2012

Wild Minds Searching: Early Scholars Groping in the Gap

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.21.05

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Recommended Citation


DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.21.05

Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol21/iss1/5

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Wild minds searching: early scholars grappling in the gap

- Joy Denise Scott and Jane Grellier

**JOY**

This paper builds on an earlier co-constructed narrative (Grellier and Scott 2009), in which Jane and I articulate our struggle as beginning researchers seeking to become authentic, ethical auto-ethnographers. A year later, we find ourselves as 'in-betweeners' grappling in the gap between self and other, and seeking to understand its nature and our positionality in this space.

**JANE**

The two of us wrote Anti-Oedipus together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3)

The writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), particularly their concept of rhizomes, provide strong frames for the work that Joy and I do, both together and separately. We each choose to speak in a range of voices — the voice of the academic, the student, the teacher, the art curator, the wild explorer, the reflector, the life story writer, and so on — which we see as equally valid and valuable. We also evoke other people's voices, both verbal and visual, intertwining them all in our exploration. For these reasons we choose to label our own voices throughout this piece, rather than to try to create a disembodied voice that speaks for both of us — both and neither. Sometimes we engage in dialogue; at others a series of interleaved monologues.

In this paper Joy and I refer from time to time to our separate, ongoing auto-ethnographic projects, as we grope our way to a deeper, richer understanding of the self-other relationship. My research involves working with first-year student participants at Curtin University, listening to their voices as they reflect on their learning experiences in their early months in the institution. I also coordinate the first-year Communications Program in the Faculty of Humanities at Curtin, which provides credit-bearing compulsory units in communications (labelled in other universities as Composition, Rhetoric or Academic Literacy programs) to a range of first-year students outside the school to which I belong. While much of the writing I am currently doing centres on the students' voices, my own voices as teacher, researcher, student and member of the institution are more central in this co-written paper.

The image that underpins my auto-ethnographic writing is that of a choral braid, in which the voices of students, teachers, and the institution interweave in harmony, dissonance and cacophony, blending with and cutting across my own voices.

**JOY**

For me the image is one of undertaking embroidery as a form of ritual. Ritual as the craft of writing — to word stitch the multiple threads of lived experience to create new ways of thinking and being and challenge the binary constructs of eastern and western.

As practitioner and cultural “in-betweeners”, my research explores the multiple voices of self and Chinese other/s as we border-cross our daily experiences within the Shanghai academic community.

JANE
We take the image of groping from theologian Ann Taves, who wrestles with the boundaries between spiritual theory and practice, describing her struggle as “groping one’s way forward in search of language and methods to enable one to adequately express a particular way of seeing things” (2003, 193). Taves’ concept of the researcher needing to alternate self-consciously between being engaged and detaching herself provides us with a taste of the complex relationships we are beginning to explore. Michelle Fine helps us enrich this concept even further: we do not move smoothly between the self/other or theory/practice spaces; we are “knottily entangled” (1994, 72) in working in and through the gaps.

JOY: Wild mind groping in the gap – the hyphen between auto and ethnography

Deep within us resides a place of being and knowing – a gap in the inner mind through which we are dialectically linked to the universe; this ‘wild mind’ is the site we are connected to when we write (Goldberg 1991, 31-33).

As social science researchers engaged in scholarly pursuits, Jane and I find ourselves enmeshed in an interpretative performance, weaving together multiple threads of lived experiences and knowledge constructions. Using our ragbag of appropriated goods, following a long tradition of appropriation to create new meanings, we grope within the gap of being and knowing, whose inner dimensions reveal margins and centres, spaces and presences, and the possibilities offered by eastern dialectics to dissolve the western dualism of self and other. Consciously or not, we border-cross between our personal histories and locations, suturing together meanings that frequently shake our academic beliefs.

When we use wild mind/s and ponder how we are going to write up our research, we intuitively sense how we are constrained by our own thinking and beliefs. ‘Wild mind’ allows us to penetrate our interiors, and to grope around for authentic ways to capture moments of lived experience and the multiple voices of self and other, which otherwise remain voiceless in the margins of our papers. Exploring our positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases, just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects (Madison 2005, 7).

