

Re-storying the self

Thoughts on mapping moments of articulation of the
poststructuralist feminist activist self in contemporary Australia

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My doctoral work explores two dimensions of contemporary feminist praxis: the process of re-storying the self in response to contemporary feminist epistemologies; and the process of working with such a notion of self to become politically activist. At the heart of the thesis is an exploration of the ways in which these two dimensions of contemporary feminist praxis have been played out in the life of my central participant and former undergraduate student, Sandy Newby.

In exploring the processes of re-storying the self, in the thesis I draw explicitly on my reading of Drusilla Modjeska's fictionalised biography, *Poppy*, and on the recent work of narrative scholar Susan Stanford Friedman. Ultimately, I argue that Drusilla Modjeska's focus on the processes of self-narration meets with Friedman's call for feminists at the dawn of the new millennium to become more literate in narrative theory in order to investigate more fully a feminist politics of location.

In exploring the ways in which the complex and contradictory self connects across difference to interact with other similarly complex and contradictory selves to enact changes, in the thesis I adapt Susan Stanford Friedman's notion of a feminist politics of location to undertake a spatial and temporal mapping of selected moments of articulation which emerge from the storying of the journey towards feminist activism of my central participant. My conceptual focus in doing this mapping is on thinking beyond the hierarchical oppositions implicit in the dichotomous conceptual order to explore the hybridity of the spaces between a number of sites of difference. These spaces include the space between the former (striving-to-be-coherent) self and the (newly conceptualised) contradictory self; the space between concepts formerly held in binary opposition (eg voice/silence; masculine/feminine; joy/pain); and the space between the self and the other (friend and friend; teacher and student; colleague and colleague; activist and activist; activist and adversary). The mapping process which I have adopted ensures that one of the theoretical narratives running through the thesis is the story of the hyphen, the space between, the exploration of the movement and stillness in the space between sites of difference and sites of sameness.

In summary, the thesis explores some dimensions of an embodied feminist subjectivity through mapping the ongoing creation and performance of the feminist activist self at particular times and in particular locations during the decade of the 1990s. A temporal and spatial mapping of the kind I have undertaken illuminates the variety and the specificity of each moment of articulation. In so doing, I argue, it accentuates the fluidity, the unpredictability and the unevenness of the process of engaging in contemporary feminist activism, so providing the genesis for a re-storying and a fresh understanding of this intensely political process.

This paper draws on material gathered for that wider project to reflect on the mapping process I have undertaken. In the paper I first outline the theoretical chains of association, particularly those related to narrative processes and the geographics of identity, within which my work is situated. I move then to give a single example of the mapping process I have undertaken. Throughout the paper I reflect on the ways in which this mapping process has enabled me to understand the uses of narrative in the re-storying process implicit in the creation and performance of the contemporary feminist activist self.

Narrative processes

I first encountered *Poppy* on my way home from a particularly disturbing Women's Studies conference in Melbourne in July 1990, where postmodernist tensions were in the air, and the price of feminists' postmodernist stance was seen by some to be a kind of paralysis, a complete lack of collective agency.

From the time of my earliest readings of *Poppy*, I have been intrigued with the ways in which that book's narrative structures appeared to emulate and illustrate its thematic emphasis on the process of finding a voice: of giving life to a story and a story to a life. I indicated in the Prologue of the thesis that I felt intuitively that if I could grasp the significance of the *movement* implicit in Drusilla Modjeska's focus on the processes of narration, especially of the oscillation and fluctuation from life to story and story to life, I would be able to sidestep the paralysis of which some of my feminist colleagues on the brink of engaging with postparadigmatic notions of subjectivity and power were afraid. I indicated, too, that the thesis represents my attempt to explore the significance of that movement (*fort-da*, hither-thither) in narrating the complex and often contradictory postparadigmatic self, and in connecting with the other(s) to initiate and participate in various expressions of feminist activism.

It seems to me that in Irigaray's terms, 'giving life to a story' suggests removing all boundaries, celestial and earthbound, and engaging with *jouissance*, with excess, with the chaos of the feminine imaginary to evoke the fluidity, multiplicity and intertextuality of feminist knowledges; 'giving a story to a life' suggests an ongoing reflection on the art of creating a narrative, honouring both the temporal and the spatial to create the story in feminist ways which work out of the feminine imaginary, combining an aural economy with a scopic economy to bring the feminine subject into the symbolic (Irigaray, 1985a; 1985b; 1986; 1991; 1993a; 1993b; 1995).

Having begun with Irigaray and Modjeska, throughout the thesis I have formed a chain of associations linking the process of narration and the production of voice. I have linked my understanding of Drusilla Modjeska's conception of the production of voice (that is, that voice is born of the *movement* implicit in giving life to a story and a story to a life) with Elspeth Probyn's understanding that voice comes from the interstices of knowledge and experience. I have linked these understandings with Pam Morris's call for a theory of the subject that will allow for political agency and the production of voice, through a strategic process of self-narration which is historically, culturally and sexually contingent.

