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Working the Hyphens  
*Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research*

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(1994)

I am waiting for them to stop talking about the "Other," to stop even describing how important it is to be able to speak about difference. It is not just important what we speak about, but how and why we speak. Often this speech about the "Other" is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences, that space where our words would be if we were speaking, if there were silence, if we were there. This "we" is that "us" in the margins, that "we" who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance. Enter that space. Often this speech about the "Other" annihilates, erases: "no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and you are now at the center of my talk." Stop. (hooks, 1990, pp. 151-152)

qualitative research projects have *Othered* and to examine an emergent set of activist and/or post-modern texts that interrupt *Othering*. First, I examine the hyphen at which Self-Other join in the politics of everyday life, that is, the hyphen that both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others. I then take up how qualitative researchers work this hyphen. Here I gather a growing set of works on "inscribing the Other," viewing arguments that critical, feminist, and/or Third World scholars have posed about social science as a tool of domination. This section collects a messy series of questions about methods, ethics, and epistemologies as we rethink how researchers have spoken "of" and "for" Others while occluding ourselves and our own investments, burying the contradictions that percolate at the Self-Other hyphen.

A renewed sense of possibility breathes in the next section, in which I present discussion of qualitative research projects designed for social change. Here readers engage narratives written against *Othering*, analyzing not just the decontextualized voices of Others, but the very structures, ideologies, contexts, and practices that constitute *Othering* (Bhavnani, 1992). Qualitative researchers interested in self-consciously working the hyphen—

Much of qualitative research has reproduced, if contradiction-filled, a colonizing discourse of the "Other." This essay is an attempt to review how

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that is, unpacking notions of scientific neutrality, universal truths, and researcher dispassion—will be invited to imagine how we can braid critical and contextual struggle back into our texts (Bura-woy et al., 1992; Fine & Vanderslice, 1992).

This essay is designed to rupture the textual laminations within which Others have been sealed by social scientists, to review the complicity of researchers in the construction and distancing of Others, and to identify transgressive possibilities inside qualitative texts.

### Selves-Others: Co-constructions at the Hyphen

In September 1989, my niece was sexually assaulted by a department store security officer. He caught her shoplifting and then spent two hours threatening her with prison, legal repercussions, and likely abuse at the hands of other women in prison. She had just turned 16, and half believed him. Filled with terror, she listened for 90 minutes of what would later be determined "unlawful detainment." He offered her a deal, "Give me what women give men and I'll let you go." Surprised, shocked, understanding but not fully, she asked, "What do you mean?" She refused. For another 30 minutes he persisted. Tears, threats, and terror were exchanged. She agreed, ultimately, after he showed her a photo album of "girls who did it." Sheepishly, and brilliantly, she requested that he "get a condom."

March 5, 1992. We won the criminal case for sexual assault, and we are pursuing a civil suit against the department store. Tomorrow my niece is going to be deposed by the store's lawyers. She is, by now, 19, a new mother, living with her longtime boyfriend/father of the baby. She is Latina, and was adopted from Colombia into our middle-class Jewish family 12 years ago.

Writing this essay, I find myself ever conscious about how I participate in constructing Others. Tonight I listen to myself collude in the splitting of Jackie, my niece—the dissection of her adolescent, Latina, female body/consciousness. Family, friends, lawyers, and unsolicited advisers subtly, persistently, and uncomfortably work to present her as white/Jewish (not Latina), sexually innocent (not mother), victim (not shoplifter), the object of male aggression. Stories of her new baby, sexuality, reproductive history, desires, and pains, we all nod across cities, should probably be avoided in her testimony.

At some point in the phone call I realize our collusion in her Othering, and I realize that Jackie has long since grown accustomed to this dynamic. Her life has been punctuated by negotiations at

the zippered borders of her gendered, raced, and classed Otherhood. As the good (adopted) granddaughter, daughter, and niece, she always has, and does again, split for us. In a flash I remember that when she was picked up for shoplifting she gave her Spanish name to the police, not the English name she had used for nine years.

Sitting within and across alienating borders, Jackie is now being asked to draw her self-as-good-middle-class-white-woman and to silence her Other-as-bad-Latina-unwed-mother. Valerie Smith (1991) would call these "split affinities." Jackie the Latina street girl had to stay out of court because Jackie the white middle-class young lady was escorted in. That night on the phone we were all circling to find a comfortable (for whom?) space for representation. We struggled with what bell hooks (1990) would call a *politics of location*:

Within a complex and ever shifting realities of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, of making culture, toward that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible? (p. 145)

No surprise, Jackie danced through the deposition shining with integrity, style, and passion. She told all as proud mother, lover, daughter, niece, and survivor. With a smile and a tear, she resisted their, and she resisted our, Othering.

