

**Curtin University of Technology**

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**Seeking Jane and Joy:**

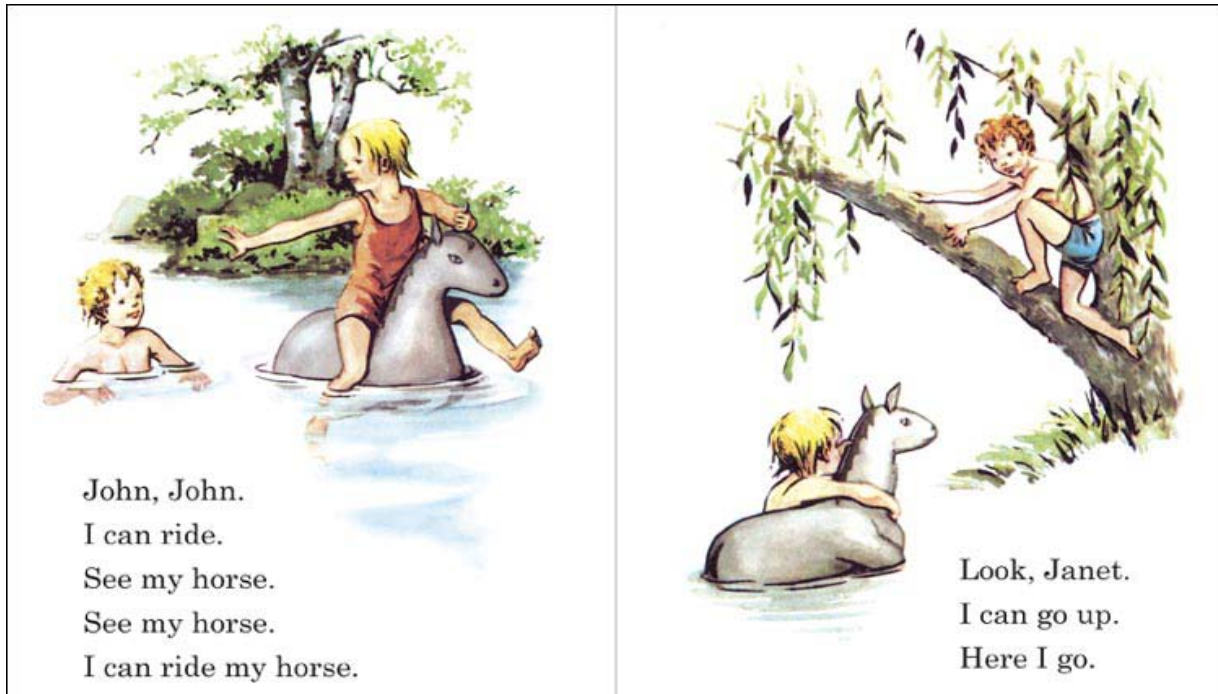
**The struggle to Become Authentic, Ethical Auto-Ethnographers**

**Abstract**

Jane and Joy are both embarking on auto-ethnographic studies of educational communities they are very familiar with — first-year communities of practice at Curtin University and offshore Chinese higher education learning communities in Shanghai. In engaging with our subjects, we increasingly face issues of identity: our own identities as researchers, teachers and learners impinge on the ways we understand and portray the identities of our students, our colleagues and the institutions in which we work. The power imbalances in our relationships with these people foreground for us significant ethical issues, which we will examine in this presentation. Issues of race are a key element of our work: for Joy, working in a transnational context, but also for Jane, in the context of the increasing numbers of international students at Curtin.

In the form of a dialogue, we will explore our responses to issues of identity, power and race in our work, sharing our personal struggles to identify and portray the lenses through which we view our subjects, and considering how different forms of narrative can bring us closer to our quest for an authentic and ethical research practice.

