

2009

## Trying On—Being In—Becoming: Four Women’s Journey(s) in Feminist Poststructural Theory

Donna Kalmbach Phillips  
*Pacific University*

Gennie Harris  
*Linfield College*

Mindy Legard Larson  
*Linfield College*

karen higgins  
*Oregon State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/educfac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/educfac_pubs)



Part of the [Education Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Performance Studies Commons](#)

### DigitalCommons@Linfield Citation

Phillips, Donna Kalmbach; Harris, Gennie; Larson, Mindy Legard; and higgins, karen, "Trying On—Being In—Becoming: Four Women’s Journey(s) in Feminist Poststructural Theory" (2009). *Faculty Publications*. Accepted Version. Submission 1.

[https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/educfac\\_pubs/1](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/educfac_pubs/1)

This Accepted Version is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield, with permission from the rights-holder(s). Your use of this Accepted Version must comply with the [Terms of Use](#) for material posted in DigitalCommons@Linfield, or with other stated terms (such as a Creative Commons license) indicated in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, or if you have questions about permitted uses, please contact [digitalcommons@linfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@linfield.edu).

Running Head: TRYING ON—BEING IN—BECOMING

Trying On—Being In—Becoming:  
Four Women's Journey(s) in Feminist Poststructural Theory

Donna Kalmbach Phillips, PhD,

Pacific University

Gennie Harris, PhD,

Linfield College

Mindy Legard Larson, PhD<sup>1</sup>,

Linfield College

karen higgins, PhD,

Oregon State University

Donna Kalmbach Phillips, Gennie Harris, Mindy Legard Larson, and karen higgins research and teach from a poststructural feminisim theoretical framework in the following areas: teacher identity acquisition; multiculturalism; literacy; and qualitative studies.

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Linfield College 900 SE Baker Street A474, McMinnville, OR 97128; 503.883.2203

## Abstract

This is the narrative of four women in academia spanning a ten-year relational journey. As a performance collaborative autoethnography, it explores and presents theories of subjectivity and transitional space. Through journals, emails, and dialogue we are *trying on, being in, and becoming* feminist poststructural thinkers/inquirers/teacher educators. In our work, we explore: How has theory changed our subjectivity, lived experiences and relationships, and moved us from comfortable spaces of knowing to uncomfortable places of becoming? In a series of poetry and performance narratives, we chart our own linked journey(s) in pursuing these questions. As autoethnographers, we grapple with meanings and moments of loss, desire, guilt, and love as a practice of *hypomnemata*. This study represents a reflective mining of such treasures, capturing moments of rereading and meditation, and a pause, even if an illusionary one, in our intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and embodied journey(s). Our work illustrates how the self looks in transitional space: in motion, contemporaneous, simultaneously in the making and in relation to others. We continue this practice as a pedagogy for being and living out the fictions of our lives.

Trying On—Being In—Becoming:  
Four Women's Journey(s) in Feminist Poststructural Theory

Introduction

“Not only do people produce theory, but *theory produces people*.”

(St. Pierre, 2001, p. 142)

This essay is the narrative and poetic representation of four women in academia, spanning a thirteen-year relational journey of living transitional space (Ellsworth, 2005), a time of examining assumptions, patterns, and beliefs in our lives. We were initially bound together through doctoral studies. karen was an active member of Donna's dissertation committee; completing a feminist poststructural dissertation was new territory in 1996 for the university, a task karen and Donna embarked on together. Five years later, karen and Donna were members of Mindy's dissertation committee. The three of us continued the conversation about theories of subjectivity, even as Gennie began her doctoral program, with karen again serving on the committee. Gennie studied critical race theory, but upon encountering binaries she could not resolve, it was poststructural feminisms and our combined reading of Ellsworth (2005) that allowed her to map her data with complexity. The data for this study were gathered during this particular time period. At one point during the thirteen years, Donna, Mindy and Gennie taught at the same university.

Throughout the span of 13 years, our individual and collective understandings and questions of poststructural feminisms grew. We experimented with pedagogy; we struggled with essentialism and a desire for “the answers.” We found ourselves

profoundly changed. Through reading and critiquing one another's work, we lived our individual studies of theory collectively in such a way that our writings have worked across the boundaries to author us all.

Ours is a study of how “living and theorizing produce each other; they structure each other” (St. Pierre, 2001, p. 142). Through journals, emails, and dialogue we are *trying on, being in, and becoming* feminist poststructural thinkers/inquirers/teacher educators. Over a period of ten months, we came together on a regular basis to question, discuss, and map our “individual” stories as a way of making sense of theories of subjectivity (Foucault, 1983; Lather, 1991; McLaren, 2002; St. Pierre, 2001) and to study the concept of transitional space (Ellsworth, 2005).

These reflections are autoethnography because we initially did our thinking and writing within our own spaces. They are collaborative, because we have come to learn that individually written autobiographies are illusionary: we write them in relation to powerful discourses producing our subjectivity (Butler, 1997b, 2005). As autoethnographers, we grapple with meanings and moments of loss, desire, guilt, and love as a practice of *hypomnemata* (Foucault, 1983), “a means to establish as adequate and as perfect a relationship of oneself as possible” (p. 247). Foucault (1983) describes *hypomnemata* as “account books, public registers, individual notebooks serving as memoranda . . . They constituted a material memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation” (p. 246). This accounting of oneself is not in the Puritan tradition of confession or in a humanist attempt of self-discovery, but an attempt “to collect the already-said, to reassemble that which one could hear or read, and this to an end which is nothing less

than the constitution of oneself” (Foucault, 1983, p. 247). This study represents a reflective mining of such treasures, capturing moments of rereading and meditation, and a pause, even if an illusionary one, in our intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and embodied journey(s).