By choosing “auto-ethnography” with a hyphen, as opposed to a slash or a seamless interface with no visible gap to grope with, Jane and I draw attention to the multiple voices that speak in our stories, and the people for whom they speak. We reveal the gap between self and other in order to stitch together diverse ways of knowing that are worked from threads of lived experiences and speak of intimate relations. As writers and researchers, we set the scene for our readers, for we recognise that even when writing about others, our words interpret and shape the meanings our readers will make. As Fine (1994, 72-74) argues, it is we who decide how to paint our respondents’ stories. When we work the hyphen we are choosing to get involved with those we study. To undertake such a performance, one of interpretation, listening, transporting oneself into another’s cultural space is deeply personal and full of dialectical twists and turns. It is a performance of soulful struggle. This is a political act and cuts at the heart of academia by challenging the narratives of the dominant, distanced scholarly voice (Conquergood 2002, 145-146). When we begin to listen to the voices of the other/s, we engage with wild mind and become open to the possibilities of new ways of being, or of becoming ...

JANE: The self-other gap in western cultures

And man has the left limbs detached more than any other animal because he is natural in a higher degree than the other animals; now the right is naturally both better than the left and separate from it, and so in man the right is more especially the right, more dextrous that is, than in other animals. ... for the starting-point is honourable, and the superior is more honourable than the inferior, the front than the back, and the right than the left.

(Aristotle 350BC/2007)

As well as the right/left distinction set up by Aristotle, western people have internalised a vast series of other dualities, including self/other, white/black, good/evil, rich/poor, man/woman, west/east, mind/body, reason/emotion, and theory/practice. Power lies in the first half of each pair being seen as valuable in opposition to the other half. This is the basis of the oppression of those categorised as defined in the second halves by those who define themselves in the first halves (Collins 1986). The power is strengthened by the interlocking nature of oppressions, with the dualities underpinning race, class and gender oppressions being unspoken and often undisputed (Collins 1986; hooks 2000). So deeply ingrained are these dichotomies in western cultures that even those who want to avoid such positions, and who struggle to stay alert to their moment-by-moment effects, find it impossible to eradicate them completely from their thinking.

Perin (1988) suggests that the western reaction to the other (and by inference to all the aspects that are seen as the second or inferior halves of the dualities – black, evil, poor, woman, east, body, practice and so on) is visceral and affective rather than intellectual, and thus very difficult to control. Basing her work on liminality theories developed by Arnold van Gennep (1908/1960), she contends that those who are labelled in these inferior halves are confined to the borders or margins of society, and seen as disordered, fearful, polluting, and thus dangerous.

So I grope with my responses to the other: If, as a westerner, I share this visceral response, if my reactions are as autonomic as breathing, sweating or vomiting, then what can I do to alter them? If I try to think myself out of my reactions, I sweat more profusely; I have as little chance of intellectualising myself out of my reactions to the other.

JOY: The dialectical relationship between the Chinese self and other/s

While living in Shanghai I frequently found myself groping with the legacies of ancient Chinese philosophers, legacies that have, during the last four thousand years, shaped the Chinese way of life, just as the Ancient Greek and Roman worlds have shaped mine. The Chinese world view is rooted in the philosophies of Taoism, Confucianism and, later, Chan Buddhism (Nisbett 2005, 12). Although the many traditional Chinese schools of thought have diverse and often conflicting points of view, all schools place a strong emphasis on the concept of a holistic cosmic universe in which all people share a similar nature (Snuwar 2008, 15). To make sense of such a world, unlike the ancient Greek philosophers who saw humans as independent and separate from nature with the power to control all objects and events within it, Taoist philosophy placed emphasis on a complementary “betweener” relationship, where there is no separation between the object and the subject (Chang 2011, 19). This betweener relationship symbolises the dialectical nature of the cosmos, in that all things are also contained in their opposite. Under such conditions Chinese ontology is orientated towards the self as an agent of becoming, a performer caught up in a cycle of change and emergence through interconnected relationships and experiences. This is a way
of life in which paradox and uncertainty can exist—where there are questions but not always answers.

