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5. COLLABORATIVE STORY TELLING

The Poetry of Everyday Life and the Challenge of Transcription

LADY GAGA AND ME

and That was the kind of Thing that I – that My Dream was
that it was Never going to be Dry and Stale that it was going to be Open
and Fluid
that Lots of you know we Didn't have to s- Start out and say "we're going to
Work on
eduCation and empLoyment" that We were just going to be Open and we were
Just going to
– you Know
we were going to Go where the work Took us and we were going to be
Guided by what Women were Coming in and Telling us

These words were spoken by my friend, "Lady Gaga" (a self-chosen pseudonym), as part of her response to my research invitation to, "Tell me a story of voice that has some significance to you as a feminist community activist". We had first met through a solidarity exchange between feminists from Tanzania and Ireland, reclaiming women's community education for grassroots feminist movement through neoliberal times. One evening in Mwanza, after asking me to tell her about my PhD research, Lady Gaga said, "I want to be involved".

In this chapter, I attend as a feminist researcher to some radical methodological implications of a collaborative ethic for the *textuality* of critical educational research, particularly transcription. Guidance abounds on "writing up" research. Yet, even as Lady Gaga tells of being "Guided by what Women were Coming in and Telling us", a collaborative research ethic insists on hearing and being guided by what *she* is telling me. Such hearings and tellings are mediated, not only by story-telling processes, but in moving from the oral/aural into writing.

My concern is to critique and recreate the links between pedagogy, political agency and research. A research link of collaboration means seriously responding to the ontological, epistemological and political ramifications of Lady Gaga's dream, including for textual representation. I contend that textuality risks being a "Dry and Stale" aspect of research practice, its normative impulse to fix potentially

undermining the “Open and Fluid” political possibilities of unofficial pedagogies. I focus on transcription as one precarious site of linkage charged with political and creative import for embodied connections.

I first link Lady Gaga’s approach to critical pedagogy with Cavarero’s (2000) and Tamboukou’s (2008) Arendtian-informed feminist philosophy of the “narratable self”, before outlining my own collaborative methodology based on the narrative practices of White and Epston (1990). I then discuss the ontological challenges of transcription based on the “devocalisation of logos” (Cavarero, 2005, p. 42). This sets the terms of my poetic transcription which adapts the punctuation practices of poet Emily Dickinson. I assert that critically negotiating the oral-writing move can unsettle sedimented histories of language and science, affording a research position of remembering and responding to already present pedagogical possibilities of transformation.

THE NARRATABLE SELF

“*Tell me a story ...*”. My invitation to Lady Gaga is, of course, no academic contrivance. It belongs to the human condition itself. What Cavarero (2000) calls “the familiar sense of the narratable self” (p. 35) relates to “the type of story whose tale finds itself at home in the kitchen, during a coffee-break, or perhaps on the train” (p. 53).

Adult education research has benefited from and contributed to the social sciences’ “narrative turn”. But Cavarero’s concept of the self as *narratable* attends to something other than the more typical analyses of narrative content and structures. Her point is not so much the story itself, or the strategies of its construction, but the knowledge that the other *has* a story “even when we do not know their story at all” (2000, p. 34). This *a priori* knowledge of narratability infuses both narrative research methodologies, and critical pedagogies of the personal as political.

Narratability relates to Hannah Arendt’s (1958) question, “who are you?”, addressed to a unique existent, “*here and now*, in flesh and bone, this and not another” (Cavarero, 2000, p. 90, original emphasis). Cavarero notes that the *you* is ignored, both by individualistic philosophies concerned with the *I*, and their critics who tend to privilege collective pronouns of *we* (p. 90). However, to ask “who are you?” enacts an embodied relationality, opening the “subjective in-between” of “the ‘web’ of human relationships” (Arendt, 1958, p. 183). This fragile web is the ontological condition of Arendt’s distinctive notion of the political, a site of “reciprocal appearance ... each one *for* and *with* another” (Cavarero, 2000, p. 90, original emphasis).

For Cavarero (2000), the Arendtian political finds a historical realization in feminist consciousness-raising groups, whose uniqueness is in the intersection of politics and narration. It also involves pedagogy. Describing the aim of women returning to adult education as to “think that my ‘I’ exists”, Cavarero distinguishes between “mere empirical existence” and “ontological affirmation” (p. 56). In

explicitly feminist contexts, women's stories intertwine on the "shared scene of co-appearance", allowing them "to deconstruct a point of view on the world, which claims to be neutral, but in reality conforms largely to masculine desires and needs" (p. 60).

