descriptive reporting in science and the role of the audience, the reader of "scientific writing". *Is the trend away from audience involvement/consideration a precursor or a result of "rhetorical diminution of methods", whose main function Bazerman claims is to "protect the researcher's results" rather than to "help the reader conceptualize the event that produced the results" (p. 138)? Which came first, the unreadable and unreachable language of science or the religious fervor with which the social sciences have narrowed the realm of acceptable methodology in their efforts to emulate the hard sciences? Food for thought in light of the plethora of books popularizing science: what is their purpose?*

Five years ago today my then-23-year-old brother died and I am feeling a need to reflect and write. Springtime is forever tainted. This year I was very preoccupied with exams; "it" had not preyed on my mind as in years past. Yesterday I spoke at length with one of my sisters, both of us keenly aware of the impending anniversary; yet this morning I awoke and did not even think of "it" until noon. I felt instantly pleased (the dark

place, the aching loss ebbs ever so slightly as time passes) and guilty (Is my lack of awareness a reflection of loss of love?). Driving to the university, basking in my precious solitary time while listening to music in the car, I was suddenly and ferociously attacked by waves of grief. I wailed until I wondered if it would stop and felt powerless to control this flood of emotion. What I had seen the day before as a fairly well healed scar opened afresh. Some day I want to try to write a story, my version of my truth about my brother. But are there any relevant "facts"?

He had dropped out of college twice. P. was interested in music in a family where little value was placed on the arts. He had been depressed and was on medication...and maybe smoking dope, drinking as well. The baby of the family, he was again living at home, unemployed but pressured by conflicting messages of independence/dependence. Our parents were out of the country at a conference and returned very late. They had to hail a cab home in the rain when P. didn't appear at the airport. As the cabbie waited, they found him with the dog in the family car. My mother thought he was sleeping: "He looked so peaceful." The coroner's final ruling: suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning.

Or try another version... My youngest brother was remarkably gifted and physically fit. He was a lover of mountains, forest, solitude and pursued his passions for any and all kinds of music and people with

wonderful zest. He was tender and very, very funny. It was impossible to be in his presence without feeling an envelope of warmth. Various described as deeply sensitive, a risk-taker, a dare devil, a flaunter of convention, he went the day before to get his passport for an upcoming trip to Australia and made plans to spend the summer out West with the love of his life. He left no note. The car keys were turned off and the gas tank was half full. No drugs were found in his body save the prescribed amount of anti-depressant. He left the dishes undone and the house lights on. Seen by a neighbor in a local bar around midnight playing pinball, he waved. He had plans to housepaint the next day and his friend was pissed off when P. didn't show up for work. *Did he listen to music in the car with the garage door closed? Did he flirt with death and then decide to turn off the ignition? Did he realize the carbon monoxide already in the air would go on affixing itself to his blood molecules, an eternal unbroken bond?*

There are other versions, other stories. I have given up searching for THE truth, but it is very hard to get over the notion that there ought to be one and that it ought to be possible to locate it. The wish for transparency rests, I think, on another faulty assumption: truth denotes meaning. If I could know "the truth", I would know what his death means. Wrong again. And while I write fresh from reopened wounds, I am confident that this too is fleeting and I will soon return to a more

peaceful calm where it is his life that is meaningful and the perspective moves back into another focus. Tonight I just miss him....

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My parents are here visiting this weekend for their 46th anniversary. This is a month of anniversaries with Mother's Day thrown in for good measure. The pain is etched on their faces. My father, a radiologist himself, submitted to one of the newer radiological devices, the MRI, to "prove" he has a spinal cord tumor. He is being very "scientific" about his own diagnosis/prognosis, matching images with both subjective and "objective" symptom measures.

We talk about my plans to do qualitative research and he is more attentive than I had anticipated. While trying to engage him in questions about the paradigmatic status of science, I remain careful to use the correct language, to phrase myself in nonconfrontive, understandable rhetoric. Successful in that he doesn't say I am "out of it" or ridicule me, I realize that it has advanced my cause not at all. I am not sure it is possible for either of us to take the other seriously in an intellectual discussion; we cannot get outside the relationship.