These journey(s) explored are mind/brain/body travels, for, according to Ellsworth (2005),

Bodies have affective somatic responses as they inhabit pedagogy’s time and space. Specific to pedagogy is the experience of the corporeality of the body’s time and space when it is in the midst of learning. Because this experience arises out of an assemblage of mind/brain/body with the time and space of pedagogy, we must approach an investigation into the experience of the learning self through that assemblage. (pp. 4–5)

This research reflects our embodied experiences as learning selves.

jagodzinski (1993) writes of “the most fundamental human experience”—that of movement. This experience is “informed by the body’s negotiation between becoming *lost* and finding a *direction*” (p. 160). Within the mind/brain/body, feelings of being “lost” and “direction” is what we have come to view as transitional space, a leaving behind and a tentative embracing without retreat. This direction is not straight, but elliptical; it is indeterminable (Ellsworth, 2005). Out of this space, our reflective mining is investigated through the “assemblage of mind/brain/body” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 4).

Thus, we began to view Ellsworth’s (2005) concept of transitional space as a key concept in our journeys in poststructural feminist theory. Transitional space “exists always and everywhere as potential” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 32). It is space inviting

transformation, without a mandate. As a relational space, overlapping and competing discourses make possible twists and detours of subjectivity, fissures in our self-fictions, and emergence into other spaces as we reinterpret the stories of our lives. Thus, our work is intended to demonstrate subjectivity and should not be taken as “mirrors to reality” (Jones, 2005, p. 765), but as illustrations of the ambiguous spaces of unrest that move us intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

### Mining the Treasures

In our effort to practice *hypomnemata*, while working through and with theories of subjectivity and transitional space, we collected data over a ten-month period. This data included individual researcher journals written after rereading Ellsworth (2005) and returning to other feminist poststructural theorists (a partial list includes Butler 1997a, 1997b, 2005; Ellsworth 1994, 1997, 2005; Lather, 1991; St. Pierre, 2000a, 2001). We met together six times to discuss our readings and journeys. During our face-to-face meetings, we mapped themes from previous email dialogues using situational mapping (Clarke, 2005), a postmodern form of grounded theory, to “lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive, and other elements in the research situation of inquiry” (p. xxii). Based upon the mapping of our conversations and studies at our face-to-face meetings, we chose tentative themes to further investigate through email dialogues. These themes included the following: truth, empowerment, grief, religion, epistemology, binaries, subjectivity, transitional space, and embodiment. Our situational map evolved at each face-to-face session. In writing our results, we framed the discursive elements from our map within the concepts “trying on,” “being in,” and “becoming.”

We presented this work as a collaborative performance autoethnography at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, May 17, 2008. Our performance was “literally the staged re-enactment” (Alexander, 2005, p. 411) of our journals, emails, and situational maps. We chose to represent our work as poetry for four voices, with excerpts from our data, stories of “emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). For this publication, we have modified the poems, melding the four voices into one, which adds to readability and illustrates our collaborative journey into feminist poststructural theory.

The following essay is organized into three sections, “Trying On,” “Being In,” and “Becoming.” These titles are intended to show movement, the space between “lost” and finding “direction.” Each section begins with introductory comments and a quote; we discussed and pondered these quotes at length during our study. Following each quote is a poem written from repeated words in our data. Poems give way to our individual performance narratives based upon journals and emails documenting the section’s theme. Each section concludes with a postscript, a poem, and a section summarizing the theme and leading the reader into the next idea. Sections and the linear movement of text can be deceptive, however. We employ structure to bring a certain sensibility to the text, but the reader may be reminded by the stops, gaps and spaces that the power of story is sometimes the opaqueness of metaphor, a gap in a character’s thinking, or a digression refusing to reconnect. We choose this form of writing to reflect theories of subjectivity and transitional space, including the discontinuities, paradoxes, and the ability to “change answers we have into new questions—and to change the routes we take to arrive at an

interpretation” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 135). This is not a study of destination, but one of wandering in-between while making sense of living, through theory.

### Trying On

According to Pitt and Britzman (2003), “Knowledge returns to self as belief that threatens to crumble. Belief may locate the self, but knowledge can make it disappear. Influence rests uneasily between knowledge and belief” (p. 762). Trying on—at first like slipping on a new shirt, we played with ideas of feminist poststructuralism, yet we craved Truth, as tangible and directional. The more we played with poststructural ideas, the more we found ourselves drawn into the theory, so we returned to the writings of Ellsworth (2005), Lather (1991), and St. Pierre (2000a). We tried the language on again and again, reframing our thinking and our stories. Feminist poststructuralism troubled our constructed sense of security, as illustrated in the following poem using repeated words found in our early discussions.

### *And Truth Left Early*

We search  
 but maybe it is too much to find  
 that Truth left early:  
 Trauma  
 Grief,  
 Terrified to see (our)selves  
*Like that.*  
 Who am I?  
 Who are those “other” people?  
 Paradigm shift, *they* say

Invigorated/Depressed  
 Empowered/Subjected  
 Meeting *this*  
 And trying on—

*Trying On: Performance Narratives*

*karen*

The debates begin...

Constructivism?

Reflective Practitioner?

Critical Theory?

