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Introduction

In Paule Marshall's novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, an anthropologist goes to the fictitious Bournemouths Island in the Caribbean where he meets Merle, the island's most impressive inhabitant and the anthropologist's most astute critic. Over drinks one night, Merle confronts him:

"You're always working," she said. "Always collecting data. You think I don't know that. And you could get a stone to tell you its life history. I don't know how you do it." She thought about this for a moment; then her eyes narrowing suspiciously, "Unless maybe you're something of a Juju man yourself. Yes," she cried, laughing, her forefinger impaling him. . . . "I've watched you work your magic. . . . Questions and more questions. . . . You never run short. And yet scarcely a word from you about yourself. The poor informant must tell you his life story from A to Zed, everything—whether he actually owns the little cane piece he works on the side, if the woman he's living with is his lawful wife, what he thinks about government, when was the first time he had sex, everything while you stay mum, your business to yourself. You know what," she cried, the finger fixed him again, "somebody needs to interview you for a change." (Marshall 1969, 319–320)

Unlike traditional qualitative methodology as characterized by Merle, feminist methodology promises a more interpersonal and reciprocal relationship between researchers and those whose lives are the focus of the research.¹ Feminist methodology seeks to break down barriers that exist among women as well as the barriers that exist between the researcher and the researched. For the researcher, the responsibility of engaging in a more personal relationship with

those researched while collecting ethnographic and narrative data and writing the interpretive research text may be as difficult as it is joyful. We are often confounded. We grapple with concerns about ethics, reflexivity, emotions, positionality, polyvocality, collaboration, identification with participants, intersubjectivity, and our own authority as interpreters. Postmodernist thinking increasingly makes the interpretive task tricky as the old theories and master narratives of unified individuality collapse and are slowly displaced by theories of the speaking subject whose "individuality and self-awareness" or subjectivity is multiple, conflicted, complex, fragmented, and in constant flux (Henriques et al. 1984).

These new articulations of feminist research practices and human subjectivity suggest that we need to look toward research methodologies and interpretive theories that will help researchers be more thoughtful and critical about our intersubjective research relationships and the ways that we analyze the personal narratives of others. With these concerns in mind, I have written this book to focus on two central issues. First, I examine the promises, possibilities, and limitations of feminist methodology, particularly focusing on researcher-participant intersubjective relationships. Second, I explore how feminist narrative interpretations, as the result or product of the fieldwork relationships, may create a context in which nonunitary subjectivity can be engaged as the grounding for the study of women's lives.

Perhaps this is the place to admit that this study was not always about methodology and interpretation. Initially, as a graduate student embarking on my dissertation, I conceived of it as a more conventional ethnographic and life history study of feminist teachers and administrators. That is, the methodology I proposed was a fairly traditional qualitative framework, while the study of feminist educators' lives was the more "ideological" or political means through which I would engage in feminist scholarship. At that time, I was unaware that methodological questions could also be an avenue of feminist scholarship.

However, when I began reading about feminist methodology, starting with the essays in *Theories of Women's Studies* (Bowles and Klein 1983) and *Feminism & Methodology* (Harding 1987) and Patti Lather's (1986) article, "Research as Praxis," I realized that the methodological questions about fieldwork and interpretation raised by feminist theory were a call to me to engage in this conversation. Similarly, as I began thinking more about the feminist interpretive process, I became tremendously excited about feminist and postmodern theories emerging from such disciplines as anthro-

pology, sociology, education, and English and began to see ways that I could contribute to this interdisciplinary scholarship through my study. What I read about subjectivity in feminist theory particularly impressed me and deeply influenced my work. As this “confessional tale” (Van Maanen 1988) indicates, my ideas about methodology and interpretation changed greatly throughout the reading, data collection, and writing process. Thus, while the book is both a critical analysis of feminist methodology in practice and an investigation into interpretive methods for examining nonunitary subjectivity in women’s personal narratives, it also has a subtext which is the story of my intellectual and personal journey, or subjectivity, as I came to learn about feminist methodology and interpretation through my research.