Foreigner in the city
Joy Denise Scott

Foreigner exported commodity
Dressed in colonial sheep clothing
Sweating occidental appearance
They see my skin white mask
Touch my hair lack lustrous gold
Smell my perfume—opium—exotic not
Sense my fear of "I-am-like-other"
Wild mind—me—caught deep in marginalised gap
Something intangible, cannot define
No longer secure
Not nestled in culturally formed safe cocoon
Feel self unravelling—transparent—thread bare
Arms sprayed out in stupendous gorge

According to Tu Wei-Ming (1985, 231-232), the idea of a unified self is present in Confucian philosophy; the Confucian self includes a necessary relationship with the other. A principle of Confucian practice is the complete awareness and acceptance of the other as part of one's self-development. He argues that the Confucian self sees life as part of a spiritual sojourn through which the attainment of selfhood is an ultimate goal. This way of thinking, says Tu, suggests the notion of self as residing at the centre of all one's relationships with others, being involved in a continuous learning endeavour with spiritual enlightenment. He emphasises that Confucian learning, although concerned with scholarly pursuits in the form of writing, also accentuates the need for ritual performance. Mind and body become unified through the art of discipline to create a person who is ready for living in the everyday world, complete with obligations and responsibilities to one's immediate family and the universe as a whole (Tu 1985). Thus, from a traditional Confucian perspective, it is nonsensical to imagine that the adult self is separate from the other, as both are a necessary condition of the whole person (Chu 1985, 260). Only through the ceaseless cycle of continually opening the self to the other is the Chinese self able to cultivate a sense of completeness as opposed to fragmented identity (Tu 1985, 232).

As Jane suggests earlier, our western notions of self and other are historically and culturally engrained. Intellectually, emotionally and physically, we are inclined to enshrine a gap between self and other as a boundary marker for highlighting and categorising differences. As western people we share a tendency to be cult-like in our obsessive worship of personal identity, unlike the traditional Chinese self which views personal identity as being interconnected with the other far more than the self (Chu 1985, 258). To be otherwise does not appear to make sense to a traditional Chinese mind. Consequently, Jessica Benjamin in The Bonds of Love (1988, cited in Eakin 1999, 52) sees a paradox in the way traditional western thinking does not see the relationship between self and other as a necessary condition of one's identity, especially when, in determining our personal independence, we are necessarily dependent on others to acknowledge our independence.

JANE: Alice as in-betweener
Joy and I framed our previous paper (Grellier and Scott 2009) with images from the Janet and John reading books, the English early reader series through which we both learned to read in the 1950s. It seems apt, therefore, that I now move on to the first book that I read for myself and loved as a child: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, with its evocative illustrations by John Tenniel.

Alice is the first in-between that I, and most western children of my age, were familiar with—cast adrift in a foreign world whose rules she did not understand; unaware how long she would be there, and constantly putting herself into awkward situations through her changes in size, which emphasised to the inhabitants and to herself the fact that she was a stranger in Wonderland (Figure 1).

Alice's child nature is central to the narrative, in that she is highly adaptive to her new world, and excited about its strange experiences and "people". The story advances because of her willingness to drink liquids marked "drink me" and eat cakes marked "eat me", with only a momentary adult fear they might be poisonous. Her reactions are visceral and affective, but they are moments of intrigue and enthusiasm rather than fear and disgust. Her life perspective is closer to the Chinese dialectics Joy has outlined than to the western dualism I discussed earlier—she notices the ways the characters resemble humans she knows and almost ignores their oddities.

One solution to our problem of engaging with the other, then, might be to foster our Alice nature— to be intrigued, adventurous and inclusive. But this would seem impossible for most adults who have lived for any time in western cultures.

