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Genevieve Harris  
*Linfield College*

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Inward, Outward, Onward: Autoethnography of a

Dissertation in (Qualitative) Transitional Space

Genevieve Harris, PhD

Assistant Professor of Multicultural Education

Linfield College

900 SE Baker St. #474

McMinnville, Oregon, 97123

USA

1.503.883.2238

Genevieve Harris is Assistant Professor of Multicultural Education at Linfield College, a small liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest. Her research interests include qualitative research, poststructural feminism, teacher identity, multicultural education, autoethnography, and intersections of identity.

### Abstract

This article presents the connection of a personal dissertation process to the wider world of qualitative research. Using the concept of transitional space as a metaphor, the author chronicles her theoretical transition from critical race theory to poststructural theory to emerging questions about material feminism. This transition is mapped to three major qualitative research moments within the field: modernist, crisis of representation, and the future. Autoethnography and found text are used to present the micro and macro telling of the dissertation process. White racial identity development among Christian teacher educators at a religious university was the original dissertation focus. Ethical dilemmas emerged during the data collection process, presenting the researcher with a theoretical crisis that needed to be addressed.

*Key words:* qualitative research, critical race theory, poststructuralism, materialism

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in (Qualitative) Transitional Space

[Transitional space is] an address to a self who is in the process of withdrawing from that self, someone who is in a dissolve out of what she or he is just ceasing to be and into what she or he will already have become by the time she or he registers something has happened. (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 34)

This article chronicles the transitional space of dissertation research at the micro level and the transitional space of qualitative research at the macro level. In the midst of towers of transcription, data analysis maps cluttering walls in the home and office, and research memos that litter one's desk, dissertation research feels intensely personal. However, one's individual efforts mirror those of other academics and, indeed, the field of qualitative research itself. Thus, I, as others before me (Gonick & Hladki, 2005; Norum, 2000) have undertaken the description of this personal *and* social process, one that tells the tale of my dissertation research and places it within three qualitative research moments identified by leaders in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Utilizing autoethnography as a descriptor of this simultaneously inward and outward process (Tedlock, 2005), I draw on the tradition of qualitative researchers who use alternative texts to dramatize their research (Pelias, 2000; Pelias, 2003; Richardson, 2003; Richardson, 2005; Richardson & Lockridge, 2002; Spry, 2001); I used "found text" to concisely—and, I hope, powerfully—illustrate critical incidents, theorists, dissertation and proposal excerpts, and research memos along the way. Before presenting the literature regarding qualitative research moments, autoethnography, and found text, I will provide a description of my dissertation research—and its conundrums that led me

through these moments.

The purpose of my dissertation research was to examine White racial identity development among Christian teacher educators within the context of a religious university. Specifically, I sought to address these questions: 1) What stories do Christian teacher educators tell about their own White racial identity development? and 2) Is there an impact of studying White racial identity development on the praxis of Christian teacher educators? If so, in what ways? Eight self-identified white teacher educators at a religious university agreed to take part in the study, reading Tatum's (1999) *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* and participating in related focus group discussions and personal interviews. Data were analyzed using Clarke's (2005) situational analysis, which involved a series of mapping and memoing before arriving with a final map of themes.

I began the project with a critical race theory framework. Immersed in critical pedagogy (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003) as part of my doctoral course work, I possessed a fiery, passionate desire to work as a change agent. Mid-way through my data collection, however, I became troubled by the implications of this approach. What if my participants do not wish to be changed? What if they do not need or want me to "transform" or "empower" them? I began reading poststructural theorists and the book *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy* by Ellsworth (2005) and instead became transformed myself. With permission from my dissertation advisor, I completed a second literature review, this time from a poststructural perspective. This necessarily affected my data analysis. Finally, when I arose from the wreckage of completing a dissertation and the overwhelming first year as a tenure-track professor, I began to look at

my dissertation data through the lens of material feminism. Influenced by continued reflections on Ellsworth (2005), as well as the work of Barad (2003), I wondered what shape my analysis would have taken had I gone beyond an analysis of discourses to one that would consider participants' lived experiences, emotions, and in general, embodiment in the world.

### **Qualitative Research Moments**

Decades of qualitative research have proven it to be a field of transitions, through eight moments, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005). They, too, describe the ongoing dissolve and becoming of transition, stating, "each of the earlier historical moments is still operating in the present, either as legacy or as a set of practices that researchers continue to follow or argue against" (p. 20).