Jackie mingled her autobiography with our surveilled borders on her Self and the raced and gendered legal interpretations of her Other by which she was surrounded. She braided them into her story, her deposition, which moved among "hot spots" and "safe spots." She slid from victim to survivor, from naive to coy, from deeply experienced young woman to child. In her deposition she dismantled the very categories I so worried we had constructed as sedimented pillars around her, and she wandered among them, pivoting her identity, her self-representations, and, therefore, her audiences. She became neither the Other nor the Same. Not even zippered. Her mobile positioning of contradictions could too easily be written off to the inconsistencies of adolescence. Maybe that's why she ultimately won the settlement for damages. But she would better be viewed as an honest narrator of multiple poststructural selves speaking among themselves, in front of an audience searching relentlessly for pigeonholes.

I think again about Jackie as I read a recent essay on ethnicity, identity, and difference written by Stuart Hall. Hall (1991) takes up this conversation by reviewing the representations that have seasoned his autobiography:

History changes your conception of yourself. Thus, another critical thing about identity is that it is partly the relationship between you and the Other. Only when there is an Other can you know who you are. To discover the fact is to discover and unlock the whole enormous history of nationalism and of racism. Racism is a structure of discourse and representation that tried to expel the Other symbolically—blot it out, put it over there in the Third World, at the margin. (p. 16)

Hall traces the strands of his "self" through his raced and classed body. Recognizing that representations of his selves are always politically situated, he sees them also as personally negotiated. For Hall, the Self constructs as the Other is invented. In this passage, however, Hall appears to slide between two positions. In one, he sees Self and Other as fluid. The other requires the fixing of an Other in order for Self to be constituted. Ironically, by stipulating the binary opposition, Hall reproduces the separation and detours away from investigating what is "between." Unearthing the blurred boundaries "between," as Jackie understood, constitutes a critical task for qualitative researchers.

Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1986) extend this conversation when they take up an analysis of *home* as a site for constituting Self and for expelling Others. They write:

The tension between the desire for home, for synchrony, for sameness and the realization of the repressions and violence that make home, harmony, sameness imaginable, and that enforce it, is made clear in the movement of the narrative by very careful and effective reversals which do not erase the positive desire for unit, for Oneness, but destabilize and undercut it. . . .

The relationship between the loss of community and the loss of self is crucial. To the extent that identity is collapsed with home and community and based on homogeneity and comfort, on skin, blood and heart, the giving up of home will necessarily mean the giving up of self and vice versa (pp. 208-209)

These writers acknowledge that Self and Other reside on opposite sides of the same door. Home and the "real world" are successfully split. The former codes comfort, whereas the latter flags danger. Othering helps us deny the dangers that loiter inside our homes. Othering keeps us from seeing the comforts that linger outside.

As I write this essay, the *New York Times* lands on the front porch. Another perverse splitting of Identity and Othering explodes on the front page. Lesbian women and gay men in New York City have been informed that they will not be allowed to march in this year's St. Patrick's Day parade.

One parade marshal explained, "To be Irish is to know the difference between men and women's characteristics." Ethnic community is being consolidated, whitewashed, through sexual exclusion. At a time when white working-class men and women are struggling to define themselves as whole, to locate their terror outside, and hold some Other responsible for their plight at the hands of late capitalism, we witness public rituals of race purification. A fragile collective identity is secured through promiscuous assaults on Others (African Americans? Asian Americans? women? lesbian women? gay men?) (see Weis, 1990). The exploitations endured today are protected/projected onto Others of varied colors, classes, sexualities, and bodies.

Self and Other are knottily entangled. This relationship, as lived between researchers and informants, is typically obscured in social science texts, protecting privilege, securing distance, and laminating the contradictions. Despite denials, qualitative researchers are always implicated at the hyphen. When we opt, as has been the tradition, simply to write *about* those who have been Othered, we deny the hyphen. Slipping into a contradictory discourse of individualism, personalogic theorizing, and de-contextualization, we inscribe the Other, strain to white out Self, and refuse to engage the contradictions that litter our texts.