Nonunitary Subjectivity

The examination of nonunitary subjectivity is one of the main focuses of this book and one of the main interests of much recent feminist scholarship. As Chris Weedon explains, redefining subjectivity as nonunitary refutes the humanist assumption that humans have “an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent and which makes her what she *is*” (1987, 32; see also Braidotti 1991; Cixous [1975] 1976; Henriques et al. 1984; Irigaray [1974] 1985; Kristeva [1979] 1986; Rosenau 1992). Similarly, Sidonie Smith explains that such redefinitions are “a means to counter the centrifugal power of the old unitary self of western rationalism” (1993, 155). Toril Moi, drawing from French feminism, maintains that the very concept of the “seamlessly unified self” posited in the Western humanist tradition is part of the phallic logic which likes to see itself as “gloriously autonomous, . . . banish[ing] from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity” (1985, 8).

Claiming the existence of an individual essence in Western humanist ideology denies the possibilities of changes in subjectivity over time; masks the critical roles that language, social interactions, and pivotal experiences play in the production of subjectivity; and ignores the multiple subject positions people occupy, which influence the formation of subjectivity. Because of these limits in humanist concepts of subjectivity, postmodern feminists embrace the idea that an understanding of nonunitary subjectivity in women’s lives is critical to feminist research and epistemology. Valerie Walkerdine (1990) in particular suggests that empirical research

on subjectivity is an important contribution to feminist research. She hopes that feminists will give their attention to understanding how the process of subjectivity “actually works in the regulative practices of daily life” (1990, 193), because such research may contribute to transforming women’s lives. Bronwyn Davies, too, argues that analyzing nonunitary subjectivity is a deeply political strategy for feminist researchers because it has the potential to give researchers and research participants a “clearer comprehension of their own fractured and fragmented subjectivity and [it] allows them to explore ways that patriarchal discourse is inscribed in their bodies and emotions” (1992, 55–56).

If subjectivity is not the “essence” of an individual as is asserted in Western humanist thought, then what is it and what does it mean in feminist research? Weedon explains that “[s]ubjectivity’ is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (1987, 32). Exploring subjectivity in the lives of student teachers, Deborah Britzman defines subjectivity as “both our conceptual orderings of things and the deep investments summoned by such orderings. It organizes an individual’s ideas about what it means to recognize oneself as a person, a student, a teacher, and so forth, and arranges strategies for the realization of these multiple identities” (1991, 57).

In feminist poststructural theory, subjectivity is also thought to be nonunitary or active and continually in the process of production within historical, social, and cultural boundaries. As Sally Robinson explains, nonunitary subjectivity is “an ongoing process of engagement in social and discursive practices . . . a continuous process of production and transformation [and] . . . a ‘doing’ rather than a being” (1991, 11; see also Kristeva [1974] 1980). For Teresa de Lauretis, subjectivity is “an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world”; therefore, each person’s experiences in the world with “practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning and affect) to the events of the world” produce subjectivity (1987, 159).

Metaphors of motion are often used to characterize subjectivity as a process that takes place within the world. Ferguson, for example, describes “mobile” subjectivities that move “across and along axes of power (which are themselves in motion) without fully residing in them” (1993, 154). Carole Boyce Davies articulates a theory of “migratory subjectivity,” which she explains is a way of promoting the assumption of the “subject’s agency,” and most particularly the agency of the black woman to refuse being subjugated. She

explains that “Black female subjectivity asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts” (Davies 1994, 36–37).

Theorizing subjectivity as situated in the world of experience, Amina Mama further reminds us that subjectivity is produced both collectively and relationally (1995, 98). Kathy Ferguson, too, talks about subjectivities as “relational, produced through shifting yet enduring encounters and connections, never fully captured by them” (1993, 154). These assertions of subjectivity as being produced relationally are critical, for they suggest that feminist coalitions may be positive sites for the production of subjectivity.

