Certainty, chaos and becoming

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Abstract

Identifying how we *become* researchers can appear to be as straight forward as a narrative with a beginning, middle and an end. Yet, in life with all its complexities and chaos, extracting a single thread is not at all easy. In this narrative, I used the idea of "writing-stories" (Richardson, 1990) built around the identification of four "moments" in my life to explore strands of teacher/researcher/writer identities. I elicited the moments by drawing memory-maps (Creates, 1990; 1998) of places/images that came to mind when I thought of what might have influenced my identities. From the "writing-stories", the memory-maps and the moments, I was able to detect enduring contours of influence. While this narrative and these contours may look coherent and certain, the experience of writing this paper has revealed exactly how identities are always partial, uncertain and in process.

Buds, shoots, nodes

I am drawn to academic writing. I find undergraduate student writing absorbing and complex but it is research writing by graduate students and faculty that really fascinates me. I am enticed by the difficulty many people experience with academic writing and by the common perception that there is little personal choice within discourse or disciplinary conventions and constraints. Like Richardson (1990), I believe we do have choice in how we write but that choice has poetic, rhetorical, ethical and political implications. My research is framed within an *academic literacies* perspective on writing. This is "a specific epistemological and ideological stance towards the study of academic communication" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 5). The framework has developed and grown since the 1980s (see Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998; Lea & Street 1999; Lea & Street, 2006; Street, 1984; 1995; 2003) and now forms a sizeable portion of research on academic writing particularly in the UK, Australia and South Africa. Academic literacies constitute "a specific epistemology, that of literacy as a social practice, and ideology, that of transformation" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 7).

Like Richardson (2001), writing is an integral part of my life. It's how I come to "know" my world. For me, academic writing and research is always personal while at the same time situated in time, context and other discursive practices. Richardson (2001) argues that narrative writing-stories allow us to situate our work in "sociopolitical, familial and academic climates" (p.34). Yet, these narratives are always shifting, changing and being reconstructed depending on "one's sense of who one is" (p.36) which is not stable or fixed. I found it difficult to "fix" a narrative about becoming a researcher until I was reminded of Newfoundland artist Marlene Creates' memory maps (Creates, 1990; 1997). These rough free-hand images, drawn from memory, are not accurate representations but rather repositories of meaning about memory, experience and place. The narrative that follows flowed around these images and allowed me to fix a writing-story around four moments: school, university, rural Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) work and academic teaching. From these images, moments and the narrative, I extracted key enduring "contours" that extend into my current research interests.

