

WHO ARE YOU AND WHY DO YOU CARE: INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY

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In this narrative, the author considers the process whereby her new role as a social work academic has resulted in shifts in her identity expression as insider/outsider. Weaving concepts from intersectional scholarship, with personal narratives and poetry, the author describes her daily acts of resistance as she strives to maintain, express, and ultimately embrace the changes this new role brings:

*"I am a poster girl with no poster
I am thirty-two flavors and then some
and I'm beyond your peripheral vision
so you might want to turn your head
cause someday you're going to get
hungry
and eat most of the words you just
said..."*

(Ani Difranco, 1995)

*"The moment the insider steps out
from the inside she's no longer a
mere insider. She necessarily looks
in from the outside while also
looking out from the inside. Not
quite the same, not quite the other,
she stands in that undetermined
threshold place where she
constantly drifts in and out.
Undercutting the inside/outside
opposition, her intervention is
necessarily that of both not quite
an insider and not quite an
outsider. She is, in other words, this
inappropriate other or same who
moves about with always at least
two gestures: that of affirming 'I am
like you' while persisting in her
difference and that of reminding 'I
am different' while unsettling every
definition of otherness arrived at."*
(Trinh T Minh Ha, 1989)

*"A poem worth of clichés is floating
inside me here
One day of sunshine, eagle in a tree,
Drinking coffee in the sunshine by the
lake
Children smiling, laughing, streaked with
the marks of my parental inconsistency
Articles don't write themselves with twin
boys marching around my computer..
Like sentries preventing creative thought
and demanding hugs."
(personal journal, 2008)*

I wrote this little poem last summer while on holiday with my children at the lake, hoping to steal a few moments to write this article. With deadline looming, I know I am passionate about and committed to writing, teaching, and speaking about this "Inside-Out" topic. This poem, however, best expresses my professional and personal collision of worlds over the last three years; this article is my attempt to explore the identity crisis of my personal and professional life. Crises are generally precipitated by change and this story is no different. Three years ago I interviewed for a job at a university. This, in and of itself, might not be remarkable if it were not for the fact that I was eight months pregnant with twins and already a solo parent of a three-year-old girl. I was leaving the city where I had practiced as a social worker and community-based researcher to return to the rural community of my childhood.

This narrative explores the process whereby my new role as an academic has resulted in my own movements and identity expression as insider/outsider and often feeling like the “inappropriate other” in the academic world. All this occurs as I strive to maintain and express who I am, while actively engaging in and embracing the emergence and changes this new role brings to my personal and professional self.

Intersectionality and Inappropriate Other: Professional and Personal

A key question guiding me has been: What are the daily practices of negotiating the complex power relations stemming from the university institutional authority that often does not account for intersectional identities of belonging? On a theoretical level, my work has been informed by the work of theorists such as bell hooks (1994), Patricia Hill Collins (2004) and Trinh T. Minh Ha (1989, 1997) who have challenged the concepts of identity put forward in mainstream feminist movements. In particular, these theorists explore the process whereby either/or thinking and the creation of binary opposites is central in oppression and have helped define post-colonial scholarship and the creation of intersectional frameworks of analysis. However, as Collins (2004) and hooks (1994) have both noted, abstract thought is not enough in forwarding social justice agendas; action is required. I found myself rereading *Teaching to Transgress* and being impacted by bell hooks’ words “I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share” (1994, p. 21). Further, hooks notes, “somehow it was my disinvestment in the notion of the professor or academic as my identity that I think has made me more willing to question and interrogate this role... I feel I have benefited a lot from not being attached to myself as an academic or professor” (p. 134).

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women in the document entitled “Intersectional Feminist Frameworks: An Emerging Vision” (2006) describes intersectional frameworks as having the “potential to open new spaces for

transformation by examining not only the complex factors operating in women’s and men’s lives that keep them marginalized, but also how they are often able to respond to those forces in creative and innovative ways” (p. 5). This description captures the vision of this article and of my own identity: the creation of a daily practice that allows for fluidity, creativity, and constant change through varied locations and situations through which I move. Intersectional scholarship, together with auto-ethnography, informs my development of this practice. Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (1997) writes in the anthology *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, “Double identity and insider/outsider are constructs too simplistic for an adequate understanding of the processes of representation and power” (4). I also draw on bell hooks’ *Talking Back* (1989), in which she says “[talking back] is no mere gesture of empty words, [but] is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice” (9). Talking back is not only about locating my own voice within the context of community-academic work, but is also a form of counter-storytelling in order to create narratives that disrupt dominant spaces such as those within the profession of social work and the academy. Critical race theorists such as Richard Delgado (2000) suggest that these narratives can “shatter complacency and challenge the status quo” (61).