*Which one will win?*

It is 1993 and our College of Education is working on the self-study for the upcoming National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) review process. We have to choose a knowledge base for our entire unit.

*The faculty meetings are painful, and as a “junior” (I hate that term!) faculty member, I don’t have much of a voice. The dinosaurs have taken over!*

In the end we choose Critical Theory (CT), and it sounds good, but I don't think we really have a handle on what it actually involves, means, or the implications for our preservice teacher programs. What about this language? I have to admit, though, students feel proud when they can say words like *hermeneutics* or *hegemony*, even if they don't know what they mean. *Do I?*

*Something about CT just bothers me.*

What about this concept of the “transformative intellectual” and the arrogance that seems embedded in this idea? *Who am I to say my worldview should be imposed on others? Or that it is better or more right?*

What about empowerment? *Is it really my role to empower others?*

Then it (i.e., the cataclysmic event) happens. I see Patti Lather at the American Educational Research Association Conference later that year, and she blows me out of the water. What is this idea of poststructuralism she is talking about and her mourning for Marxism and her roots in CT? *Do I even begin to understand what she is talking about?*

I start reading *Getting Smart* (Lather, 1991); she is discussing the politics of empowerment. “Empowerment is a process one undertakes for oneself; it is not something done ‘to’ or ‘for’ someone” (pp. 3–4). This is one of those times when I find my own thoughts in her words.

But it doesn’t stop there. She transforms my world, and I have to find others who will find passion in talking about her ideas—others who can also help me grow. In walks Donna, a new doctoral student, and I initiate a study group using Lather’s book as a starting point for discussion.

*Aside:*

And yes, Patti—

one person CAN make a difference!

*Donna*

I’ve been accepted to a PhD program, which is plain craziness – I am not that smart a girl. I’ve known this for a long time:

“Don’t worry,” he tells my mother as I struggle in grade five, “She only needs enough math to get by at the grocery store.”

Just enough wife math – to mind the bills, you know;

Mom math for soccer game totals;

Deaconess math – for tracking tithes to the poor.

Then,

I learn words. I love the way they slide warm across my tongue:

*empowerment, conscientization, hegemony, voice.*

But it is not enough.

I keep tasting.

Britzman (2003), Butler, (1997a), Gore (1993), Lather (1991) and Spivak (1993) and

there are more new words:

*power, discourse, subjectivity, embodiment.*

These words fill my mouth, I swallow hard. Revise my story:

*What did it mean when the doctor announced in my rural community,*

*“It’s a Girl.”*

Socially constructed by discourse;

my subjectivity determined by male church authority;

And this (*yes, this!*): subjectivity, discourse, moves, breathes, and refuses

to stay as a unitary painting, static on the wall (!).

I am in love with these words, yet nervous, feeling edgy, like a teenager indulging too

much, too fast, out of control. But I keep reading, swallowing, and digesting – new

energy surging through connecting tissues – running hard through the rain, maybe over a

cliff, but I can’t stop now.

*Mindy*

My simultaneously over confident and *certain I'll fail* self has enrolled in a doctoral program. Donna has this impulsive idea that we research our preservice teachers who are working with struggling English language learners in an after-school program.

*How am I going to add this to my life—grad school—2 ½ year old—pregnant—fulltime job—and now a research project? How can I turn down this opportunity—my chance to work along side Donna?*

As I read the data of observations, emails and focus group sessions, my eyes and ears will only allow me to hear and see my familiar world of literacy methods, skills, strategies and assessment, safely lived out in my elementary teaching past.

Donna reads the same data and then hands me Britzman (2003), Ellsworth (1997), Lather (1991), Luke & Gore (1992), Phillips (2002) and Weedon (1987).

*What is this new language?*

*Discourses? Is this academic jargon for a way of talking?*

*Subjectivity? Aren't I who I am? Aren't I Mindy?*

*Agency? Can't I decide who I will become?*

Together we power walk/talk:

The data whispers,

*These competing discourses are positioning the preservice teachers.*

The data warns,

*You've set up a binary in your literacy methods class.*

The data yells,

*Quick, you must deconstruct, or you'll leave preservice teachers with no options but to be a "good" or "bad" teacher!*

I like this new language. I will keep it safe, in my academic desk drawer. See? It behaves well here. It does not confuse itself with me.

*Gennie*

*[In the interest of full disclosure: A "Welcome" sign on a church door]*

Welcome! This church knows that its interpretation of scripture is the only Truth in the world, women are not allowed to teach Sunday School, as it is inappropriate for them to teach men—ages 3 and up, and this is important, women: you will submit to male authority. (It goes without saying, if you are not white or middle to upper class, you will adhere to our cultural norms . . . and if you are gay or lesbian, repent and sin no more.)

This sign did not greet me at the door of the fundamentalist church—though I wish that it did—instead, only smiles and kindness. How comfortably welcome I felt. For the more subtle messages, one must wait.

*[In the interest of full disclosure, there were clues]*

It's time for the weekly "ladies" Bible study. I am so excited to attend, free from the shackles of my teaching job, home with my baby. Women take turns sharing their pressing concerns. "I just know that I should wash my sheets once a week, but sometimes it's only once a month." "Oh, my," another woman gasps, "I can't sleep if I don't do it once a week." I try to understand, to care about my laundry, to be the good Christian hostess, to enjoy conversations about people's children—I really do—but my body rejects this life. I am told, if I just pray . . . just believe . . . just read my Bible every

day . . . I will be blessed.