**Keywords:** auto-ethnography, participant observation, ethics, identity, power, race



(O'Donnell, Munro & Warwick 1949, 2007)

These images are from the *Janet and John* early reading books, the means by which a generation of British children in the 1950s and 1960s, including the two of us, learned to read. The characters are typical of those who peopled school books of this era: middle-class, white, and unproblematised in their relationships with each other and within their society. We introduce these images as a playful game with our names, but also to make serious comments, first about changing social attitudes over the past 40 years, and then about the value of playfulness in current ethnographic practice (Denzin 1997).

This paper will be a multivocal presentation, with many voices – including our own two, very different ones – interleaved throughout. While we have constructed the paper together, we also call on a range of other voices, verbal and visual, to create other lenses through which to look at the concept of seeking oneself. This paper is in keeping with the recent trend in co-constructed narratives, with separate writers speaking in their own voices, either as a dialogue or as a series of interwoven voices. Carolyn Ellis and Leigh Berger (2003, p. 177), referring to Laurel Richardson and Ernest Lockridge's 1998 paper, claim the value of this approach: 'multiple voices in co-constructed pieces give readers multiple places to stand and look'.

We're beginning readers again...

We are both in the early stages of doctoral research after many years as successful professionals, Jane as a teacher and curriculum writer, and Joy as an Arts project manager, agent and teacher. We are beginning readers again on a research journey in which we find ourselves located within a struggle that is deeply professional, intellectual and soulful, a struggle in which we must make meaning out of professional, scholarly and personal contexts that are very new for us. Our dominant feeling at this stage is of having to orient ourselves to scholarly practices and approaches, and to new discourses. This struggle is intensified because we began tertiary studies in a positivist era (embodied in the *Janet and John* images), and are becoming increasingly aware of the experimental, pluralist era in which we now begin our doctoral research (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Geertz 1980), an era that Patti Lather (1991b, p. 13) describes as ‘a time marked by the dissolution of authoritative foundations of knowledge’. Laurel Richardson encapsulates our sense of being carried forward into a new world:

Once we begin the journey into Postmodernism there is no going back to a positivist position. Where this experimentation will eventually take us, I do not know, but I do know that we cannot go back to where we were. (Richardson 1994, p. 524)

In this paper, we will examine our struggle on two fronts: how we are learning to move from professional to scholarly positions; and how we are seeking to make these positions both authentic and ethical in the context of recent approaches to auto-ethnography.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Jane*

We begin our journey, like Laurel Richardson, not sure of where it will take us.

*The door*

Miroslav Holub (Czech poet 1923-1998)

*Go and open the door.*

*Maybe outside there's*

*a tree, or a wood,*

*a garden,*

*or a magic city...*

## *Joy*

This shared struggle of Jane and me, where we are reaching out to find a place of calm in the chaos that surrounds us, reminds me of an early career artwork by Chinese artist Han Feng called 'Homeland'. This was part of Connection Visual I, an exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Fine Art, a cross-cultural arts exchange I initiated and project managed as part of the City of Melville Arts Festival in 2001. On both personal and professional levels it symbolises my first working relationship with the Chinese arts community — a space in which intercultural/intercommunicative struggles took place before coming to a place of acceptance and mutual respect. 'Homeland' also speaks to me about the inner struggle — Han Feng's visual narrative reveals the story of the metamorphosis from apprentice to master of one's craft, emerging out of a sea of chaos. It captures the rambling dialectical relationship between identity and change at the heart of any transformation.



Han Feng, *Homeland*

Chinese rice paper and Chinese ink

62cm x 45cm

1998

The female form as motif for self and the heart of things

lies floating in an ocean of chaos.

She is the essence of stillness –

quietly contemplating – listening –

waiting for the right moment –  
as she gently comes into her knowing –  
she slides off the canvas merging into unity

(Joy Denise Scott 2008)

### **Seeking Jane**

In 2009 I begin auto-ethnographic research with first-year students at Curtin University, examining how they learn to participate in university ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998). I approach this work from the position that learning is socially situated, involving particular ways of thinking, believing and behaving that are shaped and endorsed by the communities within which people live, and that learners construct their changing identities as they participate in these communities (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998).