Similarly, my own research has not followed strict stages through historical moments. Rather, one moment seems to blur into the other. The proposal portion of my dissertation research exemplifies the modernist moment, a time of trying to give voice to the voiceless in society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I hoped to create change for minorities in schools by transforming White teacher educators. In conducting this critical race research, I encountered the next qualitative research moment: the crisis of representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I questioned my ability to capture the lived experiences of my participants, specifically their "voice" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2010). This led me to use a poststructural approach in analyzing their statements in light of societal discourses about race and to do so tentatively with self-reflexivity as a researcher and an acknowledgement of my role in the process of interpretation (Phillips & Carr, 2006). Finally, this project led to "the future" of qualitative research, a time of questioning the

completeness of poststructural approaches; material feminism hints at addressing the aspects of research that cannot be captured by language. The question remains: can we enact social change in our teaching and research when only attending to language? (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Even as I describe these “moments” I recognize that all three represent the ongoing “blurred genres” of recent history in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Before using key passages from theorists, research memos, and my dissertation to illustrate each qualitative research moment with more detail, I will address the mode of writing I have chosen for telling the story.

### **Autoethnography, Found Text, and Other Conventions**

In order to tell the micro and macro stories of this qualitative research, I have employed particular narrative strategies. Autoethnography and found text have proven useful in uniting the personal and the social in an impactful way. Other strategies have proven necessary for clarity and cohesiveness of the text.

Tedlock (2005) describes autoethnography as research that makes an attempt to “heal the split between public and private realms by connecting the autobiographical impulse (the gaze inward) with the ethnographic impulse (the gaze outward)” (p. 467). It showcases the interplay of self and society (Spry, 2001). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) write that narratives such as this may be “structures through which [we] make sense of [our] world, locating [our] particular biographical experiences in larger historical and sociological contexts” (p. 966). Through dialogue, autoethnography enables the “self” (writer) and the “other” (reader) gain insight and increased understanding (Spry, 2001).

Found poetry is a genre of poetry in which the content of the poems is “found” and extracted word for word from other texts. These texts may include newspapers, poetry, articles, or other written or transcribed words (Tompkins, 2007). Found poetry has been used in previous qualitative research (Norum 2000; Prendergast 2006) and is consistent with alternative ways of representing qualitative research (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2007). I have chosen to adapt the concept of found poetry in order to utilize *found text*: texts that were significant during my dissertation process, including theorists, as well as my own research memos and dissertation text. I have directly cut and pasted text from these sources, choosing segments that stand alone in the telling of the story. Dissertation and proposal excerpts are indented toward the middle of the page; quotations from theorists begin on the left.

Following Tedlock’s (2005) framework for autoethnography, I have utilized the following headings within each of the qualitative moments: inward, outward, and onward, the latter being my own addition. “Inward” refers to the private world of my dissertation research, while “outward” indicates connections to the wider world of qualitative research. Although transitional space is seamless and impossible to pinpoint with certainty, I have added the word “onward” to indicate approximately when shifts from one qualitative moment to another occurred.

Visually, I have formatted the text in such a way that the reader may envision the various voices speaking, that of the author, as well as theorists and qualitative researchers. I have also utilized the poetic convention of repeating lines for impact. In order to create flow within the text, I did not use quotation marks; all of the text presented—except when bracketed—should be considered direct quotations from the



sources, with the author, year, and page number provided. Within dissertation excerpts, other sources will be cited. Because these sources are unrelated to the purpose of this study, I will leave the reader to look them up, if desired; they are cited in the reference list.

“Autoethnographic texts reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience” (Spry, 2001, p. 712). The reader is now invited to join the writer in this endeavor.

### **Inward, Outward, Onward: Autoethnography of a Dissertation in (Qualitative) Transitional Space**

#### **THE PROPOSAL: CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

*The gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework . . . that specifies a set of questions . . . that he or she then examines in specific ways. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 21)*

#### **Inward**

##### Research Proposal

In its urgent drive for change, critical race theory takes a praxis approach to change (Ladson-Billings, 2003) and openly acknowledges that its “radical theoretical arguments [are] seen as a challenge to the ‘American way’” (p. 412). Taking a close look at White racial identity among Christian teacher educators is a direct and dangerous idea: it could cause discomfort among

participants and the researcher and among university members at-large. However, I urgently feel that it is a necessary step in my work for social justice. I hope to gain participation from people who wish to join in a learning and growing process and who want their praxis to be transformed.

Critical Incident: Dissertation Proposal Presentation

Committee member: What it sounds like you are trying to do, Gennie, is serve as a transformative intellectual, forcing your views of social justice on your participants.