JOY: Hearing the voices in the gap
In China, silence is part of everyday conversation. As a philosophical concept, silence and speech are dialectically linked: one cannot exist without the other (Tang 1999, 7). It is the intangible silence— the gap that surrounds the spoken words— that gives the voice its fullest meanings but, ironically, for some of us this gap triggers our deepest fears.

Figure 1: Giant Alice Watching Rabbit Run Away
(Carroll 1974, 16)
My first impressions and experiences of China are interwoven with my relationship with a Chinese academic named Chen. In the early days of our working together, out of my depth – cast adrift in ‘the silent gap’ that defied cultural translation – I groped around with our two opposing notions of silence. Chen’s silence was his response to situations where he could do or say would change anything; for me, words were my reply when I needed control, where silence was not an option. Between the exchange of words and non-words my western mind collided with Chen’s ancestral heritage. Why, I asked myself, did Chen not speak when deadlines descended upon us? Chen’s deafness to my frustration and continuous pleas – for information, confirmation, or anything to release me from my fear of silence – brought me closer to the edge. But no matter how hard I pressured Chen, he never wavered in his direction; never spoke a word that he could not stand by. Nor did we ever lose our way. By listening to Chen’s unspoken voice I came to appreciate the power of silence, that the utterance of no words creates a powerful voice.

On the 17th May 2004 I had been living and teaching in Shanghai for nine months when Chen died suddenly. Although I did not realise it at the time, the China I had known and experienced for the five years leading up to that moment vanished. In reflecting on my multifaceted relationship with Chen, and in particular the time that comes later when there is no voice to be heard – a temporal space in which there is an absence of sound, a vacuous silence – it is a time very difficult to bear. As Dolar says, ‘the absence of voices and sounds is hard to endure’ (2006, 13). The phase after Chen’s death is a deeply situated transitional stage of my research journey, residing within a temporal gap, amongst Chen’s many lived and silent voices and the emergence of other Chinese voices. I have learnt to appreciate that within our society we do not always hear or listen to all voices, but that when they stop and are eventually forced to stop and hear the silence, it is like a deafening roar (Dolar 2006, 14). Where are the voices? What will we become without them? As an auto-ethnographer my task is clear: to engage wild mind and grope around in the gap between then and now and...

An act of re-discovery: Wild mind grooping in the gap
Joy Denise Scott

Within temporal gap ensured I.  
Where silence screams her wail  
sound but a shadow be.  
In darkly death wood linger.  
Groping in murky gloom.  
Wild mind stirs seeking answer  
tearing illusion of veil.  
Wild mind touching harmonious surrender.  
Head and shoulders bowed.  
Eyes – fingers positioned  
working ‘chun woon’ seeing silence – sound.  
Fragile threads – time – shuttle back and forth.  
Tenderness deliberate – embroidering voices – flow.  
Stitching – needling way forward  
Applying ‘tsan chen’  
reconnecting voices – old – new.  
Pearly voices glide across silky reach  
plumped – vital – shimmering infinite lustre minute seed pods.  
Intimately embroidered surfaces emerge through gap  

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1 Chinese embroidery term: Chou woon – short and long stitches;  
2 Chinese embroidery term: Tsan chen – Peking knot similar to French knot

JANE: Living in the gap: the rhizome
I come back to my earlier question, “How do I live with the gap, given my western visceral reactions to the other?”

My first possibility comes from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) image of the rhizome. Instead of the dualistic either/or image of the tree, with its hierarchical roots becoming smaller as they divide and sub-divide deeper into the soil, Deleuze and Guattari offer the ‘figuration’ of the rhizome, the “... and ... and ...” of infinite lateral connections, with each node conjoining with every other node, and with open access throughout the system for expansion:

... a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interfacing, interconnecting. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and ... and ... and ...”. This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb “to be.” Between things is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without a beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 25)

Figure 2: A Fresh Rhizome of Cinnamomum racemosum (Lloyd and Lloyd 1884-85, Plate 23)

Michelle Fine might see Figure 2 as a very apt image of the “knottily entangled” relationships of self and other.