Rocking a baby in the church nursery, my role on many Sundays, I hear water gushing; it's coming from inside the wall. I find a man in the hall and try to explain the leak. He pushes past me to investigate and I realize: I don't even have the authority to report a water leak. Later, again in the nursery, I am told, "You should spank her." I look down at my beautiful, crying infant and back up at the woman's knowing, authoritative face.

A man is dead. A police officer from my church has shot an African American man in the "bad" part of town. The officer, white, faces media scrutiny. The pastor appears on the television screen: "When men sin, there are natural consequences . . . when we do good, we have nothing to fear." The dead man, pulled over for a minor traffic violation, had cocaine in his possession. Good? Bad? "Natural" consequences?

Ellsworth (2005) writes,

In order to learn something new, as in previously unthought, we must lose that part of ourselves whose identity depends on not thinking that thought. We must lose that part that depends on not being the kind of person who entertains such thoughts or understands such thoughts or who finds pleasure in such thoughts.

We must lose that self that is predicated on not being that kind of person who gets caught up with the knowledges of "those other people." (p. 89)

I realize I have become one of "those other people" I may have prayed for, or, more likely, politely and piously ignored. I blame theory.

*Enter Butler (1997a)*

I examine my gendered performance, down to my denim jumper and white tennis shoes and even the Bible I carry in its leather case. I realize I have become a stereotype,

and that I can no longer perform my gender “properly” in this context: pretending to care about how clean my house is, pure my heart is, while the men are taught to be leaders and another diaper needs to be changed.

*Gore (1993) enters shortly thereafter*

This regime of truth suffocates me, oppresses me. So I keep reading.

*[In the interest of full disclosure]*

*Trying-On: Postscript #1 and Poem*

We thought we could just flirt, dabble, and try on the theories casually, but the conflicts of subjectivity produce “those tiny explosion of the self that refuse to repeat the same I” and that became our “great shattering revolutions” (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 123).

*Shattered*

Who are we?  
What is Truth?  
Who is god?  
The questions come  
in between the lines  
we thought were  
solid, firm, inerrant.  
Why does everyone look the same?  
act the same?  
Must be the same?  
Truth, gendered truth,  
our truth  
Exploded.

If we frame learning as a psychic event (Britzman, 1998), then we understand the risks a learner must take: she must face internal conflicts, find herself implicated in knowledge, learn from a place of loss, and struggle “between resistance as symptom and the working through of resistance” (p. 119). She must deconstruct acceptance/rejection,

values and beliefs, and Truth as not what she thought it. We were all “trying on” the theories of subjectivity as an intellectual pursuit, but the new knowledge refused to separate neatly from our embodied selves. Theory, as Rich (1986) writes, “can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn’t smell of the earth, it isn’t good for the earth” (p. 214). Poststructuralism feminism refused to remain a disembodied abstraction – it began to return to us and smell more like us. In the midst of experiencing the mind/brain/body categories splitting apart, even as we attempted to keep them intact, we explored being in transitional space and finding possibilities there.

#### Being In

Of being in transitional space, Ellsworth (2005) writes,

Transitional space opens up the space and time between an experience and our habitual response to it. It gives us time and space to come up with some other way of being in relation at that moment. It introduces a stutter, a hesitation. It jams the binary logics that keep self/other, inner/outer, individual/social locked in face-to-face opposition. It is a space where the skin-to-skin face-off between self and other has been pried apart so that a reordering of self and other can be set in motion and so that we might go on relating to each other at all. (p. 64)

In the pages of Ellsworth’s (2005) description of transitional space, we found intrigue and a wistfulness to find such space. That was before we understood the trauma of such space, before we knew how attached we were to the spaces we previously occupied, and before we understood that transitional space would find us. We desired to maintain the myth of who we were, yet we found the myth wanting. We yearned to ignore this new

knowledge and fumbled to embrace it. Such ignorance is “not a passive state of absence, a simple lack of information: it is an active dynamic of negation, an active refusal of information” (Felman, 1987, p. 79). We had allowed poststructural feminist theory “in,” and the fissures of these former selves were crumbling and beginning to feel almost fictional. The words from our journals reflect this state of angst:

*Headline News*

WOMEN STUCK BETWEEN PARADIGMS

rescued by reframing identity  
even while experiencing  
epistemological angst.  
crisis  
confusion  
falling  
pain!

*Where is the lifeboat now?*

Women journeying out...  
journeying in...  
journeying between...

Being in transitional space is a traumatic experience of self-questioning. According to Butler (2005),

It also turns out that self-questioning of this sort involves putting oneself at risk, imperiling the very possibility of being recognized by others, since to question the norms of recognition that govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they might be compelled to accommodate, is, in relation to the present regime, to risk unrecognizability as a subject or at least to become an occasion for posing the questions of who one is (or can be) and whether or not one is recognizable. (p. 23)

As we move into this section, being in transitional space, karen does not quite know her confident doctoral advising self, Donna wonders who that person was who voted in ways she cannot imagine now, Mindy no longer finds the familiar words of church acceptable, and Gennie discovers new names and labels for her constructed world.