When we opt, instead, to engage in social struggles *with* those who have been exploited and subjugated, we work the hyphen, revealing far more about ourselves, and far more about the structures of Othering. Eroding the fixedness of categories, we and they enter and play with the blurred boundaries that proliferate.

By *working the hyphen*, I mean to suggest that researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations. I mean to invite researchers to see how these "relations between" get us "better" data, limit what we feel free to say, expand our minds and constrict our mouths, engage us in intimacy and seduce us into complicity, make us quick to interpret and hesitant to write. Working the hyphen means creating occasions for researchers and informants to discuss what is, and is not, "happening between," within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence.

### Inscribing the Other

Studies which have as their focal point the alleged deviant attitudes and behaviors of Blacks are

grounded within the racist assumptions and principles that only render Blacks open to further exploitation. The challenge to social scientists for a redefinition of the basic problem has been raised in terms of the "colonial analogy." It has been argued that the relationship between the researcher and his subjects, by definition, resembles that of the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research, and, to some extent, the quality of interaction between him and his subjects. This inability to understand and research the fundamental problem, neo-colonialism, prevents most social researchers from being able accurately to observe and analyze Black life and culture and the impact racism and oppression have upon Blacks. Their inability to understand the nature and effects of neo-colonialism in the same manner as Black people is rooted in the inherent bias of the social sciences. (Ladner, 1971, p. vii)

Joyce Ladner warned us more than 20 years ago about the racism, bred and obscured, at the Self-Other hyphen of qualitative research. Ladner knew then that texts that sought the coherence of Master Narratives needed, and so created, Others. The clean edges of those narratives were secured by the frayed borders of the Other. The articulate professional voice sounded legitimate against the noisy dialect of the Other. The rationality of the researcher/writer domesticated the outrage of the Other. These texts sought to close contradictions, and by so doing they tranquilized the hyphen, ousting the Other.

Master Narratives seek to preserve the social order while obscuring the privileged stances/investments of writers:

Within the discourse of modernity, the Other not only sometimes ceases to be a historical agent, but is often defined within totalizing and universalistic theories that create a transcendental rational White, male Eurocentric subject that both occupies the centers of power while simultaneously appearing to exist outside of time and space. Read against this Eurocentric transcendental subject, the Other is shown to lack any redeeming community traditions collective voice of historical weight—and is reduced to the imagery of the colonizer. (Giroux, 1991, p. 7)

The imperialism of such scholarship is evident in terms of whose lives get displayed and whose lives get protected by social science. Put another way, why don't we know much about how the rich live? Why don't we study whiteness? How do "their" and "our" lives get investigated (and not)? Whose stories are presented as if "naturally" self-revealing and whose stories are surrounded by "compensatory" theory? Whose "dirty linen," as

Yvonna Lincoln would put it, gets protected by such work?

Two years ago, a student of mine, Nancy Porter, asked me if she could design a dissertation around the gendered and classed lives of elite white women. I was embarrassed that I had somehow set up an expectation among students that poverty was "in." Could I really have conveyed that wealth was a bore? Nonetheless, with my blessings and to her delight, she, a professional golfer with lots of access, proceeded to conduct deep qualitative interviews with rich, "registered" Main Line women of Philadelphia, only to learn that the very discourse of wealthy women constricts and betrays few wrinkles, problems, or any outstanding features. These women describe themselves as if they were "typical," don't talk about money, and rarely reveal any domestic or interpersonal difficulties. Only if divorced will they discuss heterosexuality and gender relations critically. Nancy and I soon began to understand that there had been a collusion between social researchers committed to sanitizing/neglecting the elite through scholarly omission and an elite discourse of comfort and simplicity which conveys a relatively bump-free story of their lives. Protected then, twice, by the absence of social surveillance—in welfare offices, from public agencies, through social researchers—and the absence of a scholarly discourse on their dysfunctionality, the elite, with their "new class" academic colleagues, retain a corpus of social science material that fingers Them while it powders the faces of Us.

The social sciences have been, and still are, long on texts that inscribe some Others, preserve other Others from scrutiny, and seek to hide the researcher/writer under a veil of neutrality or objectivity. With the publication of Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture* (1986) came an explosion of attention to the domination encoded in such texts, and to the troubling transparency of ethnographers and writers. Although it is most problematic that Clifford and Marcus exclude the work of feminists, the essays in their volume confirm the costs in theory and praxis that devolve from the insistence that ethnographic distance be preferred over authentic engagement. By so doing, *Writing Culture* marks a significant moment in the biography of studying Others, documenting the complicity of ethnographic projects in the narration of colonialism.