I am seduced by the possibilities the rhizome offers. Rather than being a verb, I can aspir to be a conjunction, to embrace the nature of alliance in the gap. Rather than focusing on the
nature of the self and the other as two banks of a stream, I can be in the stream itself, in the space between the two, an interbeing. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write of humans as 'becomings' rather than beings. However, I cannot think myself into an understanding of this position (or non-position), because the intellectual act would put me back into my treelike nature that Deleuze and Guattari abhor - I need to find a non-hierarchical, non-dualistic way of absorbing this 'figuration'. So I grope on, encouraged at least by the rhizome that has the power to undermine the tree.

In addition, I am comforted in my groping by the concept of "and ... and ... and ..."); because of course Deleuze and Guattari would embrace the notion that I can be both westerner and easterner, both mind and emotion. So I can accept that I may have visceral reactions of discomfort and fear in strange situations, and that I am seeking my rhizome nature in the same moment. I am an interbeing, a becoming.

JOY: Artist as 'in-between': the essence of the rhizome

Bamboo is the ultimate rhizome. Its qualities are deeply interconnected with ancient Chinese philosophical thought pertaining to personal development, and bamboo is a dominant theme throughout the history of Chinese art, as an object of fine art and poetry. With a deeply situated history in Chinese culture going back over 7000 years, the bamboo, suggests Kathleen Buckingham (2009, 2-5), is the essence of multiplicity, with over 1500 uses. As a plant it defies borders of categorisation, for whilst in many parts of the world bamboo is seen as grass, in China it is considered a tree.

Chinese artist Qin Yifeng (Figure 3) positions himself in the gap among the roots of ancient Chinese philosophy, the idea of repetition as deep learning, and the ritual of Chinese bamboo painting and abstract art. Qin's art is not concerned with the wholeness of the art object, but rather with the between space. He takes the position of 'in-between', grooping with the gaps that are between: between body and spirit; between representation and context; and between artist as maker and artwork as entity. The relationships between thinking and doing and being and experiencing for Qin are what art is all about. Chinese art curator Gao Minglu (2008) argues that, unlike the western art world, Chinese Abstract artists are engaged in a dialogue between artist and object, in which the use of mark-making evolves as a form of spatial dialogue, through which the artist records the mundaneness of everyday urbanised existence. He claims that such artworks are concerned with the aesthetics of self development and are meant to be experienced rather than read. Such artwork, says Gao, is not about the wholeness of the art object in which there is a need to explore the special relationships between the centre and the edge; rather the focus is on the space itself (2008), the between space.

As Qin's sole subject matter, bamboo articulates the ultimate rhizome experience of 'interbeing', as Jane described earlier. Through his preoccupation with bamboo we enter a Chinese mind engaged in continual exploration of his subject to acquire deep learning. The repetitive brush strokes can be understood as a way of breaking down the essence of the bamboo, until it is but a series of marks and gaps between. By penetrating the gaps Qin comes to understand the structure of the bamboo, leading him to new translations. In Qin's work we see the vibrations of a becoming China; the warp and the weft of the bamboo's sinewy rhizome system opens up before us with ever-increasing possibilities and permutations. His work is the epitome of wild mind engaged in continuous and multiple translations that defy categorisation.