Me: Okay, I will consider that point of view. [*Internal dialogue: Of course I am, I am a change agent!*]

**Outward**

Denzin & Lincoln, 2003

Critical race theory enacts an ethnic epistemology, arguing that ways of knowing and being are shaped by the individual's standpoint, or position in the world. This standpoint undoes the cultural, ethical, and epistemological logic (and racism) of the Eurocentric, Enlightenment paradigm. (p. 248)

Ladson-Billings, 2003

CRT helps to raise some important questions about the control and production of knowledge—particularly knowledge about people and communities of color. Where is “race” in the discourse of critical qualitative researchers? To what degree have critical qualitative researchers reinscribed liberalism in their work? How has the quest to embrace the postmodern perspectives on human agency obscured the need for collective

effort? (p. 424)

### Proposal Literature Review

Critical race theory forms a theoretical foundation for my research. Goals of critical race theory are breaking down the “cultural logic of the Eurocentric paradigm” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 400) and naming and confronting hegemony. Both are possible outcomes of my research.

Critical race theory brings urgency to my work in White racial identity development in a Christian university. It criticizes liberalism and the perspective that the Civil Rights Movement is necessarily a long process. “CRT argues that racism requires sweeping changes, but liberalism has no mechanism for such change” (Ladson-Billings, p. 410).

### ***Qualitative Research Moment: Modernist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)***

*A new generation of graduate students across the human disciplines encountered new interpretive theories (ethnomethodology, phenomenology, critical theory, feminism).*

*They were drawn to qualitative research practices that would let them give a voice to*

*society's underclass. (p. 16)*

### Critical Incident: Data Collection (Phillips, Harris, Larson, & Higgins, 2009)

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. (p. 1475)

## **Onward**

### Dissertation

As I began to view my research from a poststructural lens, I recognized that we cannot “conjure a learning” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 54). We can only design places of learning, such as the buildings and museums that Ellsworth describes in her book, keeping in mind that “teaching and learning [are] always in the making, never guaranteed” (p. 56).

### Research Memo: Initial Interview Analysis

I saw participants as Wrestling and Wondering. I viewed them in what Ellsworth (2005) would call transitional space. They were all in various places on the journey. Some, I thought at the time, were just out of the starting blocks, and others, I felt, had hit stride and wanted to know what to do next. On a related note, I began to realize at that point in the process that doing a dissertation is researching in transitional space: I had changed so much in the process. In keeping with Ellsworth's work, I felt I set up a place of learning for participants, and they were often wrestling within that. I saw in places their logic going back and forth from colorblind to

gaining awareness. It was just so very interesting. I also saw them wondering, that is, asking questions. This study, it would seem, was more about helping participants ask new questions than coming up with answers.

Ellsworth, 2005

[Transitional space is] that moment of letting go of a former sense of self in order to re-identify with an emerging and different self that is still in transition. It is that moment in which what will emerge from transition is still in the making and as yet unclear. In the crisis of learning, I am suspended in the space between losing myself and finding myself caught up with different knowledges and other people. In the moment of learning, I am simultaneously me and not me. (p. 89)

Dissertation

I designed this research project as a critical race theorist (CRT), with a critical pedagogy perspective and a focus on changing individuals. In the process of collecting data, I dissolved out of a CRT approach and into a poststructural framework. As a result, writing the results of this journey has been a difficult process of talking about this specific place and time in which I encountered my learning self in a profound way.

As I conducted interviews and focus groups, I began to see my participants not as either racist or not racist, as might be prescribed by traditional antiracism, critical pedagogy approaches (Hartigan, 2000), but instead as people in transition as they

encountered and considered multiple and intersecting forms of oppression (Ellsworth, 1994). Related to the concept of transitional space is the notion of ambiguous moments. I examined how participants were often in “ambiguous situations [that] reflect gaps that have opened in an ideological conditioning that has previously held answers for most experiences” (Hartigan, 2000, p. 399).

### **THE DISSERTATION: POSTSTRUCTURAL THEORY**

*The gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework . . . that specifies a set of questions . . . that he or she then examines in specific ways. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 21)*

#### **Inward**

##### Dissertation

This research in transitional space took me from a place of binaries, a critical pedagogy perspective, to a poststructural feminist lens. Ellsworth (2005) writes that

transitional space opens up the space and time between an experience and our habitual response to it . . . it introduces a stutter, a hesitation. It jams the binary logic that keeps self/other, inner/outer, individual/social locked in face-to-face opposition. (p. 64)

Most of my participants, [education] faculty members, were

similarly in transitional space . . . they negotiated multiple discourses that were framed by Whiteness and closely connected with identity and emotion. They could be seen engaged in ambiguous moments . . . wrestling with these issues and finding fissures in authoritative discourses.

