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“Knowing One’s Self”: Selfwriting, Power and Ethical Practice

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Abstract: Adult educators are increasingly concerned with issues of power and identity. Drawing on my research text, *The Body’s Tale*, and Foucault’s writings, I explore how pastoral power effects construct subjectivities. Using three genealogical narratives—of eating, elimination and swarming—I show how we can interrupt self-regulation, and through self-writing, develop an embodied ethical practice.

Twenty Years Ago, Seven Years Ago

My mother was a war bride who left Saskatchewan to join my fighter pilot father in England, in 1948. I was born in Doncaster, the closest town with a hospital to RAF Fininglay where my father was stationed. I grew up in England and received a traditional education, culminating in a degree in History and a certificate in teaching. On December 28th, the year I turned 25, my father drove me in his pale blue Triumph sedan to the airport. We didn’t talk. He wasn’t a talker. We smoked. We stood at the gate at Heathrow. “Well,” he said, sternly, subduing unmilitary emotions, “you’re really leaving—I don’t think I’ll ever see you again, my dear. What *will* you do there?” I said, “I don’t know, I wish I wasn’t going now, but it’s too late to change my mind. All I know is, I will never, ever be a teacher, or go into a school again in my life.” I said goodbye, a little peck on the cheek, and walked on to the Air Canada plane. A day in early September, in the year I turned 45. I walked out my door (saying “Wish me luck!” to the cats), to the bus stop on the corner, climbed on the # 10 UBC when it came, and began seven years of schooling and teaching. What happened?

Power and Identity

Scholars and practitioners have begun to concern themselves with issues of identity, both in their students and in themselves. Palmer (1998) has said that while we frequently ask *what*, *why*, and *how* we teach, we rarely ask, “*Who* is the self that teaches?” This is changing. Taking up the editor’s challenge, contributors to the recent *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (2000) reflect critically on the contextual nature of their knowledge construction and the perspective from which they speak; some take a poststructural approach to understanding how the “subjectivities” (categories of identity), or “positionalities” (Tisdell, 2000), of learners and teachers affect educational practice. A convergent interest in how power works productively in adult education institutions, structures and social relations—as opposed to negatively or in a dominating fashion—is also emerging. Cervero et al (2000) offer an analysis of how power works in program planning and evaluation, although absent is an examination of Foucault’s theory of power. Brookfield (2001) presents a coherent overview of Foucaultian power and its utility for adult learning—although he omits a detailed discussion of *pastoral* power or how power relations work to *produce* people and actions, both relevant to adult education.

“Who We Are” And What We Do: The Purpose of the Study

My own work brings together these two topical issues—subjectivity and power. When I got on the plane at Heathrow did I ever imagine I could be anything but white, upper middle

class, an officer's daughter, and a heterosexual woman (not that we talked much about sex then), and did I ever wonder how what I was affected others? No. But now I do. In *The Body's Tale* I explored how various kinds of power were applied to my body in educational settings to produce subjectivities, if I might be able to shift, or rework inequitable or burdensome identities, and how my self-understanding would impact my "self who teaches." Here I draw upon my study, and Foucault's writings on power and the subject, ethical practice and space, to better understand "who we are," and how we can develop a critically reflective, embodied, ethical practice.

The Body's Tale

The body's tale is about me as a learner and a teacher, and it's especially about the embodiment of my subjectivities. Poststructuralists/feminists (Butler, 1999; McWhorter, 1999) follow Foucault in understanding that when the power which always circulates in institutions, structures and social relations is applied to the body, its surface will become inscribed with the obvious markers of identity we are all socially and culturally coded to read, like sexuality, class, and, sometimes, occupation and character. I wanted to know how my schooling had marked/made me, and especially about my Imperial or colonial identity, instilled in early childhood in a military family; I see teaching as a potentially colonizing practice with Imperial aims. Because I teach several courses a term, in a settler land, that's worth knowing about...

And so *The Body's Tale* traces the genealogy of my educated body. Genealogy is counter-memory as historical practice; it reverses the smooth, inevitability and flow of a traditional history (Foucault, 1984). It disrupts, parodies, and dissociates identity; it recognizes its slanted knowledge perspective, and resists the will to knowledge/truth. Counterhistory, or genealogy, cultivates details and accidents, it looks to the body and its exterior, not its interior. It is grey, meticulous and patiently documentary, it opposes itself to the search for origins, because if there is a secret, it's "not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that there is no essence" (p.78.). Genealogy requires "patience and a knowledge of details, *rigorous method*," and I can attest it took all of that, and more! I used postcolonial autoethnographic methods (Pratt, 1992) in conducting the research, acknowledging the co-constructedness of identity. Thus, other's stories and descriptions of our common educational experiences helped me to better understand my own: and although *The Tale* has my body as its apparent subject of research, it is a metaphoric story where "the body" is metonymic: the reader can find connections, resonances, commonalities with her/his own schooling, and educational practices.

Counter-research. I visited my schools, college, teacher-training program, homes and other places across Britain—Norfolk, Lincoln, London. I wrote, in notebooks, in airports, at the coach station, on my laptop, on menus, on walls, and on myself. I interviewed old school fellows, teachers, staff, professors, and college students; these sessions were taped and subject to ethical guidelines, yet other informal talks (with the woman who ran the tea shop, the old man at the Post Office, the people I met on buses, trains and planes and in bed and breakfasts), also enriched my counter-memories. I collected pictures and postcards, and took photographs—but not of people, for I wanted the spaces of my schooling to speak for themselves, and not be mediated by bodies. I encouraged memory: in talk, in staying in my undergraduate hall of residence, in play, and in the grief, fear, hope, joy and pleasure of reunions. I used all my senses. Sound: music, on the radio, at the Festival Hall. Taste: Victoria sponge cake and fish and chips and curry and muesli and tea in the garden. Smell: hallways, hawthorn blossom, and Miss Dior perfume.

Vision: sitting, looking, seeking “views.” And touch: the trees at Hubbard’s Hills, the feel of the gate latch at my grandma’s house, the rubber handle in pulling the chain in the toilet. My counter-memories formed multiple texts, and so I wrote again, to analyze and make meaning of the body’s stories.

Counter-representations. When it came time to represent the text, I settled on a format that allowed me to mix temporalities, spaces and genres, but which was still coherent. I assembled the material into an academic Book of Hours—a nod to my training as a medieval historian—in 12 units which follow the body through a year of schooling. These prayer books, usually commissioned by rich laity, were a way to tell time, to mark the seasons, and the holidays. They are illuminated, light bringing and light suffused, full of colour and pictures; in their borders animals, people, angels and devils, disport and riot, marginal resistances to the Church’s pastoral power. Very carnivalesque, too, what with all those bare buttocks and peasants’ dangling privates below, ascetic saints preening above. My Book of Hours honours the timed nature of schooling, one of its great disciplining techniques; it’s parodic; it’s true to postcolonial autoethnographies in that it’s funny, idiomatic and indigenous; and it uses visuals to represent the co-construction of time and place and the body. Each month contains a variety of genres, an academic dis-ordering of narrative disassociation, some parody, some masks, some pleasure, some pain. Stories of food, travel, and sex; theoretical musings, poetry and prose; photographs of toilets, cemeteries and palaces. The only certainty is that each section begins with a doorway—a liminal/lighted transitional space—and contains a bathroom. Enter any month, discern the patterns of words and pictures which clothe the educated body—or not.

Power In All Its Shapes And Sizes: What I Learned

Reading the Tale is to read about the subjectification of myself as female, heterosexual, upper middle class, white and Imperial, and it is to read about power. A counterhistory looks for the way seemingly random events show power at work, looking not for power itself—a difficult and confusing task—but for the evidence of resistance struggles to it. I used this strategy to work through my writing, interviews and visuals, and found three kinds of power circulated as I/the body was being educated. *Capacitive* (physical and instrumental) and *communicative* (symbolic, written and spoken) power were, literally, applied to me/my body to induce a self-understanding of an essentially flawed interior with a “natural” secret sexual identity in need of regulation. Power worked indirectly in *relational* ways to enforce discipline, by requiring me, as its subject, to act in specific ways. I discovered that *pastoral power*, a *bloc* of all three kinds of power often found in educational settings, was insidious; my counter-memories illustrate how I internalized its effects and learned to reinforce the subjectivities constructed in my earlier training—for my own good. I’ve chosen to illuminate power effects at work in narratives of eating, elimination, and “swarming.”

Eating is one of the ways that the spatiality of our bodies is brought into being; it can show, too, our failure to contain the space of that body, a lack of will, as in getting fat—my mother’s constant fear for me, which I internalized fully at boarding school. Food brings into being the imaginative geography of the self; we ate at school, everyday, the food of Empire—curry, kedgerie and char—seated in the dining room under the gaze of John Smith, our famous “old boy,” sternly subduing the female colonial body of waif-like Pocahontas. We learned/ate to be future wives of the Empire. In food and eating, we position bodies in relation to others in

terms of class and ethnicity, as well as morally, as in good food and bad food. Food classifies, divides, and normalizes; food subjectifies, and objectifies, and nationalizes—and all my life, I’ve been in a power relation with food. It’s made me who I am. (Ever wondered why we adult educators like to include snacks in our classes—training learners to eat up our words/works, literally?)

Elimination: What goes in must come out. Abjection is the process by which we expel that which is not us, and, as it becomes the Other, we know ourselves. Elimination is one of those daily chores we don’t like to talk about—except to agents of pastoral power, like doctors, nurses, and boarding school housemistresses—nor do we dwell on bathing, shaving, trimming, laving, and all the other ways we refine the body’s surface, making it fit for company. Yet what we do in toilets and bathrooms makes us subjects. Identity can create place and place identity/subjectivity, in complex and always fluid ways. We exist in a power relationship with places—places can have us take actions, work, or live, or sleep, or run, in a myriad possibility of ways... and, too, our actions act on places. Many of *the Body’s Tales* ended up in the toilet, and bathrooms, showing me how power works in everyday spaces on our everyday subjectivities.

Toilets are gendered, classed, raced and nationalized. They allow or restrict public movement—both of women, and the disabled (Andrews, 1990). They are inequitably planned—women take about 70 seconds to urinate, men only 30 (Greed, 1995), but there are usually twice as many Men’s as Women’s (Edwards, 1997). Toilets serve more than obvious functions; they are places where women experience the profundity of their existence—in menstruation, elimination, feeding, the care of others, the care of self, in meetings, and for many, toilets play a significant autobiographic role, especially in menstrual rites of passage (Prendergast, 2000). Toilets are places of power, where institutional power effects are spatialized; they are discursive spaces, where what’s appropriate and what’s not is closely regulated. They are places of disciplining and control of the individual, and the Public, Body—and toilets bear the freight of socially constructed attitudes toward dirt and disorder (Douglas, 1966). They are associated with seepage, with the leaking of repulsively disordered menstrual blood, faeces, urine, semen, spit, vomit and mucus; toilets become negative, even taboo, and the bodies which employ them become, themselves, liminal zones, whose orifices and margins are dangerous threats to order and civility. And every kid who’s been to school knows toilets are places for resistance (Simpson, 2000). Funnily enough, in toilet’s heterotopic spaces (Foucault, 1986) I found places of safety, expression, and alternate subjectivities. Elimination is fundamental in the creation and sustaining of subjectivities... and their disintegration; daily we fix and loosen our identities. We must interrupt our self-regulation—yet I fear we are too polite, even in private...

Swarming: As I wrote *The Body’s Tale*, I came to believe that early, deeply profound toilet/food/training had limited my body’s ability to consciously subvert some subjectivities, like gender and race, even though I know these to be performative—that is, not essential, but called forth by hegemonic discourses. By the time I reached college, at 19, I was sedimented as white, female, and middle class, and getting to be pretty... Imperial. At University, the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality, entwined with class, was wedded to the notion of “being of service,” as so many of my contemporaries recalled. “Giving back, helping others, sharing our education,” they said. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault talks of how “mechanisms swarm out from the centre” as individual blocs of power; so were we trained to

swarm. In lectures, tutorials, sherry parties, coffee mornings and at afternoon tea, we learned, along with the history of all the kings and queens of England, our mission in life. One half of my class of 33 went into teaching, others into the civil service and the foreign office, 3 into the church, 3 into politics (one successfully, serving as a radical MP), and several into social work. Many turned to education in later life—me for one—and we teach others. Did we find there, too, our “hearts of darkness” as well as the desire to serve/colonize? We were very conscious of class, and of being maybe second-class, we didn’t get into Cambridge (30 out of 33) after all, so we weren’t upper class. Those who arrived lower class became solid middle class—often by taking up swarming professions, like Oliver the diplomat, or Dave in municipal government. The Empire has a middle class body. With good manners. Oliver called us “Sheltered children from the south coast who had never farted in our lives.” But swarm out we did, to do unto others as had been done unto us, in our twin sets, nice skirts or good grey flannels, farting or not.

Using Power, Hopefully.

If we are faced with capacitive power there’s little room for resistance; I tell stories of frequently futile struggles against dominating power... of physical punishment, now internalized into self mortifying exercise programs, reducing diets, and “waiting to go the bathroom at break.” But dominating power needs to be constantly applied to subjects, iteration contains the potential for its failure, or at least, slippage. And if we are confronting communicative power—which in our postmodern world frequently results in the production of a dossier, a record of ourselves written by others and used to regulate us—there is perhaps some room for maneuver, a chance to write back, to tell our own life (Heilbrun, 1988), to “get a life” (Smith, 1996). Within the power relation lies the most danger, and the most hope, for adult educators. Hope? When power relations (where an active agent is acted upon to produce a required effect within a limited field) existed for me, my fellow students and teachers, then “fields of possibilities” for reworking subjectivities opened up, but in heterotopic and “liminal” spaces/places, rather than in classrooms or lecture halls. (In my first ghastly term at grad school, we women shrieked out our anger in the washroom at break, furious at our silencing in androcentric classrooms, but unable to challenge it publicly.)

What adult educators can also take from the *Body’s Tale* is a deeper understanding of pastoral power and its agents. Originating in medieval Christian institutions, pastoral power sought to assure salvation in the next world. But it “cannot be exercised without knowing the insides of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets” (Foucault, 2000, p. 333). Modern pastoral power is concerned with saving us in this world, with our health, wealth, well-being, and safety, and its officials have increased; developing their knowledge of populations and individuals—for our greater good—they include the family, psychiatrists, employers... and teachers. We pride ourselves on being good listeners, counselors, and so much more than didactic lecturers. How can we tell if we are “swarming” pastoral power agents—or just good critical pedagogues?

Self-Writing: Implications for Adult Education Practice

Commentators often misread “the care of the self” as a self-indulgent, relativistic, onanistic activity not consonant with ethical practice. But self-care is about self-knowledge, “knowing oneself,” and how one acts, can act, and should act, in relation to others. Through self-writing, *askesis* (Foucault, 1997), the discipline and training of oneself, we can produce, not a universalizing and objectifying moral code, but a constantly evolving subjective ethical

practice, grounded in the everyday, with its the petty, boring details. Writing *The Body's Tale* showed me the mechanics of power relations and discursive practices at work on my body, in my education, and now, in my own practice—and how I can utilize power productively. In *askesis*, keeping daily notebooks, *hupomnemata*, and in correspondence with others about those notes, we can practice an ethics of “caring for the self,” rather than caring for others—a discourse which cloaks pastoral power. Self-writing develops “a practice rather than a vantage point, an active experience rather than a passive waiting.” My *hupomnemata* and epistolary writing surfaced my actions and intentions; reviewing my writing nightly, assembling it in a form to communicate to someone else, I made self-writing a social act. Of course, *I* did it by accident, and via Hotmail, in a potpourri of Internet cafes and computer stations, but I found out writing to others is a way of returning the surveillant gaze, of breaking the narcissistic and monastic impulse to self-examination and solitary confession—an effect of pastoral power, where the subject “confesses” themselves into an acceptable subjectivity—as well as an ethical examination of one’s everyday life. Writing is being-with, embodying one’s self in one’s words.

Whether one writes about food, one’s research, the state of the toilets in Britain versus Denmark, how performativity works, or how class went tonight, self-writing, as a discipline of the self, can keep us looking and feeling good. Self/writing the *Body's Tale* allowed me to explore the construction of my subjectivities, and it also lets me ponder how the practiced/body of a white, Imperial, heterosexual, and middle class teacher is read by others writing their own bodies/lives. I now understand the frequently unacknowledged purpose of education *is* to construct embodied subjects, and the petty, daily, ways this is achieved, I don’t renounce this use of power. I can’t. I have it, you have it, we all have it; being human is to use and be used by power, to re-/produce effects and subjectivities. I can, however, try to wield pastoral power, or communicative and relational power, in ethical ways. And give me your email address, we can write to each other about it all...

A Running Text, Post Scriptum

I discovered, with astonishment, a parallel and largely unconscious text had been writing itself all the while the academic text was being inscribed in discursively ordered patterns on the university’s paper. From being a girl who was “no good at games, clumsy, fat, stupid, ugly and ridiculous,” the *body* had written itself as a marathon runner, which enjoys 20-mile gallops... Does this mean that in our pastoral power relation/struggle, the *body* has written its own preferred self knowledge on its legs and arms and feet, found its field of possibility in re-working what I thought were ineradicable subjectivities? While I wasn’t looking? To be continued....

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