JANE: Living in the gap: the Trickster

Figure 4 is a sanitised version of the original 1639 woodcut of Shakespeare's Puck from A Midsummer Night's Dream. Although his penis and breasts have been removed for Victorian audiences, he is still both rich and ambivalent: his male phallic torch and female witch's broomstick suggest his complex and threatening nature, along with the horns and hooves of the devil, the bat flying overhead, and the group of humans, perhaps witches and warlocks, dancing on the earth beneath him. On the other hand, his facial expression is benign. Through his horns and hooves, the jug of wine in the foreground and the pipe-player in the background, he is associated with Pan, the god of hunting, music and revelry, who protected shepherds and appeared throughout wild mountain areas, but who came also to be identified with the devil in Christian cultures.
The character of Puck provides me with a possible response to the problem of my visceral, affective reaction to the other. He is a Trickster (Kamberelis 2003; La Shure 2005; Perin 1988), a mythical, liminal character who exists in the borders, "betwixt and between ... much like a sewer dweller would have access to a city at any number of points" (La Shure 2005). Shakespeare’s sprites, Puck and Ariel from The Tempest, fit between physical and spiritual worlds, causing havoc, mischief and some joy by enchanting characters to fall in love with each other. Other commonly cited tricksters include the Winnebago Trickster, Brer Rabbit, the Egyptian god of confusion, Seth, who is “a messenger and omen of evil and death ... who reverses all ordinary expectations, disturbs the peace, deserts his friends, and crosses lines of every kind” (Perin 1988, 10), the Greek messenger god, Hermes, "thief, trickster, and culture hero of the Greeks, he is also 'god of the roads' and an ambassador who protects people from strangers" (Perin 1988, 10) and the Hindu god Krishna who is able “to lure women into the moonlight to dance with him, then to multiply himself in order to appear fully to each and thus gratify their unique desires, and finally to disappear at dawn” (Garrison 2009, 75).

In my reflection on living in the gap, the trickster sits alongside the rhizome as a possible way of being. This involves accepting the ambivalence that is fundamental to all tricksters, who are both “sewer dwellers” and magicians, deserters of friends and protectors from strangers. To Deleuze and Guattari’s “and ... and ... and ...”, the Trickster offers “neither ... both” (Kamberelis 2003). The implications of this for my role as teacher, researcher and student need much further reflection.

JOY: Groping in the gap with/between the vulnerable other and self

How I construct knowledge of self and other is not just based on cultural and historical determinants but is also relational, in particular where a strong element of trust and intimacy is present. In perceiving my own independence as conditional upon the acceptance of others, as suggested earlier by Jessica Benjamin, I appreciate that my cognisance of self and independence is shaped to a large degree by my intimate relationship with others. Thus my understanding of Chinese academics and students and my interpretation of their behaviours are intricately intertwined with my relationships with people such as Chen, as well as my relationships that predate my experiences and relationships with the Chinese. I learn about and experience Chinese people not just by what I read about them in texts written by western scholars (where frequently the Chinese subject is misrepresented and misunderstood), but more importantly through my actual lived experiences and intimate relationships with Chinese academics and students. Yet, as Shirley Neuman (1992) emphasises, we have great difficulty in interpreting our own personal experiences in our relationships with others, particularly when certain cultural things in our lives are hidden from view. It is not always easy to see the ways in which we are related to others (Eakin 1999, 56-57) and how the voices in those relationships impact upon us.

The ways in which I am situated in my own research, and the relationships I shared with Chen and other Chinese people, need to be understood in terms of my own subjectivity, how this shapes such relationships (Madison 2005, 9), and my understanding of the Chinese other. Our encounters with others within our fieldwork allow us to grope with multiple representations of self narratives, and these aspects of identity are what we, as researchers, tend to foreground in our ethnographic narratives (Herzfeld 1997, 169). Herzfeld argues that the self narratives we draw on during our research activities are not necessarily representations that we would choose for ourselves back home. He infers that as researchers, when we reflect on our positionality in the field, and attempt to unpick our multiple representations of self, our actions might reveal contradictory aspects about our personal character that we have not previously considered. Significantly, these kinds of personal contradictions can create environments in which we cultivate empathy with our research respondents at the risk of overriding our own personal values; we might fail to comprehend that certain modes of behaviour and thinking could be damaging to us in our home culture. Herzfeld stresses that at these moments we have the potential to learn the most from our experiences in the field, as they allow us to consider our own inner contradictions within a particular experiential moment (1997, 169).