Lady Gaga joins Cavarero in asserting the narratability of self as a feminist pedagogical and political condition:

And you Know
 there's a Space for Women to be Able to
 Just to feel Free to to Talk about
 Their Life exPerience and where there'd be Some valiDation
 ... we Say to Women "the Only thing you have to Bring is yourSelves
 And a Willingness to Share some of your Life exPeriences"
 and then We kind of Hang it on a Feminist FrameWork
 we proVide a feminist framework that they can Hang their exPeriences On
 and See it in aNother Way

 but it Is aBout
 it's Really aBout their Women's Stories themSelves
 and That's what we kind of Wanted we Wanted something that women wouldn't
 feel they had to do
 a Course and do Homework or do Writing or
 y'Know Go outSide their comMunity to Do Something y'Know?

The narratable self marks three key ontological shifts from standard narratology. Firstly, paralleling Lady Gaga's valorization of sharing stories rather than writing, Cavarero (2000) contests the paradigm of textuality informing contemporary narratology. She distinguishes the ontological status of the narratable self from the text of her story. When written narratives set the terms for understanding story-telling, then "the text ... wins out over life" (p. 42).

Secondly, this requires a narrative analytics which abandons "the sequential canon" of stories with beginnings and endings (Tamboukou, 2008). Sharing stories creates "conditions of possibility for more stories to emerge" (p. 284), accenting the process of making connections. For Tamboukou, like Lady Gaga, this means the analysis is "finally attentive to the fluidity and openness of narratives, the virtual forces that surround them, the silences and the unsaid" (p. 290).

Thirdly, identity cannot now be collapsed into narrative through, say, "narrative identity". In the expressive flux of story-telling, the narratable self exposes herself "to the becoming-time of existence" (Cavarero, 2000, pp. 38–39). Indeed, Tamboukou's (2008) feminist political subject is a "nomadic narratable self" whose condition is defined by what has *escaped* molar formations (such as patriarchy) in the "molecular counter-formations": "I am considering the self as a threshold, a door, a becoming between multiplicities, an effect of a dance between power and desire, nomadic and yet narratable" (p. 285).

COLLABORATIVE STORY-TELLING

But if the narratable self links the pedagogical and political in feminist contexts, how does it link with research? Already I have left hanging firstly the research conditions of story-telling, and secondly its turning into text. But therein lies a conundrum. A key research marker – producing a text – has been problematized. Moreover, both research moments are implicated, being not, after all, distinct or sequential. The *anticipation* of a textual analysis binds normative approaches to the research interview, closing nomadic possibilities through the “interview schedule”. Even complex, multi-storied exchanges demonstrated by post-structuralist researchers are usually based on *post*-interview analysis of interview texts (Speedy, 2008). This raises the question for Speedy of how co-constructed interviews with people might be carried out in practice.

The question speaks to the desires of critical educational researchers to do research *with* rather than *about* people. I found a response in the post-structuralist narrative therapeutic practices of White and Epston (1990). They attend to meanings generated “in the *there and then* of the conversation” (Speedy, 2008, p. 61, original emphasis) through a collaborative inquiry emerging from people’s own words. Following Foucault (1980), their purpose – and mine too – is the “insurrection” of “subjugated knowledges” against the effects of institutional power. A practice of “double listening” means inquiring about dominant stories and their effects, but also “alternative” stories of resistance. These counter-stories are amplified through a purposive social practice of “re-membering” which facilitates recognitions of knowledge, skills and values cogenerated in the relationships of people’s lives (White, 2007).

As a research methodology, these practices link critical pedagogy with research because the interview context too becomes an open site of analysis and knowledge co-production. This linking is not a welding of two abstracted planes. It is a joining which finds itself rather in the embodied particularity of Lady Gaga and me, here and now together. The research moment enacts a scene familiar to us both: telling and listening to stories, lingering together in their territories of meaning, deconstructing the taken for granted in an explicitly feminist context.

When I ask Lady Gaga then to, “Tell me a story of voice that has some significance to you as a feminist community activist”, she begins by telling me about facilitating a ‘Training for Transformation’ session. Into the space between us she introduces the voices of women who powerfully contest the predetermined agendas of official ‘consultation’ practices. I listen to her intensely, to the cadences of her voice, trying to be alive to the generative possibilities of the moment. Neither of us stays still. We move in a flux of new responses, new moments and new becomings.