For the past nine years I have coordinated the First-Year Communication Skills Program at Curtin, providing first-year students in a range of departments in the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Science and Engineering with units that aim to help them adjust to university ways of working. I will, therefore, bring to the research a rich heritage, a multiplicity of perspectives and a strong commitment. On the other hand, in researching an institution of which I am a member — that is, in undertaking auto-ethnographic research (Hayano 1979) — I am starting to ask many ethical and procedural questions.

### **Can I encourage students to explore their identity without shaping their thoughts? Can I safeguard them from the pressures created by our unequal relationship?**

When I began this research, I was concerned about influencing students, particularly given the power imbalance in our relationship. I considered that first-year students — and indeed any of us entering new communities — are likely to take some time to articulate how they understand the institution and their identity as members of it, and that in their first months their expression of these understandings would be particularly hesitant, half-formed and changeable. Could I phrase interview questions that would help them think through their new experiences without controlling the meanings they made of them?

As I read more, however, I became aware of a significant group of social scientists who claim that interviewers need to acknowledge their personal perspectives to their interviewees (for

example, Ellis & Berger 2003; Lather 1991b; Portelli 1997), and that it is both dishonest and disabling to interviewees for researchers to maintain the ‘myth of non-interference’ (Portelli 1997, p. 12): ‘the less the historian reveals about their identity and thoughts, the more likely informants are to couch their testimony in the broadest and safest terms, and to stick to the more superficial layers of their conscience and the more public and official aspects of their culture’ (1997, p. 12). Portelli goes as far as to advocate being ‘a critical, challenging, even a (respectfully) antagonistic interviewer’ (1997, p. 12).

My thinking about these questions is also being framed by my reading of the debates over the past thirty years about the authority of ethnographers over information they gather in their fieldwork (Clifford 1983; Denzin 1997). I now view the students as potential participants or informants (Fine 1994) in the research, rather than subjects. My relationship with them will be a two-way relationship, with them being experts in their own experiences, and owning their own voices (Lather 1991b; Richardson 2000). I hope that the position of the Communication Skills program outside degree structures will reduce students’ feelings of inhibition in speaking with me: in situations of unequal power, people are more likely to open up to interviewers they perceive come from the periphery of power rather than the centre (Portelli 1997, p. 63). In some ways participating in the research may even be beneficial to individual students. The very act of being interviewed on a subject can give interviewees a more complete and cogent understanding of a set of experiences than they previously had (Portelli 1997). Ethnographic writing is writing *for* and not *about* the participants (Denzin 1997), and is of most significant benefit to the community of the participants (Lincoln 1995).

While I am hesitant to adopt the ‘(respectfully) antagonistic’ approach suggested by Portelli, and committed to being responsive to the direction in which participants wish to take the interviews (Anderson & Jack 1998), I am also aware that the very view of students as participants rather than subjects of research requires that I engage with them in two-way conversations.

### **Can I represent the wide range of student voices and stories that I will hear?**

As well as a breaking down of the authority of the ethnographer, the last thirty years have seen the end to the concept of a group of people having one voice for all periods of history and in all situations (Dumont 1978; Richardson 1994). I am becoming more aware of a call

for a variety of types of written ethnographies, including multivoiced, multigenre ethnographic writing (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Denzin 1997; Rose 1993), which allow ethnographers ‘to write better, less soothing, more faithful and ultimately more truthful accounts of their fellow humans than ever before’ (Van Maanen 1988, p. xiii). I won’t be able to represent all the voices that speak in the institution, but hope to represent a large number of the voices I hear.

### **Can I develop my reflexivity so that I can see my own assumptions and perspectives?**

Since researchers cannot, and must not, be detached, they need to acknowledge the position from which they conduct their research — the ‘assumptions, motivations, narratives, and relations which are part of the researcher’s backstage’ (McCorkel & Myers 2003, p. 200) — and be constantly aware of the way this position shapes and limits their research. Having spent my professional life in literacy education, I am imbued with assumptions and perspectives about how we learn. I will be challenging myself to question how these are shaping my responses and the directions the research is taking. I concur with Norman Denzin (1997, p. xiii) who argues that ‘self-reflexivity in ethnography is no longer a luxury’.