Subjectivity is also thought to be produced through contradictions and conflict, which cause subjectivity to fragment. Because of women’s long history of material marginalization, patriarchal oppression, colonization, physical abuse, and the psychological damage of being demeaned by the pervasive hierarchical structuring of the sexual differences of male/female, women have internalized many negative and conflicted ideas of what it means to be a woman. Both negative feelings and experiences and diverse conflicting interactions and experiences—affirming or negating—result in subjectivity’s fragmentation. For this reason, we often speak of *subjectivities* rather than subjectivity, for the fragmentary and nonunitary qualities of subjectivity really do defy the singular noun. It is no wonder, then, that Ferguson says that subjectivities are “ambiguous: messy and multiple, unstable but persevering” (1993, 154), and that Carol Boyce Davies says that they are “conceived . . . in terms of slipperiness, elsewhere-ness” (1994, 36).

Language and discourse also play important roles in the production of subjectivity. Weedon believes that subjectivity is “constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (1987, 33). Language is also critical to Cixous’s ([1975] 1976) understanding of women’s subjectivity as a source of rebellion against oppression. She believes that the diminishing of women through the binary language of “the discourse of man” may be regarded as a source of strength for women. This strength is shown when women challenge, fight back, “explode,” “turn around,” and “seize” (not to mention laugh at) male discourse by naming their own experiences and writing their multiple subjectivities in a language of their own. One way that feminists in particular have taken up Cixous’s call for a new language is in the redefinition of subjectivity as nonunitary. Through the analysis and celebration of the strength that nonunitary subjectivity can have for women, women can become the authors of their own lives in ways that do “explode” male discourse. It is

important, then, to the interpretive project that examines women's lives, to recognize that although subjectivity "is not entirely accessible because of the subterfuges of the unconscious" (Henriques et al. 1984, 225), that "discourses carry the content of subjectivity" (Mama 1995, 98).

As a process, fragmentation, and discursive and lived practice, nonunitary subjectivity must be considered a meaningful category of feminist analysis, for it encourages women to understand how we can be open to new ways to understand the world, to think about experiences, or to reflect on one's self. In a project that seeks to understand how women talk about themselves and their experiences in their narratives, the strategic benefit of mobilizing a theory of nonunitary subjectivity is that it resists essentializing individuals by naming a particular immobile identity. As Ferguson claims, subjectivities are "politically difficult in their refusal to stick consistently to one stable identity claim; yet they are politically advantageous because they are less pressed to police their own boundaries, more able to negotiate respectfully with contentious others" (1993, 154).

Humanist and masculinist notions about what it means to be human would lead us to believe that all this fragmentation, conflict, ambiguity, messiness, mobility, border-crossings, and changes in subjectivity means that a person is mentally unstable or weak, lacking an enviable, unified (masculine) self. Rejecting this notion of the unified self, postmodern feminism asserts that an understanding of subjectivity as nonunitary is a move toward a more positive acceptance of the complexities of human identity, especially female identity. To accept that subjectivity is nonunitary and fragmented, however, is not to "promote endless fragmentation and a reified multiplicity," for, as Sidonie Smith argues, this would be "counterproductive" to the narrative project "since the autobiographical subject would have to split itself beyond usefulness to be truly nonexclusionary. And it is difficult," Smith continues, "to coalesce a call to political action founded upon some kind of communal identity around a constantly deferred point of departure" (1993, 156). Smith's caution is well noted, for claiming nonunitary subjectivity and its fragmentation should not signify a loss of self.² Rather, it should signify an alternative view of the self located historically in language, produced in everyday gendered, racialized, and cultural/social experiences, expressed in writing and speaking, and employed as a political feminist strategy.

As we shall see in the following chapters, nonunitary subjectivity is indeed a meaningful theoretical framework through which to

examine both researcher-participant relationships and the life history narratives of the research participants, Sandy and Olivia.³

Interpretation and Genealogy

In the above description of nonunitary subjectivity, I refer unproblematically to the importance of “interpreting” both research relationships and personal narratives. But the act of interpreting is never unproblematic. In my work, I use a dual interpretive framework that consists of both feminist hermeneutical practices and genealogical or feminist postmodern interpretive practices. The differences between the two and how they converge in this work is important.