The story becomes the condition for remembering another story:

when when when i was After that Session with the Training
for transformation i was Thinking about it and i thought “God

you Know it it Isn't What we Really would have Set Out to do
you know when We Started when we Came toGether Years ago

...

And you Know the Time we Had in Those days with the supPort
Agency

to Have just Space for converSations
to Actually Dream of what a Women's project could Look like

We return to Lady Gaga's dream again and again as a touchstone of desire, freedom
and pleasure, intertwined with a critique of governmentalized practices:

... if we'd Had the Freedom to Really Work the way we wanted
VolunTeers would have been kicking our Doors down to be Part of it
because it was

it was So Great!

and and Little by Little it Started getting Pulled aWay
– you know where our Meetings we said “we'll Always have Meetings
we'll Always have a Space

– to Talk about

you know something Real that's going On in the Real work Rather
than” –

and we Always light a Candle we Still do to this Day we Always do this
and we Always check In and we you know when the Candle is
Lit

you're Free to talk about Anything and

– it's Not Minuted or reCorded

and –

but – the the the preTend World started to Push In on us and
Make us Do This

Link In with this preTence of Filling these Forms and it
it Pushed In and it's Making our World Smaller and Smaller

...

and Then All Crazy neoliberal Language started coming In
and there was No Room AnyMore for what We wanted to Do
because All that Mattered Now

was that we got people Educated to get Jobs
to make More

Stuff that could be Traded

to cause More Inequality

and it just p- it's – we're reSisting as Best we Can

but it's Pushing In and Pushing In

and making it Smaller and Smaller

She tells of a dream delegitimized by a neoliberal regime of training for the labour market. But she draws on the dream to hold these pushy practices at a distance, calling them “the preTend World” opposed with “the Real work”. A lighted candle marks a boundary of resistance, when talk about the Real work is not minuted or recorded, but free to turn in any direction.

And as she again protests the increasing diminishment of “our World”, she remembers a moment from yesterday:

and Some days like Yesterday was a Gorgeous day here
we had a Crowd of women in it was Lovely the Chat
was Great the Talk was unReal what people were Talking about
and – you know Then you say
i was Sitting Listening to the Women some Women in the Kitchen having
converSations and it was Just so Lovely and i thought

“This is what we have to Fight for”

But these research moments of telling are fragile, disappearing in the moment of their appearance. This is the fragility which inheres in all action, and why Arendt (1958) writes of the importance of “the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember” (p. 95).

But how? The norms of research textuality start to push in, casting our research moment as one of *data production*, a discrete moment in a specialized, linear set of practices looking for resolution in writing. Conventional qualitative methodology, argues St. Pierre (2018), is still controlled by a “preexisting research process to follow, a container with well-identified categories”, to make all research aspects “recognizable, clear, and accessible” (p. 603). The normative expectation is that I will contain, analyze, and somehow render Lady Gaga “knowable”, facilitating my emergence as *the* expert knower. But the cost would be a kind of dis-memberment which separates me from her, making my world smaller and smaller as I flounder unmoored from the relational and epistemological conditions of my own political agency.

When Lady Gaga says then, “This is what we have to Fight for”, what ontological and epistemological alliances does she awaken so that I, as a feminist educational researcher, am politically aligned with this ‘we’? But to write now of “she” and “we” is to recall that, “She is the *you* that comes before the *we*” (Cavarero, 2000, p. 90). Indeed, catching myself writing post-interview reflections *about her/she*, I realized with a startle how swiftly my thinking had abandoned the collaborative address to “you”. Writing/thinking my notes then *to* Lady Gaga evolved into research retellings of stories through the I-you ethic of letter-writing. But this critical intervention into the power/knowledge relations of textuality was already premised on negotiating the oral/written word move to remember Lady Gaga as “the inassimilable, the insubstitutable, the unrepeatable” (Cavarero, 2000, p. 90). For me, transcription marked a critical threshold of a dance between forgetting and remembering.

women in their own local contexts, guided by their voices. The non-actualization of this dream in no way diminishes its significance for the critical imagination.

The word “logos”, Cavarero (2005) reminds us, derives from the ancient Greek verb *legein* which means “speaking” and “gathering”, “binding”, “joining” (p. 33). These joinings are through “a ‘speaking’, which announces the relation between mouths and ears that logos carries inside of itself from the beginning” (p. 182). Cavarero’s story of the devocalized logos tells of how sight rather than sound becomes the horizon of meaning. It is the story of Homer, the epic poet who composes with oral methods: “this law is rhythmical, like breath or the heartbeat ... manifest in speech through the regulation of accents, the number of longs and shorts, the modulations, assonances, and silences” (p. 80). It is the story of Plato who transforms these unruly instabilities of sound into immobile presences. The historical transition from orality to writing is one whereby speech “makes itself available to a visual organization that positions it in discourse according to a spatial, linear, analytical and permanent process” (Cavarero, 2005, p. 81).