But the issues go far beyond the pedagogical. In embracing the need for continuous reflexive writing as a political act, I position myself alongside feminists Patti Lather (1991b, p. 13), who describes a ‘reflexivity where we learn to attend to the politics of what we do and do not do at a practical level, to learn, in Nancy Hartsock’s (1987) words, “to ‘read out’ the epistemologies in our various practices”’ and Laurel Richardson, who claims that we need to ‘understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times’ (1994, p. 518) and ‘unmask complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing’ (1994, p. 523).

### **Can I cope with pressures that may arise within the institution to express or silence particular ideas?**

I began thinking about this research with an acute sense of the potential pressures that I might feel from the institution itself, as I imagined it. However, this sense of pressure is reducing for me as I realise that the institution is not monolithic, and that I will hear a range of voices from staff and senior administrators in different contexts. My reflexive position will help me



clarify some of these political pressures, and protect me against the sense of an amorphous block pushing me in various ways. I also hope that here again my position on the periphery of degree courses will act in my favour: disciplinary staff may feel less constrained to speak with someone who is neither a member of their own department nor in a position to shape their future in the university.

*...Go and open the door.  
Maybe a dog's rummaging.  
Maybe you'll see a face,  
or an eye  
or the picture  
of a picture...*

### **Seeking Joy**

Working with the Chinese academic community since 1999, as well as living and working in Shanghai for three years, has had a profound impact on my sense of personal, cultural and professional identity. This has prompted me to reflect on my own practice, and to question how Western border-crossing teachers, such as me, make sense of a Chinese teaching/learning environment; and equally how Chinese teachers and students make sense of my professional and personal behaviour and that of others similar to me. My experiences within the Shanghai tertiary education sector have provoked inner questions as to how a Western teacher develops pedagogical practice in the face of constant potential for cultural misunderstandings with Chinese students and teachers, ongoing cultural blunders, and the need to confront one's own shortcomings, be they of a personal or professional nature. To answer these questions and to provide deeper understanding, my intention is to examine, in the form of ethnographic participant observation and in-depth interviews, the contextual intercommunicative relationships and contexts in which cultural border-crossing teaching and learning takes place, situated within a Chinese tertiary learning/teaching landscape. Giroux (2005, p. 22) describes people that border-cross as,

people moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power. These are not only physical borders, they are cultural borders historically constructed and socially organized within rules and regulations that limit and enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms.

By applying an auto-ethnographical lens, my research questions are contextually arranged around lived cultural border crossing experiences of individual local Western and Chinese teachers and students teaching and learning within the Shanghai tertiary education community.

According to Richardson (1994, cited in Guba & Lincoln 2005, p. 205), there are no research methods capable of portraying absolute truth. When we begin to reflect on, and question, how we are going to write up our research, we are including ourselves within the main argument of postmodernist thought: that knowledge is constructed in the social domain, and it is through language that we portray a particular view of reality. Consequently, the actual words and linguistic structures we employ generate particular ways of seeing and values of meaning (Richardson 1995, pp. 198-99). In this sense, all researchers are constrained to some degree by a framework of ontological and epistemological assertions. Irrespective of their inherent roots of truth, or falseness, these assertions are part of a series of monocultural belief systems that govern thinking and behaviour (Kincheloe & McLaren 2005). Thus all research work is interpretative, as it is moulded by the belief systems of the researcher in question (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 19).

As a researcher and professional situated in the postmodernist moment, which denies the possibility of discovering absolute reality and objective truth, I struggle to bring clarity to the following three issues.