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I think that I've gone too far with the personal stuff and want to try anchoring myself in some readings. I read the extracts from Theodore Sizer's book *Horace's Compromise*. Sizer and some colleagues

studied American high schools in the late 1970's and early 80's firsthand, visiting schools in fifteen states. An historian by training, Sizer also spent two years as a secondary school principal and teacher, trying to understand the culture of the American High School. Sizer argues that experienced adults can reflect on their own learning, that they know (more or less) how to learn for themselves. Children, on the other hand, "know neither how to learn very efficiently nor are aware of how to reflect on their own knowing" (p. 3). To convey "the essential feel" of high schools, Sizer creates a series of word pictures and composite characters, blending real people and places, and locates his narrative somewhere between "precise journalism and nonfiction fiction" (p. 8). The overall flavor of the chapters I read was pleasing to me. Just why I'm not sure, but I think the closer approximation to fiction brought life to the characters and foregrounded the place of the humanities in teaching. On the other hand, his discussion of the gender issue was troubling. His gross understatement that "sometimes gender is significant" (p. 38) and his list of examples (summed up in one tidy paragraph!) force me to imagine, to try to conjure up situations where gender is not significant.

Peshkin (1988)'s article, "Understanding Complexity: A Gift of Qualitative Inquiry" is a clever little, neatly packaged piece. I resonated with his comments about "those who

turn to qualitative inquiry" as reflective of an attraction "more to a form of investigation that, by considering the extraordinary variability of things, is replete with — and does not shrink from exploring — AMBIGUITY" (p. 418): ambiguity and (equally important to me) ambivalence. His conclusion is marvelous: "I suggest that qualitative inquiry resists standardization. It is, therefore, idiosyncratic in regard to its ends, its means, and the forms it uses to presents its findings. Such idiosyncrasy is consonant with the complexity of the social world we choose to study" (p. 423). A few trim sentences right to the point.

The White-Hood (1988) paper on the lived experience of the adolescent was an exemplar of phenomenological writing Ugh! I actually read this dreadful article twice and found it just as awful the second time 'round. *What was the rationale for selection of this article? Have I missed something? This seems an excellent example of an idea gone sour, of what NOT to do. I have this image of an older woman, a "mature student" as they say, having spent at least the past ten years out of mainstream academia. She enrolls in a course on phenomenological writing. Something clicks for her. (So far, this could be me...) It is as if she has license to air uncensored any thought, any feeling that comes into her head: no hard edges, no challenge to the complexities of mind. Her metaphors are ill chosen: "For me, it [adolescence?] is a petal that captivates my very being and pulls on my*

*heart"* (p.2). The tenor makes me extremely uncomfortable, reminding me of the 1960's Esalen nude group therapy. In her opening acknowledgement, she pays tribute to the instructor in her course on phenomenological writing. Mouthing platitudes and clichés, she willingly unclothes herself and gushes adulations to her guru. As her mentor, I would be so embarrassed. I must talk about this in class... *What AM I participating in when I read this? It strikes me as a phony touchy-feely session: sad and empty. One can sense the depth of emotion, the power that makes "the birds sing now...I know for I have heard the chirps...I have seen the rhythm...and I have felt the flutter" (p. xx), but she fails miserably to teach us her song. Is it a song worth learning—no variation in rhythm, no subtlety, mindless bubble gum music, background noise? Just praying I don't write such drivel.*

I'm not terribly pleased with myself. Maybe I went overboard in class re White-Hood. Was I too mocking? I would have been more comfortable with a different audience, one with energy to defend White-Hood. It felt too easy to tear her up. *Is it possible that her technique (to write AS an adolescent to convey a sense of adolescence) was deliberate???* Now THAT would be something!