Cavarero (2005) traces the entire Western philosophical and scientific lexicon to the Platonic predilection for the eye. Plato’s use of the term *theoria* to mean “the contemplation of real, lasting, immobile things” confirms the detached gaze as the guarantor of “the status of truth as presence” (p. 37). The embodied flux of speech is frozen into abstract universal images of “the mind’s eye”. Words are no longer sonorous events, but signifiers of ideas. Their proper visual plane is in writing, joined in an “ordered and controlled chain” (p. 81). The logos of philosophy is “the order that rules the ‘joining’” (p. 34).

The critical point for Cavarero, however, is not simply the privileging of sight, but “a precise strategy of devocalizing logos that relegates the voice to the status of those things that philosophy deems unworthy of attention” (p. 42). In this codified account of language, the role of the voice is relegated to acoustic signifier, stripping logos of the “*who* of saying” (p. 30). Splitting the vocal from the semantic also confirms a mind-body dualism, with the mind-semantic a male-defined rationality, and the body-vocal assigned to women who come to speech through “idle chatter” (p. 207).

What then of trans-cription? Transcription bends research towards the norms of observable data, allowing the qualitative researcher to speak authoritatively to questions of truth and evidence, validity and reliability. However critical the theorizing behind these warranting claims, the whole exercise is generally premised on the ‘service role’ of the voice as acoustic signifier. The word itself already privileges the *script*, with the oral/acoustic its silenced other. The words lie on the page as ‘dry and stale’ husks, their semantic content sundered from their embodied speaking and hearing.

But for me, Lady Gaga’s own voice reverberates through this sedimented epistemology. It resounds with Cavarero’s (2005) insistence on reclaiming a vocal ontology for feminist politics – and, we might add, critical research in adult

education. The point is to effect a shift in the logos of the joinings, to disrupt the devocalized binaries of body/mind, poetic/philosophical, speech/writing, and the linear terms of research that aspire to “know” an ending. This is a dream for the freer etymological roots of *recercher*, “to search again”, from the Latin *circare* – “go about, wander, traverse”.

To traverse the boundary between spoken and written language is to connect them in a way that “disorganizes language’s claim to control the entire process of signification” (Cavarero, 2005, p. 132). This is a poetic logos which Cavarero highlights through Cixous’ writing where the voice “invades writing” (p. 132), allowing language to “flow in the musical rhythms of language ... so that they can begin to signify and resound in one another” (Cavarero, 2005, p. 141). Cixous writes, “I do not write, I curl up in a ball, I become an ear, I am a rhythm” (1994, in Cavarero, 2005, p. 143).

This alternative logos opens educational research to poetic inquiry, attending to “complexity, feeling, and new ways of seeing” (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 29), including through poetic transcription (Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009; see also Cahnmann, 2003; Glesne, 1997). Poetic transcription involves representing conversations in stanza form, although its processes and underlying philosophies are not homogeneous. My poetic transcription was inspired by the punctuation of U.S. poet, Emily Dickinson (1830–1886).

DICKINSON’S PUNCTUATION

*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through –*

*And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum –
Kept beating – beating – till I thought
My Mind was going numb –*

*And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space – began to toll,*

*As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear;
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –*

*And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
 And I dropped down, and down –
 And hit a World, at every plunge,
 And Finished knowing – then –*

(Emily Dickinson)

The surface narrative of Dickinson's funeral poem – "and then ... and when ..." – suggests a chronology of events, commonly interpreted as the stages of a "mental breakdown". Indeed, her odd punctuation – no full stops, strange intrusive dashes, "incorrect" use of commas – has been variously regarded "as the result of great stress and intense emotion, as the indication of a mental breakdown, and as a mere idiosyncratic, female habit" (Denman, 1993, pp. 27–28). But some regard Dickinson's punctuation as a critical engagement with conventional writing practices, and integral to her challenges to conventional expectations of women (Denman, 1993; Ladin, 1994; Crumbley, 1997). Crumbley (1997) argues that the feminist implications of her poetics register with greatest force in "her refusal to silence the many rebellious voices that registered clearly in her own mind" (p. 20). My reading of this poem is of a horror evoked when the voices of convention seem to overwhelm, when "it seemed/that Sense was breaking through –". But Dickinson's punctuation works to disrupt conventional Sense, refusing to silence Silence by drawing attention to language as process rather than product.