### **How to speak for the ‘Chinese other’**

Undertaking a critical auto-ethnographic inquiry in a culture very different to my own suggests difficulty in being able to nurture a comprehensive partnership between reality and my representation of it. I struggle with the notion of how I will be able to speak for the ‘Chinese other’. As a person who has been educated and raised within a Western culture, how is it possible for me to feel and experience the world as a Chinese person? In what form do I attempt to use this scholarly voice of mine that permits my Chinese respondents to speak for themselves? And in doing so, how do I meet the ‘Chinese other’ as my equal, not at the centre where West meets East but crossing over into that space within the margins —where only the Chinese voice resides? As I go about my work in the corridors of the Chinese margin will I have the courage that bell hooks desires, to surrender my Western hegemonic self to a space

where I bear witness to the events as they unfold (hooks 1990, p. 150)? Will I have the imagination to resist the self within, that finds it easier to speak for the ‘other’, rather than listen to the stories that only the Chinese voices can tell?

### **How to deal with multiple perspectives**

Conducting qualitative research, employing multiple postmodern theoretical paradigms as referents, denies the possibility of being able to capture ‘absolute’ lived experience; rather that experience is constructed within the social domain of the text by the researcher. However, our choice as to how we articulate our texts is located in struggle (hooks 1990, pp. 145-46). As Richardson declares, ‘There is no such thing as “getting it right”, only “getting it” differently contoured and nuanced’ (Richardson & St Pierre 2005, p. 962). In undertaking ethnography I need to be able to create spaces within the interview setting through which those being interviewed are able to present their own stories, in ways that give voice to the multiple viewpoints of any experience or event. But, how am I to deal with these multiple perspectives, how do I locate them and how can I organise them in my work? In what way am I able to choreograph the chaos that these multiple perspectives bring with them, and in doing so how do I include those perspectives that may be deemed politically incorrect? Am I brave enough to create texts that will reveal both the ‘Chinese other’ and ‘myself’ speaking in ways that will challenge the hegemonic viewpoint. As hooks says, ‘Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance’ (hooks 1990, p. 146).

### **How to reconcile a duty of care**

Cultural assumptions are woven into the fabric of the established cultural/ideological values of all societies, and are transmitted into the social domain by our institutions. These cultural assumptions shape our behaviour and ways of thinking, and are to be in all areas of our lives. In the same way both teachers and students of educational institutions are bound and constrained by ideology and the dominant cultural thinking and behaviour patterns (Brookfield 1987, pp. 44-45). Writing about other people with the intention to create awareness and understanding carries with it moral obligations — a duty of care. But, how do I reconcile a duty of care, as one who seeks to challenge viewpoints that focus on cultural ‘others’ as problematic and needing to be changed? How is it possible to calculate the risks

on my Chinese respondents when neither I nor they understand the full implications of my research on their well being? How does one really know that informed consent has been fully understood, and how do I reconcile a duty of care to my person?

*...Go and open the door.  
If there's a fog  
it will clear...*

### **Jane's response to the struggle**

I understand now that it is no longer acceptable to naturalise the process from observation to writing ethnography — ethnographic writing is a creative production of itself (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Van Maanen 1988), rather than just a 'writing up' of fieldwork. I will choose the voices to present and the ways I will structure them, and my choice will be as much an act of construction as my interpretive comments. All knowledge is 'constructed, contested, incessantly perspectival and polyphonic' (Lather 1991b, p. xx).

My current plan is to write a braided ethnographic narrative: a polyphonic, multigenre choral braid, consisting of intersecting and overlapping voices (Clifford 1983; Marcus & Cushman 1982; Rose 1993; Tyler 1986). The voices will include the myriad student participant voices; my own ethnographic voices (descriptive, narrative, analytical and interpretive); my voice as a student, taken from my reflective journal; the voices of teachers across a range of disciplines; and the voices of senior administrators in the institution.

As part of the braid I will create a series of chorus voices, in the tradition of Greek drama, commenting on the narrative (both mine and the participants'), and expressing some of the expectations on the students from the institution and professional communities in which they seek to participate. Since the institution and professions are not monocultural, there will be more than one set of chorus voices, but they will be similar in their effects on the students — they will represent the forces at work to coerce students into conformity and commitment to the institutional culture.