High School
I went to high school in Johannesburg, South Africa during the 1970s. When I think of the 1970s, I think of war. Mozambique, South Africa's neighbours to the east had been engaged in a guerrilla war of independence since the mid-1960s, which ended in 1975. Two years later a bloody civil war broke out, largely instigated by the South African government, which only ended in 1992 when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and South Africa, became a democracy. To the north, Rhodesia was also involved in a civil war during the 1960s and 1970s, which ended in 1979, and Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. To the west, South West Africa engaged in a war of independence against South Africa from the 1960s to 1988 when it became Namibia. Similarly, Angola to the north of Namibia also fought for its independence during the period. South Africa itself was at war but the war was waged underground and in the dark with the typical blanketing of communication that goes along with authoritarian control creating an environment of rumour and fear.
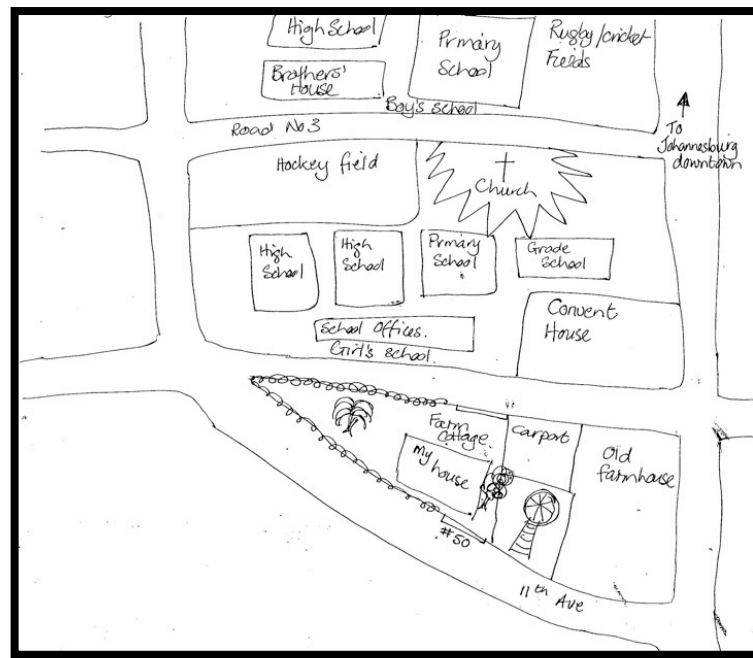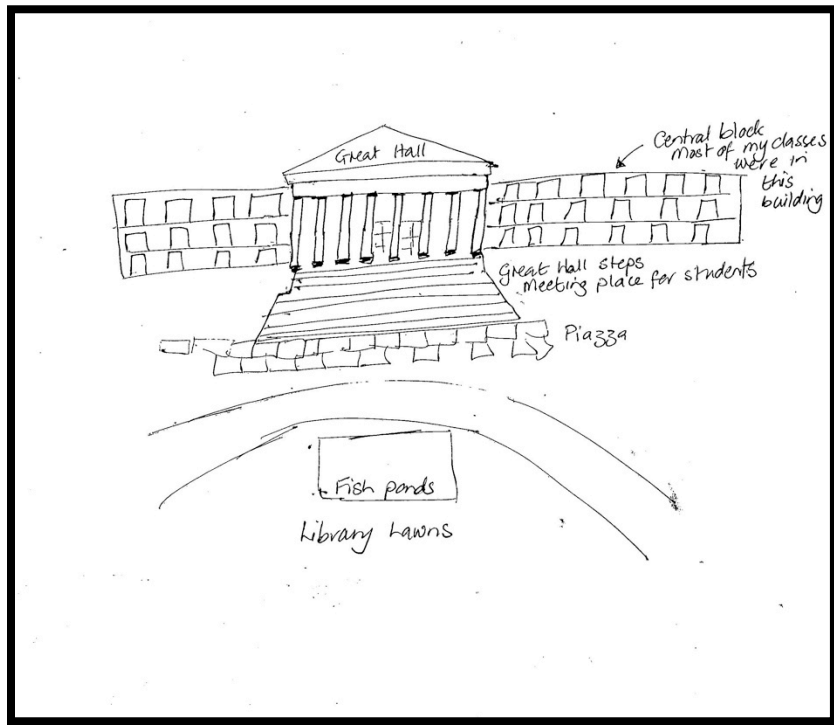

Memory Map 1: School

The Apartheid government had been in power since 1948 and all schools were segregated according to race. My parents chose to send my siblings and me to a small independent under-resourced Catholic school. My father, particularly, did not want us to be educated in the Apartheid schooling system. The Catholic Church in South Africa at the time was influenced by liberation theology, which sought to change the unjust social, economic and political conditions in the country. While the government regulated the curricula in independent schools, they could not control what was taught in the classrooms. The convent-school began as an all-white school but during my tenure there, they were one of the first schools in the country to open their doors to all races despite government legislation.

Against this background of turbulence on the sub-continent and in the country, life at school was relatively regular, methodical and stable. *Memory Map 1* shows the zoomed-in view of my life around the school and the house we lived in situated right across the road. While I loved playing sports and I excelled at extra-murals, I was not a good student and always seemed to be at odds with what was required. I had no childhood dreams of becoming a teacher and no thoughts of staying in any educational environment. Even so, one hot afternoon in the science room while Sister Beata Maria droned on about "inertia", I remember thinking: There must be a better way to teach this. I had no conception of academic life since no one in my family had a degree and many had not even finished high school.