JANE: Chorus: Teacher as rhizome and trickster

A chorus of voices is starting up, seducing me to explore my rhizome and trickster selves as a university teacher. The voices of Jane Tompkins, Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Henry Giroux, Professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, and Jim Garrison, Professor of Philosophy of Education at Virginia Tech, interweave with the voices of some of the first-year student participants in my auto-ethnographic research project at Curtin University in the and ... and ... and ... of a rhizomatic chorus:

Jane Tompkins (1996; 2006) bemoans the university’s emphasis on students’ individual intellectual performance over the engagement of the whole person in the wider learning community:

and ... My point is that classroom learning can constrict a person’s horizons even as it broadens them. Learning too well the lessons of the classroom exacts a price. Its exclusive emphasis on the purely intellectual and informational aspects of learning, on learning as individualistic and competitive, can create a lopsided person: a person who can process information efficiently, summarise accurately, articulate ideas, and make telling points; a person who is hardworking, knows how to please those in authority, and who values high performance on the job above all things (Tompkins 1996; 211).

Jim Garrison (2009) calls on me, as teacher, to embrace the “prophetic trickster” archetype: to find ways to work within a dualistic educational system to trick students into a passion for learning; to refuse to accept societies’ definition of a successful student, going beyond literacy levels and marks in examinations; to find cracks in the limiting systems in which I work, and hold open these cracks so that students can pass through. In his concern for marginalised students, he echoes Michelle Fine’s focus on the hyphen:

and ... It takes the inclusive logic of a trickster to even begin to comprehend the meaning of hyphenated identities (such as Mexican-American) that defy the law of noncontradiction (A and not A is always false). Conventional logic does not work without fixed identities. In addition, the hyphen is a line between two or more worlds and a poros (the Greek word for a gateway) through which possibility pours. The logos of exclusion must often build walls and post guards around pure and perfect worlds to keep out immigrants of body, mind, and spirit. (Garrison 2009, 82)

The first-year students I work with are in transition between the worlds of school and university. Many of them feel that the university community “builds walls and posts guards” around its world, as suggested in this response from student James White:

and ... No, most of our lectures don’t know our names this year. Maybe they’re waiting to see if we survive first year. Then they’ll think it’s worth putting some effort into us. It’s like sink or swim – if we swim then they’ll take us seriously next year.

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3 All student names are pseudonyms. Students are all first years, and were interviewed as part of my auto-ethnographic research project, 2009-2011.
As an antidote to this feeling of being excluded from the community, students value trickster qualities in their teachers. In response to my interview question, "What qualities in your teachers most help you to learn?", students focused on the importance of their emotional connection and engagement with their teachers:

and ... The sense that they have passion for what they're talking about (Michael Foster)
and ... One of the things that's most appealing is a lecturer actually explaining what makes them passionate about a subject. To know that, you begin to ask yourself as a student, "Wow, would that be something that would make me passionate about it as well?" (Gabriel Morelli)
and ... It's just a cycle -- if the lecturers give such an emotionless delivery then everyone is just zoned out, not asking questions -- it goes both ways. (Larry David)
and ... I learn better if I have a personal connection with the teacher. That's the most important part. If I feel I don't know the person at all, I can't learn from them because I don't listen to them. (Sam Tucker)

Jane Tompkins sees university education systems as taking their toll not only on students, but also on teachers:

and ... The separation (between my private life and my work) has been very painful and almost crippling (Tompkins 2006).

Henry Giroux, too, expresses concern for the effects of the academic community on teachers. He echoes Deleuze and Guattari's advocacy of the rhizome in his criticism of binary approaches to education:

and ... Cultural politics formed in binary oppositions ... both silence and invite people to deskill themselves as educators and cultural workers (Giroux 1992, 21).

The chorus calls me to explore healthier relationships with my students, and with myself as teacher and member of the university community. My students' positions as immigrants in the academic world challenge me to reflect on my own position in the institution and my own views of teaching. Tompkins, Garrison and Giroux join in this reflective chorus. And as Fine (1994, 1972) reminds us all, our relationships in any community are not straightforward but "knottily entangled".