Counterbalancing these voices I will represent 'uppity voices' (Fine 1994), which speak against the grain:

#### **The Wall**

**We don't need no education.  
We don't need no thought control.  
No dark sarcasm in the classroom.  
Teacher, leave them kids alone.  
Hey, teacher, leave them kids  
alone!  
(Roger Waters/Pink Floyd 1979)**

*Rupturing narratives allow us to hear the uppity voices of informants and researchers who speak against structures, representations, and practices of domination. In these texts, researchers are working the [Self-Other] hyphen, reconciling the slippery constructions of Self and Other and the contexts of oppression in which both are invented. (Fine 1994, p. 78)*

In creating chorus voices I will not be suggesting that they represent particular individuals, but rather that they embody the ‘contexts of oppression’, ‘the structures, representations, and practices of domination’ that grow in all cultures. It is these contexts against which some individual students – and indeed some staff – speak out in any university. In this work I will be seeking to hear and represent these uppity voices alongside the other, less rupturing voices.

*...Go and open the door.  
Even if there's only  
the darkness ticking,  
even if there's only  
the hollow wind,  
even if  
nothing  
is there,  
go and open the door. ...*

### **Joy's response to the struggle – Embroidering myself into otherness**

Historical antecedents are the roots from which my research interest and resultant inquiry spring forth; they are an integral aspect of my personal narrative, in that they create a contextualised background, from which I am able to introduce experiential moments of memory and subjective interpretations of past Chinese relationships and events into my research. Much of my existing knowledge and experience, although developed prior to my inquiry, has a place within auto-ethnographic narrative, providing a trajectory interface between my broad cultural realm of experiences and my highly focused academic existence (Tedlock 2000, p. 467). My personal history influences my experiences (Eisner 1991, p. 36)

and thus justifies my use of narrative as a plausible strategy to introduce characters, events and experiences, which, although outside the temporal time and activities of my inquiry, are intimately and contextually connected. This form of narrative requires the use of expressive language that has the ability to capture not only my voice, and voices culturally and professionally similar to mine, but also the voices of the ‘Chinese other’. As Eisner suggests, the reader’s ability to relate with texts, voice and expressive language assists her/him in gaining a deeper understanding, and nurtures a more empathetic and synergetic interpretation (1991, pp. 36-37).

Like Jane’s choral braid and uppity voices, my research requires the inclusion of narrative that is able to recapture and present the lived experience of multiple voices and my subjectivity; to create a setting that is plausible to my readers; and to sketch a trustworthy portrait of a Western (foreign) teacher living and working in Shanghai. Based on personal experience, I intend to create a fictive narrative, which is set within the social discursive activities of a group of embroiderers. The characters include one or two Chinese teachers, two Chinese students and myself. Through the act of embroiderers sharing their stories, I will create an intercultural space for social, critical and reflective discourse, a place where boundaries are crossed and things are spoken about that might not be discussed in a more formal classroom setting.

By locating myself in a space I am familiar with, I position myself as a cultural learner rather than cultural expert. In the same manner that Chinese women used embroidery as a means to explore Chinese female culture and cultivate networks (Ko 1994, p. 207), the communal space provided by the social activity of doing embroidery will be adopted as a channel through which different aspects of Chinese culture will be explored. Embroidery, like teaching, has a sense of community. It is a space that is historically rooted as Chinese women have a long history of transforming the act of doing embroidery into texts that represent common everyday life and reliving memories from past experiences (Fong 2004). This embroidery space is a place where I am able to use my characters to project past voices and elaborate on previous experiences, a space for cultural learning and conversations between ‘self’ and ‘Chinese others’, to portray the multiple meanings of shared experiences connected to teaching and learning in the Chinese classroom. Through the act of embroidery our

stitching becomes an instrument of communication (Murphy 2003, p. 646), an intercultural discourse made manifest through the experience of cloth meeting thread.