A close look at these tensions is offered in Mary Louise Pratt's (1985) analysis of early travel journals. Pratt argues that within these texts, "natives" were portrayed through multiple discourses, typically as if they were "amenable to domination" and had great "potential as a labor pool" (p. 139). Written to "capture" the essence of "natives," these journals allowed little interruption and less

evidence of leakage, sweat, pleasure, oppression, rude or polite exchanges in the creation of the manuscripts. These journals were written as if there were no constructing narrators. Disinterested translators simply photographed local practices and customs. Pratt (1985) reproduces John Mandeville's *Travels* (circa 1350):

Men and women of that isle have heads like hounds; and they are called Cynocephales. This folk, thereof all they be of such shape, yet they are fully reasonable and subtle of wit. . . . And they gang all naked but a little cloth before their privy members. They are large of stature and good warriors, and they bear a great target, with which they cover all their body, and a long spear in their hand. (p. 139)

Pratt comments:

Any reader recognizes here a familiar, widespread, and stable form of "othering." The people to be othered are homogenized into a collective "they," which is distilled even further into an iconic "he" (the standardized adult male specimen). This abstracted "he"/"they" is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense, which characterizes anything "he" is or does not as a particular historical event but as an instance of pre-given custom or trait. (p. 139)

Qualitative researchers then, and most now, produce texts through Donna Haraway's (1988) "god trick," presuming to paint the Other from "nowhere." Researchers/writers self-consciously carry no voice, body, race, class, or gender and no interests into their texts. Narrators seek to shelter themselves in the text, as if they were transparent (Spivak, 1988). They recognize no hyphen.

Analogous to Pratt's project on travel journals, sociologist Herb Gans has written and worried about the more recent dense body of work produced on "the underclass." This flourishing area of research has legitimated the category, even amidst multiple slippery frames. Poor adults and children have been codified as Others, as the broader culture is being prepared for a permanent caste of children and adults beyond redemption. Social science has been the intellectual handmaiden for this project, serving to anesthetize the culture with cognitive distinctions that help split the species. These same constructions may, of course, be producing their own subversions, resistances, and transgressions, but, for the moment, "we" don't have to see, smell, hear, feel, or respond to "them." The material and discursive hyphens, again, are being denied.

Michael Katz (1993) narrates a similar story about the historic encoding, within social scientific debates, of the "(un)deserving poor." Katz traces representations of the poor across social

science debates and public policies. He argues that social scientists have insinuated moral boundaries of deservingness that thread research and policy, enabling researchers, policy makers, and the public to believe that we can distinguish (and serve) those who are "deserving" and neglect honorably those who are "undeserving" and poor.

We confront, then, one legacy of social research that constructs, legitimates, and distances Others, banishing them to the margins of the culture. Sometimes these texts are used to deprive Them of services; always to rob Them of whole, complex, humanity. Although these portraits of subjugation may be internally slippery, they cohere momentarily around deficiencies, around who they are not. These Others are represented as unworthy, dangerous, and immoral, or as pitiable, victimized, and damaged.

There is, too, a growing postcolonial critique of Othering directed at those literatures written presumably "for" Others. Homi Bhabha (1990), for instance, unravels "nation-centered" discourses that weave ideologies of "common culture." To assure their hermetic seals, he argues these cultures are written in ways that essentialize and silence women's bodies and stories. Like Cornel West (1988) and Kimberle Crenshaw (1992), Bhabha takes affront at "common culture" discourses made coherent by "the subsumption or sublation of social antagonism. . . . the repression of social divisions. . . . the power to authorize an 'impersonal' holistic or universal discourse on the representation of the social that naturalizes cultural difference and turns it into a 'second' nature argument" (p. 242). Thus even "for" Others there are growing, stifling discourses that essentialize to map culture.

At the root of this argument, whether Othering is produced "on" or "for," qualitative researchers need to recognize that our work stands in some relation to Othering. We may self-consciously or not decide *how* to work the hyphen of Self and Other, how to gloss the boundaries between, and within, slippery constructions of Others. But when we look, get involved, demur, analyze, interpret, probe, speak, remain silent, walk away, organize for outrage, or sanitize our stories, and when we construct our texts in or on their words, we decide how to nuance our relations with/for/despite those who have been deemed Others. When we write essays about subjugated Others as if *they* were a homogeneous mass (of vice or virtue), free-floating and severed from contexts of oppression, and as if we were neutral transmitters of voices and stories, we tilt toward a narrative strategy that reproduces Othering on, despite, or even "for." When we construct texts collaboratively, self-consciously examining our relations with/for/despite those who have been contained as Others, we move against, we enable resistance to, Othering.