As we got closer to our school-leaving exams, my teachers' anxieties grew. "Don't take math and science because you'll fail" said Sister Maura. I needed these academic subjects to get into university. "You're not university material anyway," she reminded me. I was also "not marriage material" because my Home Economics marks were equally as poor even though I loved cooking classes and making (poorly sewn) baby clothes. These labels never particularly distressed me because I had no ambitions for either. My father, however, insisted that I take the subjects needed for a university entrance and he told Sister Maura in no uncertain terms, so that was that. I had a good group of friends, and one especially gifted peer mentor, and it was with their help that I managed to complete school and scrape a university entrance pass.

University
After school I couldn't make up my mind what I wanted to do. Ever conscious of 'not being university material', I went to secretarial college because a friend of mine had decided to go. Teaching was still not an option for me even though my father persisted. "You'll be good at teaching," he told me. We had several 'discussions' about this but I was resolute: It was not for me. During that whole year I was at college, my father worked on me. "Go to university, try it for one year, do teaching, you'll be good at it". I did not want to teach but I finally gave in about university and decided to try it for one year. In my mind, subjects like psychology and sociology appealed to me. But once I had agreed to go, my father admitted that he couldn't afford to pay my fees (with two sisters still at the fee-paying convent) but that he thought I could apply to get a teaching bursary. We 'discussed' the issue further but by that time I was excited at the thought of university. Government-issued teaching bursaries were readily available and all a student had to do was complete a B.A. Ed and then teach in a government school for the equivalent time that the funding was granted. I was still a teenager with little thought of the future and not at all sure I would finish the four years of study anyway, so signing up for one year didn't seem too onerous.

Memory Map 2: University

As classes got underway, I realised that unlike school, this was my milieu. I understood what was required of me and I slotted right in as if the whole place was made just for me. My subject choice was limited because I was on a teaching bursary and I could only select teaching subjects. I chose History, Geography and Education as majors and I enjoyed every class. I no longer had doubts about going to university and I even began to think of myself as a future teacher. In stark contrast to school, the group of friends who had helped me survive now needed my support. The person who was 'not university material' had somehow inexplicably become very much 'university material'. The more I took education classes, the more I turned towards teaching as a career. *Memory Map 2* focuses on the Great Hall, a focal building on campus, and the steps where students often gathered. I spent many hours sitting in the sun on these steps. It was here that students and faculty collected to protest.

I went to university when the apartheid government was at its height in terms of repression and control. Any insurgence was ruthlessly repressed. The university I attended, the University of the Witwatersrand, was a staunch anti-apartheid institution. From the 1960s it fought to maintain its independence from the apartheid government despite political pressure and funding cuts. Many famous anti-apartheid activists had studied at the university including Nelson Mandela. During the 1980s, the government's response became increasingly more coercive. Peaceful student and faculty protests were met with police invasions onto campus along with rubber bullets and armed vehicles. Academics, staff and students were beaten, detained, banned or deported with regularity. Our courses exposed us to the brutal realities of apartheid hidden behind official miscommunication and smokescreens. It was no surprise that our key course "textbooks" were by Marx, Engels, Althusser, the Frankfurt School, Gramsci and Freire. Most

of these texts were banned in the country and it always surprised me to remember this because they were openly read, discussed and debated on campus. The key message of my university education was liberation from capitalist social and economic domination, particularly that of the current government.

It was with this mindset and *Das Kapital* tucked under my arm that I went on my annual teaching practicum into the ultra-conservative and reactionary apartheid school system. Without any forethought whatsoever, I had taken the three subjects at university that were the foundations of apartheid philosophy. Rewriting history to justify the need for segregation, carving up the geographical landscape and forcibly removing people to "homelands" to enforce segregation and then providing an education that ensured that the majority of the population would always be labourers to maintain economic dominance. "Bantu" education consisted of untrained teachers, teaching a specifically designed curriculum to create workers, in schools that had no electricity, running water or the most basic of learning resources. In the fully resourced white schools, the curriculum was designed to explain the rationale and logic of apartheid, and to ensure compliance. My university education had opened up history, geography and education for scrutiny. My lecturers peeled back assumptions based on race, class and economics. They exposed "norms", "traditions" and "common sense" for critical examination.

In my third year practicum, I remember walking into the history class I was due to teach and seeing a huge South African flag pinned up on the notice board at the back of the classroom alongside a picture of the prime minister. I have a vivid memory of time slowing down and the student's voices fading to white noise as the flag came into sharp focus: a flag I despised for all it represented. I remember turning to the classroom teacher and saying "I'll never have that flag in my classroom." He gave me a rueful smile. "If you teach history, you are required to have that flag in your classroom."