*Being In: Performance Narratives*

*karen*

I found an old email I sent to my colleague, Warren, during this time. Warren, ah yes, dear Warren—my 65+ Asian-American university mentor who loved pressing boundaries within the system and getting away with it! He was about the only one I could talk to during this stage of “being in” that actually seemed to understand what I was going through and pressed me to indulge in my own troubling thoughts. I wrote to him,

*The thoughts that are roaming around in my head are beginning to scare me a bit.*

*My personal journey into critical and poststructural theories has taken me to lands I am not sure I should enter. The more I read and think the more I question.*

*Let me give you some examples of how bad it actually is. Warren, I don't even know what data is anymore. Are my thoughts data? Are my dreams data? Or is data only something that can be codified and cut up into little pieces, categorized, and observed for emergent themes? I don't even know how I feel about theoretical frameworks anymore. I think that when we tie our research a priori to someone else's framework, we could view our “data” with blinders. What do we not see? And couldn't that be more important than what we do see? And, what if a theoretical framework, in itself, is oppressive? Did anyone think about that? Isn't all research or inquiry invasive? (Perhaps even our own reflections?) What if we*

*choose not to be emancipated? Then what? Do we exert “power over?” My thoughts don’t fit the system anymore. I guess that’s what scares me. I don’t know what all of this looks like, and I don’t even know if I should have a doctoral student until I figure at least some of this out.*

(Aside: Warren assured me that this is EXACTLY the time I should be working with doctoral students!)

So, I think now that transitional space can’t be taken for granted. I first have to know it exists. Right? Then, I have to want to come up with some other way of being in relation to it at that moment.

*But . . . sometimes I don’t.*

Sometimes the momentary “habitual response” is just easy . . . sometimes it doesn’t disrupt or fracture . . . sometimes it helps me let go . . . sometimes it helps me cry . . . sometimes it stops me from crying.

I feel theory growing in me. *How does this theory create transitional space?* Create it in me? How does one try on? Be in? Become? “What must now be thought and thought otherwise?” (Derrida, 1994, p. 59). As I try on theory, it shields me, covers me. A false sense of security, perhaps? Yet, it leaves me vulnerable. Does “being in” create the transitional space that helps one become?

*Donna*

Circles. Competing Circles.

Subjectivity—each circle labeled as a way of supposed being:

Dutiful Daughter

Feminist Academic

Good Wife

Exceptional Teacher

Living in Circles is dangerous and when the adrenaline wears off

I am exhausted.

*Aside I:*

I once believed I could keep the circles separate,  
secret tunnels burrowed between them  
squeezing self within the parameters of power;  
but this is one more  
fiction too weighty to keep living.

The overlapping circles creating layers of myself:  
grey shadows  
spreading, merging:  
is this transitional space?

My fundamentalist beliefs

Crumble

Dissolve

Cremated remains without an urn

*Aside II:*

Somewhere in a mock election  
Another “I” voted against the Equal Rights Amendment  
For Ronald Reagan  
Said to a gay friend, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.”

Her bumper sticker read, “I found it.”

Who was that person?

She doesn’t know.

But the crowds applauded her performance.

*And isn’t this the danger of affirmation?*

*Mindy*

I have a boat. It is a standard, safe boat, wooden with strong oars, authoritative, modern, essential, and oh, so rational. Yet recently I find myself constructing a new raft. It is half-built, flexible, situated, shifting, emerging, and oh, so freeing, troubling, scary and liberating. This new raft is submerging labels and discourses like “Christian” and “Mother” and forcing them to bob up and down, up and down, gasping for air.

“Christian”

Church singing in unison: Our God is an awesome God. He reigns with power and love.

Church praying in unison: Father, who art in heaven.

I begin to question: *He? Father? What metaphors are we ignoring? Silencing? I begin to add a layered voice . . . Mother, who art in heaven.*

My father: Oh sweetie (tears in his eyes; tears in my eyes, surrounded by the familiar wallpaper in the kitchen where I grew up) What *is* the big deal? How can *words* keep you from hearing God’s message of love and grace for you?

I think: *Your white, male, patriarchal discourse allows you to simplify, condense and remain where your world makes sense. You can stay here. I cannot.*

“Mother”

*A preservice teacher chastises:* How do you do it? How can you leave your children every day and come to work?

*My husband encourages:* You can do it, Min.

*My three year-old son's Mother's Day fill-in the blank card from school haunts:* I know my mom loves me because . . . first she does her homework and then she plays with me.

*My mother cheers:* Keep it up! How can I help? What do you need to stay sane and finish your doctorate?

*My former university provost admonishes:* You can't work full-time and finish your Ph.D. It is impossible. (He doesn't know about my pregnancy or the toddler at home). I begin to wonder: Perhaps *I* can live beyond the binary of good mother/bad mother?

*Gennie*

I am teaching at a Christian college . . . less controversial for a part-time working mom, but I am still keeping it on the down-low. I see the glances when I tell the moms at the playgroup that I am heading off to a meeting.

*Don't tell! I'm so excited about what I'm reading and thinking! Mindy feeds me articles from her PhD program, and Donna seems to think I'm okay; I really respect her as a thinker. I'm curious about this poststructuralism, but I can't quite wrap my head around it.*

Bounding up the stairs, a new book about cultural competence in hand, I show it to a colleague, yet another poststructuralist in this little, conservative place. His response: “*Oh, yeah, I've read that. It's so essentialist.*” I feel deflated, and once again I see

feminist poststructuralism as an elite club. I'm not always sure I am interested in membership.

I join a PhD program. karen serves on my committee. I know how to be a good student and say the “right” things about bell hooks and critical pedagogy in her class. Righteous indignation bubbles up at just the “proper” moments when “resistant” white, male, conservative, Republican students disagree with hooks (1994) and Freire (1984).