The action of embroidery, as well as being a shared social experience between equals, can also be interpreted as a solitary performance (Fong 2004, p. 19). The silence of stitching provides an intimate space for self-reflection and meditation (hooks 1990; Flannery 2001). My intention is to mirror this space through the construction of an actual embroidery. As my self-reflections unfold through my narrative chapter by chapter, so does my embroidery reveal itself stitch by stitch, layer by layer.



(Chinese shawl – family heirloom; photograph – Warren Grellier 2008)

My life – your life, our lives – are  
contained within an intricate embroidery of lived experiences.  
The complicated threads that lead to  
‘I’ the researcher  
cannot be disentangled from those of

'I' the person.

(Joy Denise Scott, 2008)

### **Joy's response to the struggle continues with – The Sages**

Although there is documented evidence in the Qing and Ming dynasties that Chinese scholars undertook embroidery as part of their scholarly pursuits (Bray 1997; Ko 1994), the use of embroidery as a possible metaphor for cultural learning does lend itself somewhat to a gender bias. To counteract this possibility, I am playing with the notion of introducing the voices of Eastern and Western sages, Confucius and Plato, into my narrative as metaphors for traditionally located, culturally determined, philosophical discourses and modes of learning. Furthermore, I intend to use the works of Confucius and Plato as referents to elaborate on the historical and philosophical roots that underpin Chinese and Western ontological, epistemological and axiological heritages. Such diverse histories that underpin the West's desire for dualism and abstract linear logic, and the Chinese penchant for dialectical relationships in all things, are constant and subject to change.

*...go and open the door.*

*At least  
there'll be  
a draught.*

(Miroslav Holub 1967)

### **The voices continue to speak to us ...**

As we seek our paths within the vast realms of experimental ethnography that we are discovering, we hear a chorus of voices giving us lenses through which to look at our research. They are the voices of feminist scholars and auto-ethnographers who are setting the scene for the acts that will follow:

...hesitant and partial scholarship, capable of helping us tell a better story in a world marked by the elusiveness with which it greets our efforts to know it. Patti Lather (1991a, p. 15)



...the rich yet ambiguous and messy world of doing qualitative research. Mike Crang (2005, p. 231)

...in postmodernist, mixed-genre texts, we do not triangulate, we *crystallize*.

Laurel Richardson (1994, p. 522)

...ethnographic truths are partial – committed and incomplete... James Clifford (1986, p. 7)

We seem now to be in a period of considerable uncertainty and change, for what was once ‘good enough ethnography’ seems to many not so good any more. New voices are audible, new styles are visible, and new puzzles are being put forth. John Van Maanen (1988, p. xi)

In contrast to the realist regime, the new writers seek a model of truth that is narrative, deeply ethical, open ended, and conflictual, performance, and audience based, and always personal, biographical, political, structural, and historical. Norman Denzin (1997, p. 266)

I must be willing to stand beside [the participants], not to speak for them but to speak for myself and with them. Ruth Linden (1993, p. ix)

...iridescent metamorphosis ... Rodney Needham (1970, p. 46)

... revelation and discovery may occur when conventions are violated and hermetic forms opened ...:

Barbara Myerhoff and Deena Metzger (1980, p. 98)

Yet the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality still...

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, p. 85)

**And we continue our journey ...**

As we move from the positivism that characterised our undergraduate education into postmodern, experimental auto-ethnography, we are valuing and playing with a variety of voices. In our struggle we have found it most important to be able to explore with others, especially our fellow postgraduate students, as we invite each other to continue the journey.



Come and see.

(O'Donnell, Munro & Warwick 1949, 2007)

In the future, we will experiment with more co-constructed pieces, and multivoiced narratives, looking always to find and provide others with 'multiple places to stand and look' (Ellis & Berger 2003, p. 177).

We know more than we can say and will know even more after saying it.

John Van Maanen (1988, p. 123)

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