That was the moment of truth when I knew with certainty that I could never teach in an apartheid classroom. I could never teach history, or geography or *be* a teacher in that system. When I returned to classes at the university, I switched programmes from a BA Ed to BA Geography Honours and applied for scholarships. I used the scholarship money to pay back the teaching bursary.

Rural Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) work
After finishing a BA (Hons), I left for Canada to do a Masters and PhD. My research interests focussed on Neo-Marxism, particularly Antonio Gramsci (1971). As the apartheid government tried to wipe away African history, a "school" developed across disciplines at the University of the Witwatersrand around social history. This was the history of the ordinary African men, women and children. Not the history of great men but the stories of people who had been silenced, removed, and whose ways of living had been destroyed by racial politics in South Africa. My PhD involved reconstructing a social history of African cultural institutions in Johannesburg from 1920 to 1950. My thesis combined my three subject areas: history, geography and education. By visiting government archives, private collections and industry vaults – some no longer in existence - I sewed disparate bits of information together until it became a history that had not been documented before.

I left South Africa, not because I had a burning ambition to get a Masters or a PhD, but because I wanted to get away from the violence, the brutality and the lack of humanity. Six years later, I was drawn back again. By this time it was 1991 and South Africa was at a tipping point. No one really believed that a peaceful solution was possible and it seemed clear that civil war was immanent. But it also seemed imperative to be there. We moved to one of the 'homelands', Bophuthatswana, situated west of Johannesburg where my partner took a position at the university. While I was waiting on the outcome of an interview, one of my spouse's colleagues asked me if I would be interested in managing an adult basic education non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the poverty-ridden rural areas of Bophuthatswana. I accepted without blinking. This was practical on-the-ground work, not the theoretical in-the-mind work of the university. Here, I could make a difference. In the barren semi-desert landscape I would drive from one isolated village to another establishing adult literacy projects. This involved developing materials, training tutors, canvassing students and setting up classes for reading and writing in the local language SeTswana. With visions of a Freirian social movement, I immersed my self in the job. It was one of the most satisfying periods of my life and also the most frustrating. Learning to read or write in a context of abject poverty is pretty low on most people's lists of things to do. Tutors joined the NGO because they wanted the pitiful wage we doled out. Adult "students", often grandmothers, came because they wanted the scribbler books and pencils we gave out for free. They took these and gave them to their grandchildren to use at apartheid schools where everything had to be paid for: fees, uniforms and books. While illiteracy didn't prevent many of the people in the rural areas from eking out a living, it restricted them to low paying work. All of this against a background of people, who had been disenfranchised, subjugated and told through state legislation that they would never be 'university material'. At the NGO we struggled from one fiscal year to the next, applying for funding but never knowing if we would receive it. Some people became literate under our auspices but it was like trying to nurture a forest with one teaspoonful of water. *Memory Map 3*, in a way, illustrates my despair at the enormity of the task. It shows the two towns nearest the NGO house/office (Mmabatho and Mafikeng) and the barren landscape dotted with villages and resettlements.

Botswana

• Villages.

NGO 'office' •Mmabatha
        •Mafikeng
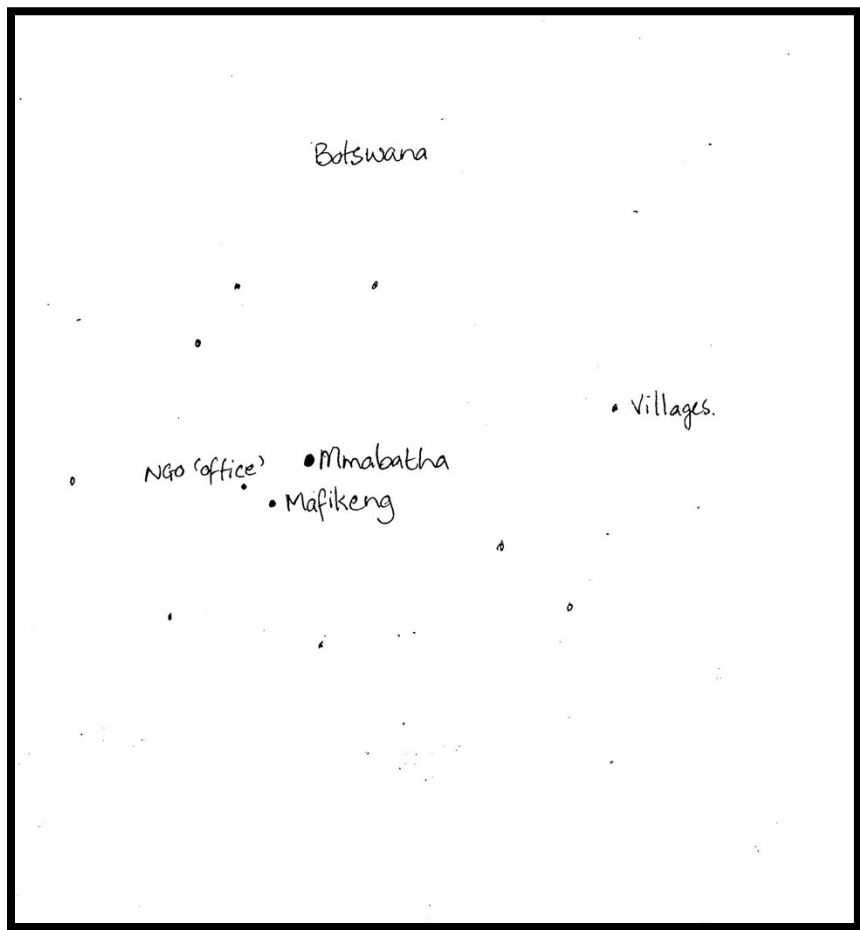
Memory Map 3: Rural NGO

In 1992, Nelson Mandela was released from prison. The impossible had become possible. As hope increased, so too did tensions. In the months before the first democratic elections, our NGO was busy with election education showing people how to vote for the first time in their lives. Now our classes were full, as everyone wanted to make their mark on April 27, 1994. In Bophuthatswana, the 'homeland' president was opposed to joining the new South Africa and he refused to have any elections held there. This sparked widespread reaction. The civil service went on strike: government offices, schools, hospitals and other government employees took to the streets in protest. Students and staff from the university soon entered the burgeoning numbers. Eventually the police also joined the strike and law and order broke down completely. Cars were burnt in the streets, roads barricaded and people with guns were running everywhere. At our NGO 'office' (a run-down house on the edge of the towns), amid the chaos of helicopters flying overhead, soldiers with AK47s and tanks rolling down the road, we focused only on getting everyone home alive albeit clutching their 'How to vote' notes.

Academic teaching
After the tensions and the elections, South Africa swung into democracy. We moved back to Johannesburg. My time at the NGO led to an involvement in re-writing adult education curricula as South Africa moved into the enormous task of redress and reparation. Alongside this was the