*PS—Labels are okay when they are good and right and—  
especially—in the name of social justice.*

*[A new religion, one might say!]*

That is when karen asks “The Question.” It's at my dissertation proposal meeting.

*PS—It's not really a question.*

“What it looks like you're trying to do is to change people. You're trying to be a transformative intellectual.” karen doesn't require an answer and allows me to continue with my critical pedagogy research plan. And I'm glad: I secretly respond to her statement with an overwhelming sense of, “So what?” and boldly begin my dissertation research among colleagues, seeing if studying white racial identity development will make a difference in their praxis.

*PS—I already know that it will.*

*Being In: Postscript #2 and Poem*

Judith Butler (as cited in St. Pierre, 2000a) writes,

If a subject were constituted once and for all, there would be no possibility of a reiteration of those constituting conventions or norms. That the subject is that

which must be constituted again and again implies that it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance. (p. 277)

But if the subject could be constituted once and for all, it might seem easier; at least there would be limited choice. Yet, Foucault (Foucault, Martin, Gutman & Hutton, 1988) reminds us, “The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it?” (p. 9). Foucault continues, “The game is worthwhile insofar as we don’t know what will be the end” (p. 9). The words from our journals illustrate this kind of work, the movement of subjectivity.

*Illusions of Me*

The illusion of binaries  
 appears so firm  
 unmovable.

*Then:*

Someone SHOUTS—NO!  
 And the whispers  
 lure from safe corners...  
 LET IT BE!

I can't.

I won't.

(What if I do?... Doubt...)

You can't know!

They love me for who I am!

*Who are you?*

A good girl, you said.

*Maybe bad.*

You lie?

*Your story?*

*Whose story?*

*Who is telling it now?*

Name it...label it...

watch it melt...

grey pools of dogma

covering the fine drawings

of “I am.”

Our experience mirrors that of Rich (1986) when she writes,

It’s hard to look back on the limits of my understanding a year, five years ago—how did I look without seeing, hear without listening? It can be difficult to be generous to earlier selves . . . Yet how, except through ourselves, do we discover what moves other people to change? (p. 223).

How, except through the study of our own self-constitution, do we discover discourses and power, and how else does transitional space find us? Except through practicing “care of the self” (Foucault, 1983), engaging in that “ethic of self-disentanglement and self-invention” (Gore, 1993, p. 129), how do we continually and deliberately engage in becoming?

### Becoming

Regarding theory, St. Pierre (2001) writes,

Living and theorizing produce each other; they structure each other. Not only do people produce theory, but *theory produces people*. I remember how that concept shattered my world when I first came to grips with it. A different theory, a different discourse, different statements and questions about living, different grids of normalcy and regularity could produce *me* differently, for better or worse . . . At that point, Foucault's problem, “My problem is my own transformation,” became my own. (p. 142)

Donna read this quote first: How could someone you have only met through books write your life so well? Donna passed it on to Karen, Mindy, and Gennie, and it acted, over a

period of time, as one more outside force crashing, pulling, folding in and out at our sites of subjectivity. Transformation is the taut rope of internal/external interplay—the continual morphing of selves. Our emerging understanding of theory producing us is explored in the following poem:

*Transformation*

The problem  
is my own  
Transformation.  
I am living in pedagogy's hinge  
living in my *own* body  
my *own* lived experience  
in relation to all of you . . .  
all of *them*.  
Autoethnography is never  
a solo tale...  
Discourses producing  
*Me*  
always in context of  
*Us*.  
It's living in question.  
My life as Foucault's canvas  
the layered paintings of subjectivity  
of constantly becoming  
continuously redefined.  
The theory produces people.  
The theory produces  
ME.

Butler (1997a) writes, “A critical analysis of subjection involves . . . a recognition that the subject produced as continuous, visible, and located is nevertheless haunted by an inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivity” (p. 29). In “becoming,” our subjectivity was “continually displaced/replaced,” (Lather, 1991, p. 118): this the dynamic process of mind/brain/body haunted by what is left behind, between lost and finding direction. In “being in” and “becoming” subjugated by discourses of poststructural feminisms, we risked unintelligibility, unrecognizability, as

we morphed into other spaces. Encryptions of self draw us back to old discourses; mourning our losses keeps the tensions and movement in play (Mackwood, 1997).

*Becoming: Performance Narratives*

*karen*

I asked him during a time of transition in our relationship how I might be a better partner to him.

*What he said:* Don't be such an advocate for social justice

*What I heard:* I am a racist

*What he said:* Don't give me that diversity crap

*What I heard:* I am proud of my white, male privilege

*What he said:* Don't give me that goddess shit

*What I heard:* I am a believer in God

*What he said:* Why do you thank mother earth? Why don't you thank HIM for the food on the table?

*What I think:* Does he even have a clue how long I have been trying to replace that male god image in my head—the patriarchal god who was the center of my Catholic universe?

And then he said, "You only have one way of viewing the world . . . Everything boils down to gender to you." And I think to myself, "I get it. I get where he's coming from. I see the discourses at play in our relationship and I understand."

But still I want to change him. I want him to be a better person, *like me*. Why do I have these thoughts? At what point does it become about self and not just the other? Aren't I "there" yet? I am silent—no stutter, no hesitation. I just choose not to go there.

So there are things we just don't talk about, things he will never understand about me, things he will never appreciate about me, things he'll never get. And we go on loving each other and he IS a good person. Is it the transitional space that helps me cope so "that we might go on relating to each other at all?" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 64).