For Weisbuch (1972), Dickinson's dashes expose "the struggle of poetic process, a struggle to find the right word, and they serve to represent a hesitancy" (in Crumbley, 1997, p. 13). Her unconventional capitalizations "concentrate attention, implying that the capitalized words have additional meanings" (Ladin, 1994, p. 46). Crumbley (1997) argues that this "verbal instability" (p. 8) challenges "the syntactic linear progression suggestive of specific linguistic destinations" (p. 20). By grouping words, indicating tone, and marking rhythms, her punctuation creates "places of silence in the pauses between words" which extend their meanings (Denman, 1993, p. 38). Silence not only provides the time and space for speaking and hearing words, but is also a generating source of language: "Silence is not a void but rather a fullness from which the most powerful language emerges" (Denman, 1993, p. 39). All this fluidity of meaning valorizes an uncontainable and emergent self who resists reification in social discourse.

I regard the shift in this poem to a sense of sound, announced by Space tolling and "Being, but an Ear", as an ontological rather than chronological turning point. It is marked by a subjectivity which expands from the bounded confines of a Box, to "all the Heavens", attuned to a relationship with Silence. What *appears* foundational and absolute is not so after all: "And then a Plank in Reason, broke", seems to expose the epistemological scaffolding of "Reason". To "hit a World, at every plunge", evokes a plurality of Worlds becoming newly available. The last line is wonderfully paradoxical: "And Finished knowing – then –". Whatever this finish means, it becomes undone in the dash where openness is affirmed. Or rather, *reaffirmed*: this

openness is present throughout the poem, disrupting linearity through punctuated silences which suggest new possibilities erupting through the routines of Sense.

And so for me too, on the threshold of transcription, the Plank of grammatical Reason broke, along with its constituent closures and hierarchies. Full stops dissolved. Capital letters mutated. I became an Ear, dancing to the open rhythms of breath, stresses and silences. As I heard the taking of breath, I marked a new poetic line. I denoted stresses with capital letters, reflecting a syllabic listening (e.g. exPeriences). I used dashes for moments of stumbling to find words, and transcribed silences as blank spaces on the page to suggest rhythms and groupings of words (see Mazzei, 2007).

The resultant transcript is, of course, a construction. Its purpose is to convey a sense of self, language and voice as processual, emergent and embodied, so that our identities are not fixed but open and on the move. Lady Gaga loved it, as did the two other women collaborating with my research. They loved its subversions of the written word, its genesis in the poem, and the possibility of hearing their own voices. As for myself, I became newly present to the language of everyday life as a poetic miracle emerging into sound and meaning, and a key site of “what we have to Fight for” in harnessing the critical and creative possibilities of adult education research.

AND FINISHED KNOWING – THEN –

In this chapter, I have joined my friend and research collaborator, “Lady Gaga”, in her resistance to governmentalized pedagogies, by linking critical pedagogy and political agency through an open and fluid narrative analytic. This accords with a critical feminist pedagogy of the narratable self (Cavarero, 2000; Tamboukou, 2008) as a realization of Arendt’s distinctive notion of the political. However, such open possibilities are blocked by the closures of the perusable text which constitute the normative conditions of research, fixing its subjects into a linear narrative. This opens up textuality as a key site of struggle for critical adult education research in order to link with alternative modes of thought which step outside institutionalized pedagogies.

I have discussed a poetic transcription as a critical threshold between the oral and written word for interrupting the linguistic transformation of the intangible into observable data. The critical purpose is to effect a de-ontologizing move which unfixes these stabilizing effects in order to valorize the irreducibility of the other. The creative purpose is not so much to represent as to actively remember, where remembering is also responding. The poetic act of transcribing with an ear has enacted a purposive remembering of the fragile, embodied, relational research moment as open and processual. Ontologically congruent with Lady Gaga’s counter-narrative, the poetic transcription simultaneously responds to delegitimized pedagogical possibilities in the present which escape governmentalization.

Released from the routines of research representation, these ontological terms freed me to respond to how the voices of Lady Gaga, and the other two women

involved in my research, moved and challenged me. Such dialogical provocations found expression in a heteroglossic text (Bakhtin, 1981), actively subverting official policy rationalities of adult education through their feminist narratives of voice. But that's another story.

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