JOY: Wild mind reflecting
As my friendship with Chen deepened, so did my trust in him. But it is of some personal concern that in coming to trust Chen I am now faced with a puzzling dilemma. How am I able to write about people who have become my friends? The ways I write about Chen become a complex and censored writing approach. I have the potential to stitch together a richly nuanced embroidered narrative that speaks about Chinese teaching and learning with a sense of authenticity; however, as Fine argues, in creating deeper relationships with people, my speech becomes censored, my knowledge is expanded but there lies a silence in my words. I nurture a sense of closeness and yet this closeness lures me into acts of complicity (Fine 1994, 70).

In being intimate with Chen and Chinese other/s, it becomes difficult to be dispassionate. Reworking my own notions of selfhood impacts on how I write about lived experiences, both mine and those of Chinese others like Chen. What selves and voice/s should I choose? In reflecting on my life in Shanghai, I grope around in the sanctuary of my deepest memories, untangling the remnants of lived experiences in the gaps between self and other/s. My memories are not yet ready to be unravelled – that will be for another day.

JANE: Gaps in the institution

I return to Alice for my final thoughts on gaps in the institution. Though I am visibly “out of place” with many of the student participants in my research, I am in a position to challenge the space between them and the university. As an in-between in the institution (part-teacher, part-academic, part-helper, part-student), I can learn to play the prophetic trickster – to hold open the gap so that I can move between the two worlds and, I hope, enable my colleagues and the first-year students to understand that gap better. Like Alice, I see my momentary awkwardnesses in the two worlds as just part of my “becoming”, the and ... and ... and ... of the strange world of the university. I occasionally need to push my arm through the window in order to fit into this world, but I trust that my ultimate conclusion will not be that “You're nothing but a pack of cards”, or that it has all been a dream and it is now time to wake up to real life.

Postscript – one year later

JOY: It's one year after we first wrote this paper together, and I'm even more aware, and equally challenged, by the incredible complexity of residing in the gap...

JANE: ... knottily entangled in my connections with others, as a learner, teacher and early career researcher inside the institution.

JOY: Yes, I'm still ambivalent—not sure of my position. Where do I fit, if at all? So the gap for me continues to be something that is beyond definition—a yang and yin dimension that is constantly shifting between self and other, and east and west.
JANE: I'm fascinated by the ways my ambivalent position in the university influences my relationships with my students.

JOY: As I continue to write, memories of Chen and China are now beginning to unravel, to reveal more nuanced understandings.

JANE: Reflective writing continues to be important to me, and I challenge the students to reflect too on their position in the institution. My current writing seeks to allow the students' voices to speak in chorus with the voices of academics and administrators.

JOY: I'm even more committed to auto-ethnography, and continue to engage with Jane and others in long discussions as to whether we write the term as one single word, or link the two words with a slash or with a hyphen. As an ongoing reflective process, my consciousness has evolved to see the act of auto-ethnographic writing as being something that engages my body, intellect, cultural and ancestral legacies, life experiences and heart. For me to write about the other in my research, I have realised that the only ethically responsible thing to do is to write about my own life in relationship with others.

JANE: This is why I write rhizomatic analyses, and co-creations, and multi-voiced choruses...

JOY: ... and poetry...

JANE: ... and try to resist the pull of writing for and about others.

JOY: Yes. As Brazilian scholar Claudio Moreira contends 'the only way I could write about the "other" was through my own lived experience as an "Other."' (2011, 590) For me there can be no other way.

JANE: When Joy and I write co-created pieces, I love the way our voices weave in and out of each other, echoing, undercutting, reinforcing, clashing ... The spaces around and among our voices open up possibilities rather than limiting them. I like Garrison's (2009, 82) description of the hyphen as "a link between two or more worlds and a poros [the Greek word for a gateway] through which possibility pours".

JOY: To understand the other, I believe we must first understand ourselves, in highly personal, relational work that can only be processed in the gap where other and self are necessarily interconnected.

Works Cited:


