**Strange encounters: Reflections on authoring a doctoral thesis**

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*Writing is not an innocent practice. The technologies of writing create gendered social texts where desire, intimacy, power, class, race, ethnicity, and identity come alive.*

*(Denzin 1999)*

In this short piece, I reflect on language and the writing of my doctoral thesis as a bi-lingual student at a British university. Writing became the site where the emotionality experienced during my studies and the institutional power of existing academic structures and norms most acutely intersected. Themes of loss, gain and possibility, as well as power, resistance and submission are prominent in the reflections offered.

The production of my doctoral thesis was interwoven with numerous sites that engender challenges and tensions concerning language and the demands and norms of academic writing. These sites include: writing across two languages; the general demands of academic writing conventions for an English audience; reconciling disciplinary norms and traditions of a faculty of health and social care (were my research was carried out and examined) with feminist and anthropological textual practices; and writing a doctoral thesis, a process which reflects a particular form of knowledge production and specific academic conventions. Being a mature student and researching my own profession adds further dimensions.

My research explored the practice and use of Western herbal medicine (WHM), a 'holistic', alternative healthcare modality. The metaphor of a 'spider's web' is frequently drawn on in the rhetoric of alternative approaches to health and healthcare and also in feminist discourses about women's lives, highlighting the centrality of relationality and human interdependence in both contexts. While practising and teaching herbal medicine I often drew on the metaphor of the web to explain the breadth and depth of enquiry in WHM, and my initial concept for the presentation of empirical chapters built on the spider's web. In using this metaphor inflected with ties, knots and inter/connections, and also strength and flexibility, I intended to convey the importance of relationality to women's practice and use of WHM. In this, I followed Callaway (1992: 29) who observes: 'The language we use [...] becomes one of the first areas of critical awareness in seeing the implications of gender for the "translation" of other cultures'.

My mother tongue - German - also mirrors the intricacies of webs. Its grammar, syntax and writing conventions facilitate the expression of complex and multi-layered thoughts, ideas and experiences in one, or a few, sentence/s. In early drafts I crafted multi-faceted sentences and paragraphs in order to communicate the multi-layered relationships in women's lives, to express the conceptual intricacies in WHM, and to approximate the complexity and nuances of my reading, description and analysis. That is, though writing in English, 'embodied' modes of thought and expression resonated with my research engagement.

Invariably, readers advised me to 'unpack' sentences and paragraphs, to 'simplify' and write 'short sentences'. The need to produce a 'reader-friendly' text that 'tells a story' was repeatedly reiterated. I vividly recall my sense of frustration on reading feedback such as 'unpack', 'this sentence is too long' or 'this paragraph is too dense' in the margins. A short entry in my research journal captures my increasing irritation:

*I feel exasperated! How can a sentence comprised of S[ubject] - O[bject] - V[erb] and not much else possibly be anything but  simplistic and lacking in depth??? The very word 'unpack' infuriates me and engenders feelings of being infantilised. 'Unpack' - what does it****mean****?*

Several months later, I record:

*I can now pinpoint almost 100% accurately the sentences and paragraphs which will be [...] considered to be in need of 'unpacking' and simplifying. However, whenever I do do the 'unpacking' I lose a layer (or two or three) of my intended expression, subtlety of thinking, processing and descriptions. The word that keeps coming to mind is 'impoverishment', due to lack of precision, subtlety, complexity, and a profound absence of 'flow'. While I may be gaining greater clarity of expression on some levels, I lose a sense of the intricacies and connectedness of it all. [...] I feel [...] wary of the power of hegemonic practices. [...] Even more acutely, I fear losing any potential for creative thinking, playfulness and imagination.*

Over time my focus shifts from the spiders' web to individual 'threads' that make up the web. This can be seen as a response to my readers' ongoing exhortations to simplify and 'unpack' my writing, and thus to produce a reader-friendly text, and increasing analytical depth. Gradually the metaphor of the 'journey' gains prominence - individual journeys, journeys consisting of individual paths, steps and stages, journeys of individuals. Like a red thread, 'journeys' wind their way through the final ethnography and shape the 'story' of the thesis. This shift signals to me a move from complexity to linearity. More precisely, an intermediate layer of linearity is superimposed on the complexities I cherish in herbal medicine and in linguistic expression. To me, the metaphor of the journey suggests a predetermined end point, though I recognise that for others it may conjure up associations of process, multiple directions and diversions. To me, the metaphor of the journey does not reflect the richness of the multi-layered relationships I aim to express, nor echo the complex conceptual challenges I struggle with. Progressively, and almost imperceptively, I cease to articulate the fluidity and complexity of my research topic. The language I use begins to create a particular view of the phenomena I interrogate.

Operating on this intermediate layer feels like the painstaking process of applying the rules of a new language. This new language is the language of written, academic English where 'I'm constantly on the lookout for breathing spaces to deal with the fact that I can't express what I have in mind' (Ugresic 2005: 9). The use of this language is an ongoing process of success and failure. Alongside is also resistance. I experiment with how far I can go before 'unpack', 'simplify' or 'too dense' appear on the margins of drafts. I try to subvert the imposed constraints by pushing the limits of punctuation in the vain hope that this will offer me some respite from the fragmentation and truncation of my thoughts. I attempt extremely short sentences, but cannot carry it off in any meaningful way. Looking back, I realise that my readers were equally on 'the lookout for breathing spaces', simply because they could not find *their*familiar and normative conventions in this 'strange encounter' (Ahmed 2000) where we do not speak/write/embody the same language.

One day, a senior academic remarks that since my thesis will be judged within British academia I will have to accept the normative conventions and expectations - should I want to achieve a doctorate. Following this stark invocation of institutional power I surrender. I inscribe the linguistic, academic and disciplinary norms in my emerging thesis, 'writing out' the 'messy' and complex that is considered troubled and troubling. I perform rather than author. Yet somehow, traces of my silent/silenced efforts remain in the interstices of the text. This 'ground-level guerilla warfare against the repressive structures' (Denzin 1999: 572) becomes emblematic of how the existing academic structures and regimes become embedded in my identity and subject position of 'researcher', as much as of how I inscribe myself int these same structures and regimes. Writing thus becomes a constant reminder that 'the personal is political'.

Today, I still long for the intricacies, richness and 'flow' that expression in a language with different writing conventions might permit, and I continue to mourn the loss of the 'spider's web' in response to the requirements of academic English. Yet, the language/writing (and other) skills acquired during my doctoral studies are but one tool that serve to shape my particular ways of knowing, doing and writing research, of be(com)ing a researcher. Thinking, speaking and feeling - living - in this new language of written academic English, embodying and inhabiting this researcher-self offers another way of being in the world, another way of being suspended in a web of significance in search of meaning (Geertz 1973).

**References**

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