Because of this transition in my life as a teacher and researcher, I realize that I will and should always be in transitional space because “knowledge, once it is defined, taught and used as a ‘thing made’ is dead” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 1). I cannot claim that I have made *the* transition and have *arrived* at a place of enlightenment. In light of this, Ellsworth leaves all of us with a charge . . .

### **Outward**

#### Ellsworth, 2005

Are we up to it? Are we up to the trial of experience, to walking the spaces of difference in between? Are we up to putting who we think we are at risk by putting ourselves in relation to outside others, the very others who we have used through our fantasies of them to create a sense of ourselves? (p. 86)

#### Mazzei & Jackson, 2010

Specifically, we challenge simplistic treatments of voice in qualitative research that beckons voices to “speak for themselves” or that reduce complicated and conflicting voices to analytical “chunks” that can be interpreted free of context and circumstance . . . Do participants ever “speak for themselves?” . . . Letting readers “hear” participant

voices and presenting their “exact words” as if they are transparent is a move that fails to consider how as researchers we are always already shaping those “exact words” through unequal power relationships present and by our own exploitative research agendas and timelines. (p. 1)

***Qualitative Research Moment(s): Triple Crisis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)***

*...qualitative researchers can no longer directly capture lived experience. Such experience, it is argued, is created by the researcher. This is the representational crisis. It confronts the inescapable problem of representation . . . Is it possible to effect change in the world if society is only and always a text? (pp. 19-20)*

**Onward**

Dissertation Conclusion: Dangers of Binaries

My participants were teacher educators, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, friends, and lifelong learners who had a wide range of life experiences. Their ages spanned three decades, and they all had different memories, questions, emotions, and concerns. On one hand, I recognize that race is not always salient in White identity because norms and privileges are often invisible (Owen, 2007), but on the other hand, I recognize the complexity of their experiences. Participants recognized privilege and felt oppression in many different ways. Whites must wrestle within these ambiguities in order to experience change in their everyday lives. Further, “any form of analysis that takes race as its basis runs the risk of treating reductively the complexity of people’s social



perceptions and behaviors” (Hartigan, 2000, p. 386). I believe I could have better helped participants explore the complexity by creating a research experience that focused on how norms function in society (Cadwallader, 2007) and how power functions and circulates to enforce norms (McWhorter, 2005), rather than keeping the focus on the self. I now see that only by disrupting authoritative discourses about race, gender, or any of the *-isms*, is it possible to create alternative discourses and identities within a White-dominated society.

### **THE POSTSCRIPT: MATERIAL FEMINISM**

*The gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework . . . that specifies a set of questions . . . that he or she then examines in specific ways. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 21)*

#### **Inward**

##### Critical Incident: Updated Dissertation Literature Review

As Winograd (2005) and Zembylas (2003) outline, emotions are a critical element of identity. Zembylas explains, “in suggesting a poststructuralist account of emotions and teacher identity, I want to emphasize the notion of their ongoing *becoming* in a context embedded in power relations, ideology, and culture” (pp. 232-233). . . “teacher agency is the constituted effect of

emotion discourses (as well as other discourses)—bound up in practices—that inscribe the body” (p. 226).

#### Dissertation Conclusion: Learning is Embodied

A major discovery in my research was that learning is living and breathing. “Learning never takes place in the absence of bodies, emotions, place, time, sound, image, self-experience, history. It always detours through memory, forgetting, desire, fear, pleasure, surprise, rewriting” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 55). After my first focus group meeting, when participants shared their hopes and fears for the research process, I was aghast. It suddenly hit me that I was conducting research with people who felt vulnerable, who wanted to learn about themselves but were afraid to learn about themselves, who placed trust in *me* to conduct this research in a responsible way.

#### **Outward**

##### Ellsworth, 2005

Everything we “know,” everything that is “tellable,” emerges out of the time and place of this embodied movement/sensation—which is also a time and place of self-dissolution. Everyone experiences self-dissolution in his own unique ways. It is a fact that is simultaneously shared by everyone yet unsharable in our singular experiences of it. None of us has the power to perceive the time and place of self-dissolution directly because we come to consciousness of it only in the midst of our experiences of being dissolved, in relation, and in the interval between separation and connection. (p. 167)

**Onward**Barad, 2003

Language had been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing”—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. . . . Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters.

There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter. (p. 801)

Ellsworth, 2005

We come to the time and space of speaking about learning only after it has already taken place in a time and space that language cannot name. Language *follows* that which it would name. (p. 167)

**Qualitative Research Moment: The Future (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)**

. . . *we are in a moment of discovery and rediscovery, as new ways of looking, interpreting, arguing, and writing are debated and discussed.* (p. 21)

[Qualitative research continues, as always, in transitional space.]

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