immense mission of writing new textbooks for all levels of education from pre-grade (Kindergarten) to post-secondary. I became more and more interested in 'writing' as I was tasked with 'translating' the emerging policy documents and the new Constitution into readable texts for school children, parents and adult learners. Several years later, just by chance, I once again found myself back at the University of the Witwatersrand: This time as an academic.
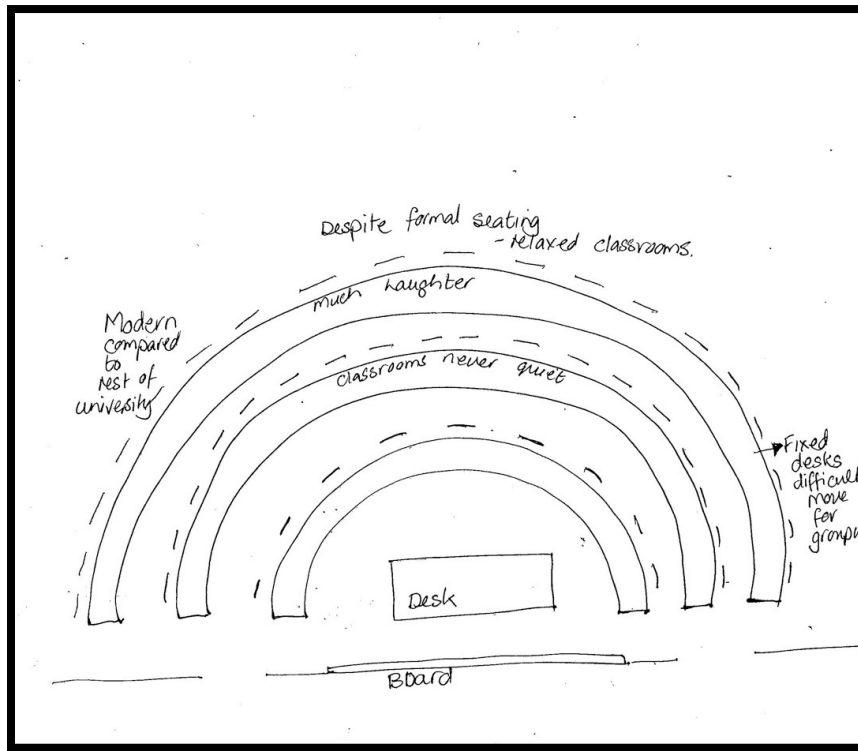
Memory Map 4: Academic teaching

The University of the Witwatersrand hired me because of my interest in writing and my experience in adult learning. I joined a school in the Management Faculty that was new and unique. The Graduate School of Public and Development Management (P&DM) had been set up immediately before the first democratic elections in 1994 because the new government would mostly consist of activists, many of whom had been exiled and others who had gone underground in South Africa. While some were highly educated, most were not. P&DM was established to educate the new civil service with graduate degrees and a broad certificate programme. "Public Administration", which was the traditional discipline for civil servants, was discredited as a result of apartheid. A civil service that was decontextualized, atheoretical and neutral is what administered the apartheid state without questioning it's actions. A paradigm shift was needed to accommodate democratic social development and black empowerment, which were the objectives of the new government. The P&DM curricula was developed with three components to meet these requirements (Hewlett, forthcoming): 1) Widening access – 'students' without previous degrees, who came from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, who were never 'university material' and did not receive university entrance certification were to be accommodated; 2) Different teaching approaches – the traditional "chalk and talk" was replaced with more participatory teaching approaches (group work, case studies, student-centred

learning, flexible participant/educator roles, relevant adult learning principles); and 3) "Administration" was no longer viable but sustainable *development* and accountable *management* became increasingly centre-stage.

Two education-focussed academics were hired to help develop and deliver curricula to meet the requirements of widening access and different teaching approaches. Multi-disciplinary academics drawn from law, political science, sociology, geography, international relations and other disciplines were hired to deliver the development management curriculum. I was one of the education-focussed academics who joined in 1998. My role specifically was to embed writing "skills" into the curriculum and to ensure that Masters students were able to complete the research component of their programme. Our initial cohorts of local activist-students began to change as peace settled on the sub-continent. Increasingly, we began to see "students" from Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique in our classrooms. Civil servants, teachers, doctors, nurses, farmers, engineers, the police and the military came to our classes to get a graduate degree in management development and to help rebuild the sub-continent. We had high-ranking personnel sitting alongside low-level personnel in the same way we had the political economy of development being taught alongside neo-liberal managerialist approaches. As shifts in South African state policy moved from reconstruction to the delivery of a developmental state, P&DM's curriculum was re-worked and revised accordingly. In my own classes, I began to link writing to research methodology and to epistemologies. Post-structural feminism and Foucault (1995) were the theoretical guides I turned to for insight and understanding. *Memory Map 4* is of one of my favourite classrooms. It was here, on a first day of class, that I would look up at the amphitheatre of seats packed to capacity with laughing, noisy and demanding learners who good-naturedly grilled me on why I thought I had the authority to teach them.