As Kathy Ferguson (1993) explains, feminist interpretation is concerned with articulating and analyzing women’s experiences and voices while genealogy is the analytic deconstruction of the very category of women. Feminist interpretation “entails immersion in a world divided between male and female experience in order to critique the power of the former and valorize the alternative residing in the latter” (Ferguson 1993, 3). Postmodernists would argue against this interpretive stance, maintaining that it upholds problematic binary structures and essentializes women through this binary structure. In contrast, postmodern genealogy or “the deconstruction of gender entails stepping back from the opposition of male and female in order to loosen the hold of gender on life and meaning” (1993, 4). Feminist interpretivists would argue against this stance because it undermines the feminist work of constituting women historically as empowered and having voice or being subjects of knowledge. Therefore, to practice interpretation and genealogy simultaneously, as I propose to do through the interpretation of women’s narratives and genealogy of subjectivity, would seem to be a matter of working with opposing world views. However, this is not the case.

Rather, practicing interpretation and genealogy must be seen as a balancing and a positive engagement of the tensions and contradictions of these two practices. What makes this engagement manageable is that both interpretation and genealogy have complementary political feminist goals. That is, interpretation and genealogy are both practices that seek to disrupt power hierarchies, albeit in different ways: “[I]nterpretation subverts the status quo in the service of a different order, while genealogy aims to shake up the orderedness of things” (Ferguson 1993, 23). Additionally, Ferguson explains, genealogy, like interpretation, can accept that

there is a “subject” who has agency—an important concept in feminist narrative (modern and postmodern) theorizing. Calling upon Foucault’s (1977) understanding of genealogy, Ferguson continues:

Genealogy does not abandon the subject, but examines it as a function of discourse, asking “under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse?” Genealogy takes the modern subject as data to be accounted for, rather than as a source of privileged accounts of the world. (Ferguson 1993, 15)

Finally, and perhaps most important, interpretation is the anchor for genealogy, for without interpretation, genealogists would have nothing to deconstruct! Interpretation too needs genealogy “in order to push aside the hegemonic claims of dominant interpretations” (Ferguson 1993, 28); genealogy in this sense exerts a pressure on interpretation, challenging it to be self-critical and aware of itself and its own potential hegemonic practices. Ferguson’s articulation of a practice that engages in both interpretation and genealogy is compelling. This dual practice affirms the importance of deep interpretations of personal narratives through which we may gain a greater understanding of women’s lived experiences and the concrete realities of daily life, while simultaneously deconstructing those foundations on which daily life is constructed and experienced. I therefore take up Ferguson’s following suggestion in this book, to not “think of the tensions between the interpretive and genealogical impulses as contradictions that we must resolve,” but rather to “approach them as riddles that we must engage, in which affirmations are always tied to ambiguity and resolutions to endless deferral” (35). Such a stance, Ferguson suggests, can give us the ironic sensibility and “appropriate humility” through which alternative epistemologies and politics may emerge.

Outline of the Study

As the above discussion indicates, this study entails an investigation into a variety of interrelated theoretical, ideological, and methodological issues. The means by which I carry out this investigation has taken me into a variety of discourses and disciplines, each of which contributes to not only the interpretation of research rela-

tionships and the narratives, but also my overall understanding of feminist methodology, nonunitary subjectivity, and the uses of personal narratives for understanding women's gendered experiences and self-representations.

Part One of the book focuses on the practices of feminist methodology and issues in researcher-participant relationships. In chapters 2 and 3, I tell the stories of my work with each of the two participants in my study, Sandy and Olivia.⁴ In chapter 2, I focus on interviewing as the critical site where Olivia and I negotiated what it meant to do feminist methodology given our different biographies, subject positions, and understandings of feminist methodology. In chapter 3, I reflect on a problematic situation that arose between Sandy and myself during fieldwork and attempt to analyze how my and Sandy's different subject positions and conceptions of the research process mediated and contributed to the situation.