*Donna*

*I am leaving my tenured, full professor position:*

*I submitted my resignation to the university today.*

There is no such thing as silent protest—joke's on me: compliant resistance annihilates self.

I am reading the university's [revised] lifestyle statement (or a statement to style one's life). It is twelve paragraphs instructing me to live by the biblical tenets of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control and the admonishment to avoid discrimination:

Then (ever so kindly) excludes certain people for their sexual orientation, followed by three paragraphs naming the dangers of alcohol (sip carefully, only if you are sure, avoid the stumbling block).

Inclusive language is not necessary – conversation over – before it started (we don't discuss God as anything but *He*).

Meanwhile, the world is dying and war is waging and their Jesus isn't mine anymore.

---

Subjectivation:

*The process of becoming subordinated to powerful discourses.* There is a little sketch of myself in the center of my notes. Discourses of power moves in relation to the flat

drawing. My notes: “The subject turns on itself, two notions of power at work: that which is outside of the subject and that which the subject wills.”

The sketch (me) stops in the drawing, listening to another discourse.

The sketch (me) has a choice:

*Will she remain subjugated to current discourses, or will she use this as an opportunity for re-making herself?*

Underlined: How is one produced? By repetition.

Butler (2005) writes, “To call into question a regime of truth, where that regime of truth governs subjectivation, is to call into question the truth of myself and, indeed, to question my ability to tell the truth about myself, to give an account of myself” (p. 23).

---

I wrote this once:

I have come to see that transitional space is troubled space. Yes, mind/brain/body *moves*, but these are not the moves of a planned and practiced dance; it is the hard breathing/gasping of *becoming*, of birthing, of trauma. Mind/brain/body in motion can only be partially known; *motion*, after all, blurs the picture.

Now, I know it as embodied.

*Mindy*

I’ve finished the heart-pounding, hive-producing, public presentation of my dissertation, written from a feminist poststructural theoretical framework. The audience leaves, the room is rearranged. I am now positioned at the head of the table for the defense. Dialogue and questioning begins, then a late addition committee member asks,

“Couldn’t we solve some of the struggles with student teaching by matching student teachers with the right cooperating teachers?” I am baited and hooked. I head down this comfortable road of knowing and answers.

*Stop. Deconstruct. Ask Again.*

I sit down to type a reflection after a long day of teaching my undergraduate literacy methods class: I need to re-think this activity on miscue analysis. How can I create a set of questions that will get these students to see how reading is based on meaning? That reading is not about memorizing letters and sounds?

*Stop. Deconstruct. Ask Again.*

I am furious. My students aren’t reading their text prior to class. They won’t even stop chatting while I am desperately trying to teach them how to do a running record. How will they be able to start student teaching in the fall without this training?

*Stop. Deconstruct. Ask Again.*

The familiar, essential authoritative discourses lurk again producing me—authoritative discourses of “Mindy in control” and “Mindy as the expert”—the myths of teaching (Britzman, 2003). Perhaps it is these embodied moments that force me to *stop, deconstruct and ask again* in an effort to disrupt my thinking, my way of being, that might enable different discourses to allow a another Mindy to emerge.

*Gennie*

I’ve just finished interviewing “Sarah.” I’m frustrated. She says my dissertation research project hasn’t changed her. But I know she’s wrong. *Of course*, it has changed her. She says, she’s sorry. She leaves it at that. But *I* can’t leave it. I call her and ask a follow-up question—maybe if I ask the *right* question—and still she hasn’t changed. I am sitting in my car, staring at my notes.

*And I can't believe I missed the Memo.*

But the memo was there . . . I think back: Donna tells me, “You can’t do that, Gennie,” when I tell her about my proposal. I don’t listen, believe her, or care. (*I’m not convinced, after all, that I want to be a member of her club.*) A perfect stranger at a conference replies, “Good luck with that,” after she asks me about my research. (*She must not understand.*) karen tells me I am trying to be a transformative intellectual. (*So what?*) The memo was even in the literature—bold in the title, “Why doesn’t this feel empowering?” (Ellsworth, 1994)—but incomprehensible to me.

What do you do with a broken dissertation, with theoretical angst? With another binary, a different regime of truth *rendering, this time, my participants invisible?* A new story of transitional space (Ellsworth, 2005) emerges. This time I see space as temporary, but not empty, multiple discourses, not binaries (St. Pierre, 2000b), and “teaching and learning [as] always in the making, never guaranteed” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 56).

*By the way, there aren't any Memos.*

*Becoming: Postscript #3 and Poem*

St. Pierre (2001) writes, “Though all the theories of subjectivity are fictions, they are nonetheless powerful fictions that both open up and shut down lives” (p. 160). We are writing these fictions—they begin to define us. And so we ask:

*A Question*

How do you embrace a question  
as if it were flesh and warmth?  
How do you hold a question  
when it is slippery  
and leaves before you awake?  
How do you live with

such questions  
that rarely come home on time?

One answer:

*To stay alive!*

*Theory produces people.* Theories of subjectivity have produced the fictions of our lives, fictions that have changed our relationships, the way we teach and research, question the world, act in that world. The theories of subjectivity and transitional space have been good for us, but where does it leave us now?

#### Returning Again: From and To Another Place

The ten months we met, read, studied, and wrote together were invigorating and tumultuous in many ways as revealed in our last section. What do we make of such learning? In describing pedagogy's time and space, Ellsworth (2005) writes:

The time of the learning self is contemporaneous. It is the duration of a learning self's participation in knowledge and in self as simultaneously in the making. It is the transitional time of self in motion toward an open future yet to be decided. It is the time of pure relationality. The space of learning is the space of self in relation. (p. 80)

Our work here is an attempt to illustrate this "time of the learning self," how this self looks in motion, contemporaneous, as simultaneously in the making and in relation.