This is no simple binary opposition of Self and Other, nor of texts that inscribe and texts that resist. There is no easy narrative litmus for Othering. Contradictions litter all narrative forms. And all narratives about Others both inscribe and resist othering. Yet in becoming self-conscious of work at the hyphen, researchers can see a history of qualitative research that has been deeply colonial, surveilling, and exotic (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Pratt, 1985, 1992; Rosaldo, 1989). Now that the subjects of U.S. ethnography have come home, qualitative accounts of urban and rural, poverty-stricken and working-class, white and of color America flourish. Through these texts, the Other survives next door. But the privileges, interests, biographies, fetishes, and investments of researchers typically remain subtext, buried, protected (Harding, 1987; Haraway, 1988).

Renato Rosaldo (1989) contends that there are no "innocent" ethnographers. When innocence is sought, Rosaldo writes, the "eye of ethnography [often connects with] the I of imperialism" (p. 41). The project at hand is to unravel, critically, the blurred boundaries in our relation, and in our texts; to understand the political work of our narratives; to decipher how the traditions of social science serve to inscribe; and to imagine how our practice can be transformed to resist, self-consciously, acts of othering. As these scenes of translation vividly convey, qualitative researchers are chronically and uncomfortably engaged in ethical decisions about how deeply to work with/for/despite those cast as Others, and how seamlessly to represent the hyphen. Our work will never "arrive" but must always struggle "between."

### Writing Against Othering

I too think the intellectual should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressures and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be the witness to their mendacity. . . . An intellectual is always at odds with hard and fast categories, because these tend to be instruments used by the victors. (Havel, 1990, p. 167)

In contrast to "hard and fast" texts that inscribe and commodify Others, we move now to a set of texts that self-consciously interrupt Othering, that force a radical rethinking of the ethical and political relations of qualitative researchers to the objects/subjects of our work. In this section I review three chunks of work that write against Othering.

First, I present those texts that insert "uppity" voices, stances, and critiques to interrupt Master Narratives (see Austin, 1989; Fanon, 1965; Fine, 1992; hooks, 1989; Rollins, 1985). Often, but not always, these are essays written about and by women of color, situated at the intersection of race and gender oppression (Crenshaw, 1992).

Second, I examine texts in which qualitative researchers dissect elites' constructions of Self and Other. Listening to elites as they manicure them-Selves through Othering, we hear the voices of white fraternity brothers interviewed by Peggy Sanday (1990), white high school boys in Lois Weis's (1990) analysis of "working class without work," and nondisabled researchers' analysis of persons with disabilities, projecting their existential and aesthetic anxieties onto the bodies of disabled Others (Hahn, 1983). In each instance, the words of elites are analyzed by researchers as they evince a discourse of Othering. This work enables us to eavesdrop on privileged consciousness as it seeks to peel Self off of Other.

The third chunk of writing against Othering comprises those texts that press social research for social activism. Engaged with struggles of social transformation, these researchers raise questions about the ethics of involvement and the ethics of detachment, the illusions of objectivity and the borders of subjectivity, and the possibilities of collaborative work and the dilemmas of collusion (Burawoy et al., 1992; Fine & Vanderslice, 1992; Kitzinger, 1991; Lykes, 1989).

From the qualitative works discussed here surfaces the next generation of ethical and epistemological questions for qualitative researchers committed to projects of social justice. These writers/researchers mark a space of analysis in which the motives, consciousness, politics, and stances of informants and researchers/writers are rendered contradictory, problematic, and filled with transgressive possibilities.

#### Scene 1: Rupturing Texts With Uppity Voices

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) contends that academics/researchers can do little to correct the "material wrongs of colonialism." She argues that "in the face of the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow, a possibility of political practice for the intellectual would be to put the economic 'under erasure'" (p. 280). Like bell hooks and Joan Scott, Spivak asks that researchers stop trying to *know* the Other or *give voice to* the Other (Scott, 1991) and listen, instead, to the plural voices of those Othered, as constructors and agents of knowledge.