I also felt a bit stupid about the Sizer article. I didn't know that he was a big shot, though I sensed his authorial voice. Also, while I had been

bothered by his remarks about gender, I really didn't have his number on sexism. I passed right over it and forgave him what little I did notice. Why? It seems to be related to his ability to write, to "build authority into the text". There seems a foreboding caution lodged here: if one risks narrative, one must also maintain vigilance in the effort to keep the door open to multiple interpretations.

Hurry, hurry. Class is almost over and I am still hungry with anticipation for things to come. The exemplars only whet my appetite. The menu is too large to choose from and I'm afraid I'll pick the wrong items. I listen to others quiz the waitperson and wonder if their meals will be tastier than mine. *Patience. Try to remember you will be hungry again tomorrow; you can order anew. Resist succumbing to your gluttonous temptations to order everything on the menu, only to find yourself too sated to appreciate the complexities of each distinct dish.*

Okay. Mulkay's (1985) article is a tidbit I want to order. He writes of the word and the world, explorations in the form of sociological analysis. What emerges is predicated on his desire to acknowledge and counter the detached, self-contained qualities of written text. It's a very deft effort at multiple voices, reminding me of "double chairing" in Gestalt psychotherapy. Have the client identify a feeling and sit in one chair. Conjure up its opposite. Then switch chairs to situate

oneself in the polar feeling, each character built around diametric feelings. The result is a sort of living, evolving dialectic at work. Mulkay practices this tactic in his writing, but throws in a third force: Author, Reader, plus the Book itself. He uses this triad to move gracefully from one perspective to another. On an experiential level, this may be akin to the human propensity for continuity, for our life stories to flow, one to another. It captures our wish for dialogue and conversation rather than an internal monologue and hints at the interactive, interpersonal foundation for all knowledge. There are some deep issues here for me. The experimental form of this piece prompts me to entertain some new fantasies relating to my recurrent and troubling methodological questions. These questions dance around how to account for perspectives in time, especially the comparison of retrospective accounts with contemporary or anticipatory ones. In reporting in-depth accounts taken from qualitative research, perhaps one way to convey temporal vantage points would be to create a conversation between several "selves".

The chapter from Haug (1987) must go on my plate too. I devour it and want a second helping. It holds, I think, the most promise for my dissertation material because it comes closest to investigating the mind-body problem in a cultural-historical-political context. The best gems include her statement that "it is not simply some lack of information or technical facility

that bars our route to fulfillment, but in some mysterious way, it is we ourselves, our bodies, our relationship to our bodies, and, again, ourselves as whole persons in relation to the world that demand to be taken into account in relation to questions of human happiness, up to and including happiness in the sexual domain" (p. 34). How often I seem to read about people whose bodies are only seen from the outside perspective and how critical it will be for me (in my study of infertility) to savor, collar, and make accessible the blend of vistas from both inside and outside the body.

Haug too calls for "more than a little disrespect for all norms and values if we are to enter the world as conscious participants" (p.38). What must be integral to any study I do is a systematic uncovering, a self reflectiveness that examines the traditional use of language, labor, and assumed thinking and behavior. Haug maintains that "identities are not formed through imitation, nor through any simple reproduction of predetermined patterns" (p. 185). They are constructed through a process whereby we analyze each life situation according to the values we enjoy and the goals we entertain. We "wrest cultural meaning and pleasure from life" through an evaluative but conflictual process that pits dominant cultural values against our own efforts at oppositional interpretations. The end result is some sort of compromise that skirts determinism on both sides, engages the human capacity for action, and employs our dual

desires for meaning and self-fulfillment. Thus, she says, "experience may be seen as lived practice in the memory of a self-constructed identity" (p. 42).

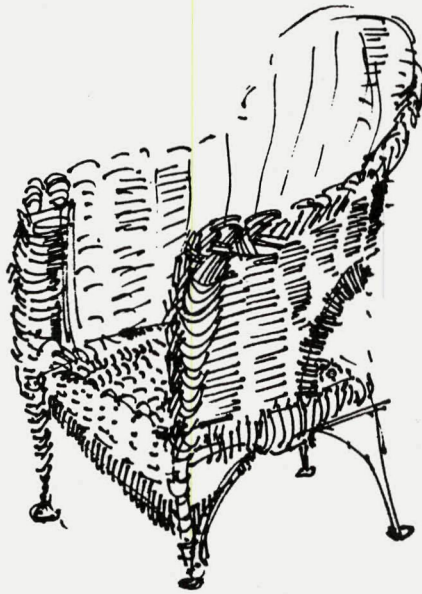
*There is too much here and I am only regurgitating. Smaller bits are needed and more time to digest it all. Still, I am drawn to the technique of the investigation of self through the use of third person narratives, along with the rationale for it. We make "our memories the objects as well as the instruments of our research, the very constructed-ness of the social, and thus of ourselves within it" (p. 49). In spite of all the goodies I find in the fragments of Haug's work, the major deficit can't go unmentioned: WHERE WHERE WHERE are the exemplars? Their virtual absence nearly drove me mad. I need for Haug to tether these abstract notions to examples from her work so I can perform a sort of validity check on my own head work. I'll simply have to read the whole book.*

White-Hood redux. I can't seem to leave this one alone. I'm quite certain White-Hood's paper is not an adept critique of the traditional, "male-oriented" voice of positivist scientific writing, but an unintended parody of such. It strikes me that "Saturday Night Live" could make it a smashing success. Maybe some of my vehemence stems from concern that her shoddiness will tragically endanger other "feminine voices".

I've done the last readings for this course. I'm feeling disappointed but unsure just why. I kept waiting for something big and found instead what seemed common and old hat, full of a lot of overused political language. I wanted something more exciting. Now what does all this say about my own situatedness?

I have some ideas, but alas no answers. I think I feel pretty saturated with the basic, starting-point material. I do not mean to suggest an adequate command of even the most fundamental principles of qualitative data analysis. Still, I feel restless to be somewhere else. Perhaps it's a simple lack of energy, of motivation to press on after working night and day for months before my exams. Now I want to sit on my riding mower and smell the grass amidst the white noise of the motor and the bump-bump of the ride, revel in my daughters' small talk and why-why-why-ness of this very moment in time. I want to be at every baseball game for my eight year old and wonder life's great issues, laughing quietly with my 19 year old son. I am aching for a few long, lazy evenings alone in the dusk with my husband. I search out time now to live, not holding out for the future or examining the distant past. Yet I am plagued with ambivalence because I wanted to give more to this course than I possess, and suddenly fear I may have squandered something precious. I have been too lazy while the clock continues ticking.

And then there is my



data. What am I to do with it? The first stage, picking through it, a cultivated illusion of openness, was fun. Now I am paralyzed and wondering a new what constitutes grounded theory. All the "grounded" structures, themes, and categories seems ultimately traceable to my own idiosyncratic assumptions about the world. Frankly, I am moving in circles.

I just finished a series of articles in *The New Yorker* (Malcolm, 1989), on the Jeffrey MacDonald trial. MacDonald, an army doctor in 1970 when his wife and two young daughters were murdered, was tried and eventually convicted of their murders and is now serving a life sentence for these convictions. Joe McGinness, author of a book about the case called *Fatal Vision*, made an out-of-court settlement with MacDonald in 1987, after MacDonald brought suit against McGinness for essentially failing to "act in good faith." MacDonald had been led to believe by McGinness that the

book would support his innocence; instead, it painted him as a psychopathic killer. Lasting six weeks and ending in a hung jury, the *New Yorker* articles suggest, save one lone juror who refused to consider the issues, the jury would have voted in favor of MacDonald. The jury remained totally convinced of MacDonald's guilt, but argued his right for redress in McGinness's failure to inform him of the negative image McGinness planned to present. Relevant here is the relationship between McGinness and MacDonald and the question of McGinness' obligation/responsibility (legal? moral? ethical?) to portray MacDonald in a way that met with MacDonald's approval. *In short, who controls the product of the research? Who "wins" when there are very disparate versions of the truth?* While derived from a journalistic perspective, the issues raised seem extremely alive to my own present dilemmas.

The course ends this week and I talked at length today before class to one of my grad student cohorts about many of my concerns. We are in much the same place intellectually, academically, and in terms of our conceptualizations of research and its progress. Yet I see us as quite dissimilar emotionally. She has far greater capacity to incorporate "the broader picture" and seems able to separate her frustrations from the push to perform. She is able to experience the same angst as

I and find a way to move on. I envy her that and keep probing her for the keys that will speedily unlock this quality in me.

This will be my last entry. I am pressed for time and with unfinished work. Partly this is a cop-out because I am reluctant to conclude this journal. And yet at the same time, my profound awe of both my professor's brain and literary talents inhibits my writing of the final course paper.

I was taken by her phrase "writing against the grain", which symbolizes many doors opening in my introduction to this vast new world of alternate ways of knowing. The readings have spurred me to a fresh diet of discovery, a measured effort to mix thinking and being, research and practice. All of this adds in some small way to my understanding of the relationship between deficits in our current social science models and their limited ways of approaching the mysteries of social life. My vaguely felt suspicions — that we succeed not well enough in our social science efforts to examine human behavior and advance social programs commensurate with that understanding — have been confirmed. So for me, the lesson fans beyond simply learning to write against the grain, but is inextricably interwoven with thinking, observing, and feeling in novel, neoteric and diverse directions which continue to shape and extend avenues for practicing personal and social change.

### After-words

Having decided to submit these doctored journal fragments for publication, it seems to me that some of the key ingredients of that decision are foretold in these pages. Now, and even then, I believe that "science" and "research" mediated through our human experience and language, give us at best, as Richardson points out, "a particular view of reality." I believed then as I do now that we must remind ourselves of C. Wright Mill's admonition to avoid succumbing to a view of social reality that depends on a bureaucratic kind of research and strive to become independent and substantive thinkers. I struggled then, as I struggle now, with where and how meaning is made and I find enduring resonance to Peshkin's view that those interested in qualitative inquiry must not shrink from exploring ambiguity. My own addition of the need to recognize ambivalence (our own as well as that we witness in others) remains salient. In fact, I think it is perhaps key to my own idiosyncratic qualitative inquiry. Ambivalence captured my response to the White-Hood paper; I was revolted and intrigued by its ambiguous mix of flavor and content. I was ambivalent about my own ambivalence toward it. Did I scrutinize carefully enough the multiple interpretations of my gut-level reaction? Was it poor scholarship that bothered me or was it something "more personal," a dark reflection of my own fears in making my

own writing public?

As I read through these entries again, I am amused by my own comments on Mulkey's work. I thought he was successfully experimenting with ways to represent the human desire for continuity in our life stories and our inextricable entrenchment in the social. While then these issues found direct accent in my dissertation work, I have found them since to reverberate in all arenas of my life. I wanted to make "sense" of my brother's death, but I also felt acutely the need for the meaning I made of his death to remain consonant with the meaning I experienced of his life, as well as meld with those made by significant others who knew us both. The fact that I chose to do my dissertation work with infertile women cannot, nor should not, be separate from my own experience with infertility. My own (at times) insufferable emotional intensity and fascination to investigating "multiple realities" must surely have deep roots in my own early life social interactions.

To paraphrase Haug, it is something mysterious about US (our bodies, our relationship to our bodies, and ourselves as whole persons in relation to the world) that demands notice in relation to all questions of human happiness and knowledge. And just as we must take seriously the need for more than a little disrespect for all norms and values and make a self-conscious effort at oppositional interpretations if we are to enter the world as conscious participants, we — no, I mean

"I" — must take seriously the need to forge my inimitable identities. In doing so, I must continue to listen closely and reflect carefully on the concrete situatedness of all my thinking and being. How is who I am and what I know tethered to my lived experience and my "real" and vicarious conversations with others? In the end, as I ask myself "who owns this piece of writing" and what is its truth? I pretend no definitive answer and concede that these days, on most days, that feels pretty comfortable. □

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