Learning happens, Ellsworth (1997) says, when we have asked one question and find the question "displaced by the return of a difference, a surprising, unexpected,

interfering encounter with the ignore-ances of one's 'very point of observation,' of one's very point of asking" (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 147). The elliptical movement Ellsworth describes is one that turns "back on itself, but does not meet itself" (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 149); it is the site of the bent force, the subject still to be worked out (St. Pierre, 2000a). The data of our lives, as storied here, illustrate this kind of return, of subjectivity still to be worked out.

And now that we are living this return and naming it and using the names to create other meanings, what shall we do? If it has been so powerful for us, then how do we as teacher educators practice such learning with our students, a learning akin to words from Raine's (1988) poem: "It burns in the void/Nothing upholds it/Still it travels" (p. 28)?

These questions are ones we live with for further study, but a key word emerges: *practice*. It is an ancient word, one we want to return to in its more mystic context. In Buddhism, Zen is referred to as a *practice*, as a way of living and seeing the world, as a way of being human. This is similar to *hypomnemata* as a *practice* of self-constitution. Perhaps this is what Ellsworth is trying to teach us (perhaps this is what our own data teaches us): pedagogy as *practice*, not as a set of beliefs, not elements of a philosophy to uphold, or strategies to adhere to, but as a way of perpetual trying on and being in so that we may continue (again) to become. Isn't this "knowledge in the making" (p. 1) as Ellsworth (2005), and now we, explore? What we have done in this work, is this not a form of such practice? Hasn't this practice, our "knowledge in the making," given us a way to see the world, a way of being human?

As a result of the practice of this study, “we have won . . . the ability to learn—by ‘hearing’ the discontinuities in our own, and others’ speech, knowledge, and memories—how to give what we already know another meaning” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 135). And now we continue this practice, but we do so a more aware of the possible pain of *becoming*, more humble to the possibility of knowing *not*, more willing to embrace uncertainty as a tonic of a *practice* – a *pedagogy* – for breathing, being and living out the fictions of our lives.

#### References

- Alexander, B. K. (2005). Performance ethnography: The reenacting and inciting of culture. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 411–422). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Britzman, D. (1998). *Lost subjects, contested objects: Toward a psychoanalytic inquiry of learning*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Britzman, D. (2003). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach* (2nd ed.). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Butler, J. (1997a). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997b). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

- Clarke, A. E. (2005). *Situational analysis: Grounded theory after the postmodern turn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx: The state of the dept, the work of mourning and the new international*. (P. Kamuf, Trans.). New York: Routledge. (Original work published 1993)
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733–768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellsworth, E. (1994). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. In L. Stone (Ed.), *The education feminism reader* (pp. 300–327). New York: Routledge.
- Ellsworth, E. (1997). *Teaching positions: Difference, pedagogy, and the power of the address*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ellsworth, E. (2005). *Places of learning: Media, architecture, pedagogy*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Felman, S. (1987). *Jacques Lacan and the adventure of insight: Psychoanalysis in contemporary culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1983). Afterward: The subject and power. In H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M., Martin, L., Guman, H., & Hutton, P. H. (1988). *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.

- Freire, P. (1984). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education and the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Gore, J. (1993). *The struggle for pedagogies: Critical and feminist discourses as regimes of truth*. New York: Routledge.
- jagodzinski, j. (1993). Curriculum as felt through six layers of an aesthetically embodied skin: The arch-writing on the body. In W. F. Pinar & W. M. Reynolds (Eds). *Understanding curriculum as phenomenological and deconstructed text* (pp. 159–183). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Jones, S. H. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 763–792). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Luke, C., & Gore, J. (1992). Introduction. In C. Luke and J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminisms and critical pedagogy* (pp. 1–13). New York: Routledge.
- Mackwood, G. (1997). Desire and encryption. In S. Tood (Ed.), *Learning desire: Perspectives on pedagogy, culture, and the unsaid*. New York: Routledge.
- McLaren, M. A. (2002). *Feminism, Foucault, and embodied subjectivity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Phillips, D. K. (2002). Female preservice teachers' talk: illustrations of subjectivity, visions of 'nomadic' space. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 8(1), 9–27.
- Pitt, A., & Britzman, D. (2003). Speculations on qualities of difficult knowledge in teaching and learning: An experiment in psychoanalytic research. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(6), 755–776.
- Raine, K. (1988). *Selected poems*. Ipswich, MA: Golgonoozo Press.
- Rich, A. (1986). *Blood, bread, and poetry: Selected prose 1979-1985*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Spivak, G. C. (1993). *Outside in the teaching machine*. New York: Routledge.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2000a). Nomadic inquiry in the smooth spaces of the field: A preface. In E. A. St. Pierre & W. S. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 258–283). New York: Routledge.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2000b). Poststructural feminism in education: An overview. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 477–515.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2001). Coming to theory: Finding Foucault and Deleuze. In K. Weiler (Ed.), *Feminist engagements: Reading, resisting, and revisioning male theorists in education and cultural studies* (pp. 141–163). New York: Routledge.
- St. Pierre, E.A. (2008). Home as a site of theory: A fragment. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 1(2), 119–124.
- Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructural theory*. New York: Blackwell.