Many students identify their reason for choosing social work as, “I just want to help people;” but they have no awareness or insight into the history of the profession and its links to oppression of people. Cindy Blackstock, in her article entitled “The Occasional Evil of Angels” (2005), draws attention to the fact that social work believes so strongly in our ability to do good in society that we do not examine, or reflect, on our “potential to do harm” (p. 1). Blackstock argues that we have created a “white noise barrier” that has prevented us from seeing our own reflection and the harm created by our profession. In many ways the reflection taught in many human service and social work programs is this barrier: a reflection overly focused on the student and on the self but which does not

examine the key role of power and the construction of knowledge. Echoing the words of Blackstock, Narda Razak (2001) states that the “Basis [of] social work values and ... ideology of caring and empathy, allow social work practitioners to ‘do good’ by the students without delving into issues like imperialism, colonialism and other forces of oppression” (p. 226). Social work classrooms need to be spaces where difficult and courageous conversations can happen, where we question the profession of social work and those of us who teach within the university, and where critical analysis of power and oppression at a structural level can be facilitated. bell hooks (1994) speaks of the importance of educators being willing to engage in sharing and reflection in the classroom and to be vulnerable. Similar to hooks, Razak (2001) questions the power presents in the social work classroom, stating that “The classroom can be a colonizing space where power and dominance continue to be enacted” (10).

Becoming a social work educator has challenged me to begin to tell these narratives that interrogate the very profession I am an educator within. I have found this daily practice echoed elsewhere, as in Myerson’s (2003) book *Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work*. Myerson coined the term “tempered radicals” to describe individuals working within corporations and institutions. According to Myerson, in an interview with Sparks (2005), “...tempered radicals are people who operate on a fault line. They are organizational insiders who contribute and succeed in their jobs. At the same time, they are treated as outsiders because they represent ideas or agendas that are somehow at odds with the dominant culture...” (5-6). Tempered radicals experience both a personal and political struggle as they engage in acts or express identities within the workplace that are different from the organizational norm. She describes them as being both insiders and outsiders. “It’s about rocking the boat, but not so hard that you fall out of it.”

Daily, I rock the boat in my professional and personal life. Frequently, these rocking-the-boat points are at the very convergence

of what it means to be an academic, a lone parent, and a community-based researcher and practitioner. I often feel at these points in the place of the “inappropriate Others” of Trinh T. Minh-ha’s work (1989, 1997), where in my very act of bringing all of who I am into my new role that I become the inappropriate other—in the classroom, in my office, and in my research and service to the university.

Mothering in the Academy: Check your Babies and your Body at the Door

An example of this shifting and “inappropriate Other” can be found in my parenting status, which changed during my several years working as a community-based researcher. My status changed from a single, urban-dwelling white woman to a single mother who became pregnant out of wedlock, without planning, to three children. Further, conducting focus groups in communities throughout British Columbia while pregnant altered and changed the relationships with the project participants. Many of the young women were pregnant and also without partners and planning. So, when they asked the question, “Who are you and why do you care?” the self-disclosure of my own unplanned pregnancies as a woman alone connected us, and the dialogue and relationship building both within and across our differences began. In becoming the “inappropriate Other,” I shifted from outsider and objective researcher to a direct connection to the young women being interviewed. In this context, the moral dimensions of mothering and the social construction of good mother/bad mother were foreground. Many of the young Aboriginal women spoke about the role of parenting status in their community and culture and how their own identity shifted as they became parents. My children include a daughter who is bi-racial and twin boys who are Aboriginal and from the Chase area and Secwepmec Nation. The reality of raising three children alone in east Vancouver resulted in my decision to apply for a job at the university and return to the Interior of British Columbia. After 17 years in Vancouver as a now mother of three, my identity shifted again. I joined a university, becoming an “academic” and a “rural.” Power and privilege intersected with the move to

Kamloops, and the shift from community-based researcher to academic.

From the beginning of the interview process, my personal life intruded into the professional role I would inhabit. When the Dean of the School of Social Work and Human Service called me to indicate they would be interviewing me I said, "I should let you know. I am eight months pregnant with twins." She replied, "You cannot tell me that." I laughed as I was bursting with life, literally.

This metaphor of my personal life pushing forth into my professional life has continued. I was offered the job and immediately went on maternity leave. My new dean, a solo parent of now grown children, indicated that I could bring my children to work, as this job would be conducive to parental and professional life.

It is my first week of work and the Dean has dropped by my office, where I am working while my twin boys who are nine months old are playing on the floor. . She picks up one of them, dressed in her two-piece suit dress and sits in a chair. . This is a powerful moment as my personal life is in the lap of my professional life. My little boy reaches up and rips off the Dean's gold necklace. (personal journal, January 2006)

This incident is not the first time I question the compatibility of my mothering in the academy, but it is a poignant first glimpse into the challenges I will encounter.

My students are standing in my office looking at the many pictures of my children. "Where is your husband?" (personal journal, September 2008)

My status as a single-parent, lone parent, solo-parent is one of outsider in the professional university community. But the status often unites me with my students, many of whom

are parenting on their own. I often experience the process of being "othered," while being aware that my education and my position within the university allow me the privilege of a nanny to assist me. My solo parenting status impacts my professional life in many ways. I often cannot attend social gatherings, evening talks, and meetings that start before nine a.m..

My daily acts of resistance are evidenced in bringing my children to work; ensuring my office is child-friendly; and supporting recent students to conduct a survey on child-friendly spaces on campus. In these acts of resistance, I echo Minh-ha (1997) who said, "she who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows that she cannot make a gesture without activating the to and fro movement of life." I cannot speak of my students and support them in their challenges as mothers if I don't risk sharing my own challenges in accessing a child friendly campus, in finding child care, and in my other experiences of mothering on campus—coinciding with my students' experiences here. In this shared storytelling, we together can work towards change and challenging the status quo and invisibility of parenting on campus.

Community Practitioner or Academic Service

My professional identity and work have always been informed and mobilized through my interconnected identities. Identity and exploring intersections in my life and in the lives of others has been a defining characteristic since my own adolescence. Social Work is a profession that allows my explorations to continue within my practice, my teaching, and my research. In my previous work, my identity as an advocate and social justice community-based practitioner and researcher with young women was the foreground. My work with young women always calls me to answer the question "Who are you and why do you care?" I have to continuously engage in the process of locating myself and role model for these young women the multiple locations and identity moments in life.

In my work, I share my own intersecting identities of oppression and privilege. I grew up as a mixed Anglo-European Canadian rural girl in poverty but with strong connections to the Secwepmec community in Chase. This background brings a rural and class lens to the work I do with girls. Growing up with a single parent and living in poverty in a rural community as “other,” I grew up fighting sexism while understanding privilege in my white body and fighting racism as an ally to my friends and lovers. The girls I work with have consistently called on me to locate myself and to answer questions like, “Why do you shave your legs and Tekla (the other facilitator) doesn’t, and why aren’t you married?”

The adolescent young women I have been privileged to work with are theorists of identity. They live in the intersections of societal oppression. They inhabit spaces where they are actively “othered.” They experience privilege or oppression depending on their social location. For example, in my work with rural and indigenous girls, they often share their stories of exclusion from the mainstream health system and of encountering programs that do not meet their needs but, instead, seek to further colonize them. In many rural areas, health services are not available locally and, if they are, they are very limited. Even when traveling to a nearby city or town, one will find that many services or programs are designed with one specific axis of identity in mind. A girl may choose to access a program for sexual minority youth in order to explore her sexuality, but may find that because all of the other youth are white, she continues to experience marginalization.

Utilizing an intersectional framework allows for an examination of the experiences of young women who are excluded from the mainstream health system by a number of intersecting axes of power, with a particular focus here on the perspectives of rural and indigenous young women. The young women I work with are actively resisting this “othering” while living inside of and exploring the realm of subject, object, other, and self.

Since joining the university, I am continuing my work with young women. Currently, I facilitate girls’ groups in the community and

an Aboriginal girls’ group in the rural community and small town where I graduated. Now, this work is considered my university service where it was my core professional identity prior to working at the university. In doing girls’ groups, especially in the small town where I grew up, I am always living as both insider and outsider. As a non-Aboriginal woman, co-facilitating a group with an Aboriginal woman, I am aware of my privilege and my experience as outsider to this group. At the same time, I am also an insider through my family connection to a number of girls in the group. When the girls share their struggles with home and family, and I share my own experiences, I know this self-disclosure is a response to their question “Who are you and why do you care?”

On the last day of group I shared that I work at the university and the girls were surprised. I realize I have not shared this, and this in of itself is poignant to me. Why have I not centralized this? I know that for these young women what I do is less important than who I am and the choices I have made. However, they were also excited to hear this and talked about visiting my office at the university, in particular for one young woman attending the university next year. (personal journal, June 2008)

You Made Your Bed, Now Lie in It: Academic Researcher versus Community-Based Researcher

Integrating my new identity as an academic researcher from community-based researcher and practitioner has created a challenge, i.e., as both insider and outsider. I joke that since joining the academy (not unlike the military) I have been having an “identity crisis.” I grapple with the move from 17 years of practice, research and teaching based in the community to one based in the university. My crisis has been precipitated by the

experience of privilege that has come with this shift. Growing up without money, on income assistance, I understood this position well. I was not prepared for the status and privilege that came with the job at the university. It was subtle and often hidden inside comments like "Oh, you work at the university"; I was aware that something had changed in how I moved through the world but, more importantly, in how the world reacted to me. Since joining the university, I have found that foreground is this new power that I have to account for and to situate. I am reminded repeatedly in community spaces, where I once moved freely and without question, that I am no longer "of" the community. But, I am now of the university, with all the good and bad that goes with this new association. Many times I wish to leave this identity at the door, which is not possible.

In particular, in my work with Aboriginal communities, I have been aware of the history of racism and the ongoing colonization and appropriation of indigenous knowledge by academics. For example, in developing a partnership with the friendship centre to explore cultural supports for indigenous students in field placements in social work, I sat with the members of the board of the friendship centre. I listened to the stories of pain and of racism in their experiences with research and "partnerships" with the university over the past seventeen years. Although I was new to the university, I now live here too and must account for my privilege and power. I had to identify and acknowledge and locate my power as an academic and representative of the university. In doing so I had to receive the stories of truth and the impact of ongoing colonization, as we reflected on the past history of the relationship between the university and the Aboriginal community.

I move between my days at the university and my two girls' groups that I facilitate in community. I spend many weekends on Neskonalith reserve near Kamloops. I feel the shifting of my identity in those moments, as I am family there and do not need to locate myself. "This is my daughter." "This is my sister." I have been of that community for over fifteen years. Those spaces are comfortable; I can move without the university role. These

are spaces where what I do for a living does not matter, is not noticed, or may not even be known.

I am at a meeting at the local friendship centre, and in a circle of community members, most Aboriginal, who I have been working closely with over the last year to develop Rites of Passage groups for Aboriginal youth in the schools. A new member joins the group today, and he looks at me and says, "...this is an outsider asking for insider knowledge". I realize that he is concerned about why someone from the university is supporting Aboriginal Rites of Passage groups in the schools, and is concerned that this is a research project seeking knowledge from the community about Aboriginal rites of passage. I wanted to speak up in that moment and clarify that I was there as a volunteer and practitioner with young women, not as an academic. But, I remained silent listening to his concerns. Later in speaking with the Elder working with the project, and great uncle to my children, I tell him how I felt and how I wanted to correct him, but did not. The Elder helps me to see the gift in listening and in not correcting another's perception of us – but to instead allow him to learn who I am in my complexity over time. This Elder provided me with a deeper understanding of the daily practice of an intersectional framework in my life. He taught me to be patient and to allow my fuller identity in all its expressions over time and place to emerge. (personal journal)

I have been a community-based researcher for over ten years. Much of the work I have done has been in partnership with Aboriginal communities. As such, my motives in engaging in the research have not been examined in the same way that I have experienced them since becoming an academic researcher.

In this narrative, the author considers the process whereby her new role as a social work academic has resulted in shifts in her identity expression as insider/outsider. Weaving concepts from intersectional scholarship, with personal narratives and poetry, the author describes her daily acts of resistance as she strives to maintain, express, and ultimately embrace the changes this new role brings. I am very aware that in my current partnerships with local non-profits and with Aboriginal communities, I have had to locate myself within both the university and the community in order to feel authentic in these spaces. I have had many challenges, as the inherent power I hold since joining the university intersects or joins with the passionate community-based practitioner I was (am?).

Clothing the Empress: Or Acts of Truth-Telling and Resistance in the Academy

In an interview with Maria Grizinic (n.d.), Trinh T. Minh Ha posits that "...when the difference between entities is being worked out as a difference also within, things start opening up. Inside and outside are both expanded. Within each entity, there is a vast field and within each self a multiplicity." I am engaging in this process of "...making and unmaking of identity" each day in my work in the university and within the community and within my own home.

I cannot leave my new academic identity at the door. So, I choose to bring my identity outside of the university to all aspects of this new role. I choose to bring the community and my movements in these spaces and who I am outside of this new role to the institution in which I now work. These acts of resistance are visible in how I decorate my office and how I dress myself in this new role. How I

move in that space is also an act of resistance of challenging power. I remember moving into my new office with a lovely view of the river below me. But, directly in front of me was the sterile, grey, standard office equipment of each office in the row of offices beside, above and below me. Resistance begins in the small acts of anarchy in the spaces where I define myself as the same but also different. In doing so I am challenging what it means to be an academic.

I drive down to the local thrift and purchase a green velvet chair, a rocking chair and a brown velvet chair; several old photos, and a rug. . . My colleagues on either side asked me what I was doing as the grey furniture was placed in my hall and replaced with the mosaic of colours from home and thrift that I had moved in to replace these. . . "What are you doing? Why would you buy furniture for here?". To which I replied, I will take it with me when I go. . . "When you go? You are a lifer here." (personal journal, February 2006)

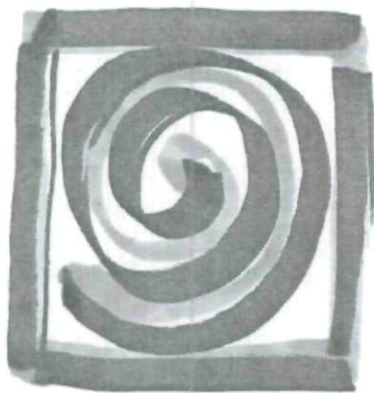
This I know for sure: I am not a "lifer" here. But, instead, I am someone inhabiting a new role for a period of time in my life. I am also aware that at the same time, in how I live and move in the community, I am also creating new visions and ideas of what it means to be an academic. The surprised question "You work at the university?" is one I encounter often. This experience has been an important lesson for me to consider how to make visible my new self in my personal life. How has my identity shifted and in what ways does this inform and guide my practice, my mothering, my sense of self as a woman?

I have had the privilege and honour of working with girls in rural communities across BC and have heard their voices, in all their complexities. As a researcher, practitioner, and now social work educator, I am experiencing transformation alongside the girls, students, and

communities. As they have come to voice the impacts of intersecting factors in shaping their health and wellbeing, I, too, must share my own experiences here. Through auto ethnography and storytelling about my own challenges and personal growth as a social work academic, I hope to encourage my colleagues and others in social work education to explore the richness brought about by an intersectional lens and critical engagement with other processes of "talking back." Without the inclusion of the experiences of a diversity of voices in the academy, social work education policies and programs will continue to reinscribe harmful power dynamics that disempower rather than empower. As a practitioner, researcher, advocate, and former rural girl, I remain committed to fundamentally reorienting the ways in which social work education is framed and ultimately operationalized.

I end this narrative with a poem I wrote about aspects of self and identity and attachment to professional identity in particular:

*Am I a truth-teller?
What lies have I nurtured my entire life,
Suckled at my breast,
Deception my only child
Your marks on my nipple
I cannot wean you my child
My creation.*



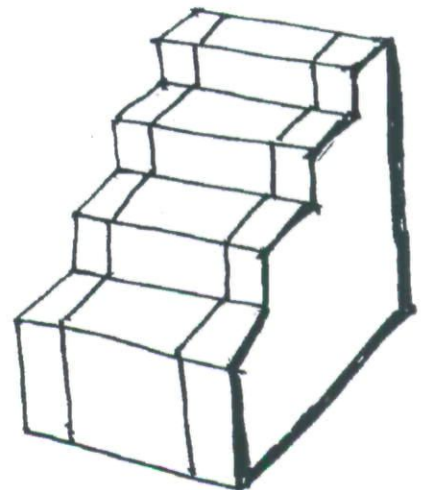
By Kathy Lay

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