At P&DM I developed my thinking about academic writing more systematically and I consolidated my teaching and research into one stream. P&DM was an exciting place to work. I loved teaching the diverse groups of 'students' and it was enormously rewarding to see people who had never thought they "were university material", that they would ever get a degree, crossing the stage at graduation time. And yet, it was also challenging and exhausting. I worked with students on their research writing, with supervisors on how to mentor master's students and with academics who needed to publish. For many years, I thought I was a researcher first and teacher second. It was during the ten years at P&DM that I began to realise that I was passionate about teaching. When I started to conduct research in the area of my teaching, that's when writing became much easier for me.

Mass of roots
The story I have presented here looks ordered, coherent and linear. It appears as if my trajectory as a researcher was rooted in particular 'moments' (school, university, NGO work and academic teaching) that constituted a beginning-point and then developed in a logical consistent progressive manner to an end-point. It does not show the difficulty I had in extracting this narrative from the mass of narratives available to me. Nor does it tell the whole story, for example, the influence of my children or the impact of moving to Memorial and how that has shaped my identity/ies as a writer/teacher/researcher. The story presented here is chronological and appears certain, and yet sometimes the most random of decisions and chance encounters led

me along particular paths. French philosophers and post-structuralists, Deleuze & Guattari (1987) have argued that the tree-image to describe knowledge and research emphasizes linear and vertical connections and in doing so we look for the roots of things and then follow branches which are often chronological lines. The tree-image has clear beginnings and pre-determined endings. They argue that this conception of research prevents us from seeing multiple entry and exit points. They suggest a different metaphor – the rhizome – which is the subterranean root of a plant (e.g. Irises, ginger). Rhizomes send out roots and shoots, and are part of a complex net of stems that sometimes bend back into itself. Any bit of root can give rise to a new plant. Any part of a shoot or stem can give rise to a bud. Consequently, rhizomes do not have clearly defined beginnings or endings, or linear branches, or progressive growth. From this perspective, my narrative of becoming a researcher is not so much coherent and certain as it is emerging.

Hidden in the story I have presented here are shoots moving forward and then turning back, creating a layer of roots in a context of soil that fed and nurtured them. What forms the mass of roots that underpins my research ethos? I've extracted four "stems" (contours) here:

1) I always question exclusions to university classrooms whether these are individual beliefs of a 'lack of ability' or institutional beliefs of "lack of preparedness".

2) As Freire (1986) argued there is no such thing as neutral education. Education either normalises, or it becomes the means by which students begin to critically see their own position in society, forming the basis for learning how to transform that world.

3) I have a critical suspiciousness of anything considered "normal"; an enduring need to question assumptions (my own as well as others); and to always ask whose interests does this serve? While at the same time I hold an innocence about possibilities of equity, inclusivity and the benefits of difference.

4) Academic writing is a mechanism by which many people are excluded from the academy. Like other practices in academic environments, writing is shaped by accepted "norms" of particular disciplinary discourses (Lakoff, 1990). It is the way we perform academia and our academic identities. Writing is the way people become normalised but also the way to transformation. Finally, articulate intelligent people are often hamstrung by the unspoken rules and conventions of academic writing.

Rather than providing a route to certainty, post-structuralists look at the instability of systems, the openness, and the potential for chaos. Deleuze & Guattari (1987) were particularly interested in how systems mutate or *become* in a context of the instability and the open dynamism of thought. Deleuze argued that no system or vocabulary could adequately capture the chaos of life. If life, and writing, is not a closed system, then it is constantly in a state of change and renewing as it comes into contact with other influences. Writing, like a rhizome, "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). Consequently, Deleuze and Guattari do not look at what *is* but explore what is *becoming.* When we feel we have become, the process begins again. We start "to renew, to question, and to refuse remaining the same" (Colebrook, 2002, p. 8). This way of thinking appeals to me because I always feel the potential for chaos in my own research, in my identities

as teacher/researcher and in my writing. While I try to control it through chronology and extracting "themes", these constructs are always in the process of deconstruction as I am forced through engaging in life, interacting with colleagues and being challenged by students to continually question my own biased assumptions, my "taken-for-granted" certainties, my perceived consistencies in life, my "normality", and even the stems I have presented here. As Richardson (2001) argues: "what we know about the world and what we know about ourselves [is] always intertwined, partial and historical" (p.36). I do not feel like I have *become* a researcher, instead I am always in a state of becoming.

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