Part Two of this book focuses on interpreting nonunitary subjectivity and the use of various interpretive theories in feminist research.⁵ In chapters 4 and 5, I use the concept of nonunitary subjectivity to interpret Olivia's and Sandy's narratives. My desire to explore how nonunitary subjectivity is represented in personal narratives led me to experiment with several possible interpretive theories. While I do not attempt to provide a complete array of available interpretive orientations, what I do hope to provide in chapters 4 and 5 are examples of how these interpretive theories, derived from diverse disciplines, work when applied to the analysis of women's personal narratives. In other words, Part Two of the book demonstrates working illustrations of how particular interpretive theories are used in the actual practice of interpreting nonunitary subjectivity in personal narratives. Toward this end, I first acquaint the reader with the interpretive theories used, writing from an explicative rather than a critical stance. I then offer analyses of segments of the personal narratives based on the interpretive theory, and I give critical commentary on the interpretations and interpretive theories.⁶

The conclusion of the book reviews relevant literature on feminist methodology, discusses the possibilities and limitations of feminist methodology, and attempts to bring together the different issues raised in the methodological and interpretive chapters of the book.

I use extensive interview data throughout the book. The interview data includes both life history narratives and excerpts from discussions the respondents and I had about methodology and about my interpretations of their life history narratives. In some instances

I have also included Olivia's and Sandy's reinterpretations of their narratives that they offered after reading their transcripts or my interpretations. While polyvocal strategies may help to diminish this project's association with traditional qualitative writing, the interweaving of Olivia's and Sandy's and my voices in no way diminishes my responsibility or the privileging of my voice. But to have this privilege and responsibility means that I must speak, not "for" the respondents as if they cannot speak for themselves, but "with" and "about" them in a shared struggle that acknowledges different social locations (Ellsworth 1994, 105). I am in accord with Margery Wolf, who reminds us that "no matter what format the anthropologist/reporter/writer uses, she eventually takes the responsibility for putting down the words, for converting their possibly fleeting opinions into a text. I see no way to avoid this exercise of power and at least some of the stylistic requirements used to legitimate that text if the practice of ethnography is to continue" (1992, 11).

"Under the Sign of Hope"

I hope that this book raises as many, if not more, questions than it answers. That is, I hope it promotes thinking about what feminist methodology and interpretation are and what possibilities and limitations exist for them; what conditions make it possible for one to participate in them; and what commitments must be addressed when deciding on a theory (or theories) of interpretation for understanding women's personal narratives. I also hope this book helps us grapple with such questions as: What happens to the research process when the nonunitary subjectivities of both the researcher and researched meet? What happens to representation in life history interpretation if the self is nonunitary? How is gender understood in the nonunitary self? What meanings do life history narratives have for the participant who has a stake in representing herself as a unitary self when the researcher is committed to analyzing the self as nonunitary? How does understanding nonunitary subjectivity contribute to feminist emancipatory goals? While I do not provide definitive answers to these questions, nor, in truth, would I want to, I do demonstrate how I have grappled with and reflected on these problems and issues in my own research.

In writing this book, I take up Sidonie Smith's call in her autobiographical manifesto to write "under the sign of hope" (1993, 163). Smith explains that autobiographical writings have been

variously theorized as being written “under the sign of death” (the male need for immortality), “under the sign of desire” (a male longing to recapture what is lost), and under the sign of anxiety (a female fear of future loss). Smith’s autobiographical manifesto offers an alternative sign under which to write: the sign of hope. It is a sign that “speaks to the future” by asserting that women, as subjects, can be free from essentializing, naturalizing, constraining, and oppressive identifications. By writing “under the sign of hope” Smith suggests that our feminist work with narratives and autobiographies can present a “generative and prospective” vision of “the subject [of] the future” (162–163), a subject who is nonunitary, and as such, is a symbol of hope for a better future for all women.

The sign of hope is a profoundly political sign in that it asks us to deliberately construct our autobiographical strategies to *consciously* work toward attaining political empowerment through alternative narrative and interpretive strategies. While some would argue that such hope reflects an obstinate denial that the funeral procession has already passed for the author, the subject, and feminism, with Smith, I believe that they/we are alive and well. I believe that feminist scholarship will benefit from our efforts to take more time to explore what and how feminist methodology and interpretation can contribute to women’s lives and to the transformation of our society. This is the sign of hope under which I write.