Like Pam Morris, Susan Stanford Friedman focuses explicitly on the power of narrative in the creation of the subject. Friedman's work intrigues me for its challenge to conventional understandings of the temporal focus in narrative, with its insistence on the need to clear a space for the spatial and locational in discussions of narrative drive. Such an emphasis allows her to shift her attention away from an exclusively temporal, cumulative unfolding of the story created by the desiring subject (whose desires reach ever into the future), and additionally onto the immediacy of the space in which the intersubjective encounter (or the intrasubjective encounter between competing discourses) occurs. One of the ways Friedman writes about this is in terms of intercultural encounters:

The contradictory tensions between sameness and difference underlying intercultural encounters in the contact zone cannot be explained solely in terms of oedipal and post-oedipal plottings of desire, however much erotics play a part in such borderlands. (150)

Friedman, then, proposes a dialogic, spatial model of narrative to displace the exclusivity of developmental, temporal models that characterise some narrative theory. Ultimately, she argues, 'we must examine the dialogic of space and time, location and development, encounter and desire as both together drive the narrative forward'. She cites Adrienne Rich's 'Notes towards a Politics of Location' to argue that a place on the map is also a place in history (1998: 149 – 150).

In summary, then, as a literary scholar engaging with ethnographic theory, Friedman has found the theoretical basis for a spatialised approach to narrative poetics, one that fosters the significance of travel, movement, setting, cultural difference, and intercultural contact zones for the generation of story. 'This approach', she argues, 'resists the conventional association of space with stasis and time with movement, positing instead the intercultural space between difference as a dynamic terrain that makes things happen, a space of travel and change – physical, psychological, linguistic, symbolic. It resists as well the reduction of story to sequence, to a temporal movement governed by a rhetoric of desire and development' (149).

A geographics of identity

My intuition of the significance of the *movement* implicit in narrating the decentred, complex and contradictory self and in connecting with others to become activist has led me to focus my attention on the hybridity of the space between sites of difference. This in turn has led me to the emphasis on reconceptualisations of space and time embedded in Friedman's work on what she calls 'the geographics of identity'. In reflecting on the doubled understanding of the term 'identity' as being born of 'difference from unlike others', as well as from 'sameness' (as in the term 'identical'), Friedman brings together her own work on narrative with the work of such scholars as Trinh, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty to argue:

difference vs sameness; stasis vs travel; certainty vs interrogation; purity vs mixing; the geographics of identity moves between boundaries of difference and borderlands of liminality. (20)

Such a discourse allows her to articulate not the organic unfolding of identity through time, but rather:

the mapping of territories and boundaries, the dialectical terrains of inside/outside or centre/margin, the axial intersections of different positionalities, and the spaces of dynamic encounter. (19)

This kind of geographic discourse allows Friedman to read both interpersonal and collective engagements across sites of difference and sites of sameness. It often emphasises not the ordered movement of linear growth but the lack of solid ground, the ceaseless change of fluidity, the nomadic wandering of transnational diaspora, the interactive syncretisms of the global ethnoscape. It is this work I have adapted in order to do the mapping of moments of performance.

To summarise the story so far, then: in the thesis I adapt the spatial discourse of Friedman to map selected moments of articulation in both Sandy's and my journeys towards finding voice as feminist activists. Specifically, this process involves mapping the performances and negotiations, the movements, which occur in the hybridity of the space between a number of sites of difference. Such a mapping process allows me to read Sandy's and my journeys in ways which loosen narrative control, giving fuller expression to their complexities. In giving life to each moment of articulation by exploring the interactions in the spaces between such sites of difference, I make possible a re-storying of the life of the feminist activist. This process underscores the political nature of the act of narration itself. The personal, the political and the theoretical intertwine.

One story behind the mapping process

Less than a month after Sandy finished her undergraduate course she was employed in her first professional fulltime job, as a trade union organiser. In a sense she'd been head-hunted by one of her sessional lecturers at university. At least, she'd been strongly encouraged to apply for one of several positions available at the time. Among the abilities which this person recognised were her capacity to think on her feet, her ability to apply her strongly held feminist framework to a huge variety of personal and public situations, and her intuitive grasp of the communication process. Sandy herself sees this early working period as a joyful and exciting time, to which she brought an intense desire to adopt what she understood to be ethical working practices. In retrospect, she recognises that her stories suggest that she knows the value of relationship, of performance, of intuition, of logic. She recognises, too, that in her stories this period emerges as a contradictory, often impossibly demanding time. It's joyful, and it's puzzling, and it's fast.

During this first year at the union, Sandy reflects on the ways in which she uses her understanding of power as fleeting and fluid. Implicit in that is her conscious use of respect and reciprocity in relationship building, not just with her own colleagues and her trade union members, but also with her members' management bureaucrats who would normally be her direct adversaries. But early experience teaches her that such a change in anticipated tactics can be disturbing for the people who are traditionally her adversaries. She tells me a story about the confusions that arise even in the eyes of the most experienced senior bureaucrats when, having

initiated working relationships with them which are surprisingly respectful and co-operative, Sandy then becomes adversarial in times of crisis. Management is shocked. Accusations of 'Traitor!' resound in the corridors of her members' workplace. Sandy stays strong. She will not resile. She is clear and determined. She uses tough measures for a tough situation. There's a clear clash of frameworks here, and in this case it's Sandy calling the shots. The ethical framework Sandy holds will allow the coexistence of respect for management with the need to employ surprise tactics on behalf of her union members; the framework those other parties hold may well permit fewer contradictions than that. Perhaps they read respect as willingness to bow and scrape, or at least to be mates at all times. And there's the gender issue too. 'Just because I'm a woman and I'm respectful, doesn't mean I'm weak,' Sandy says.

Background to mapping all seven moments of articulation

In the mapping of the process of Sandy's finding a voice with which to speak her feminist ideals, it is the trope of encounter which I want to emphasise, as much as the trope of chronology. As we have seen, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that the need to avoid gender as an exclusive category of analysis has involved a significant shift from developmental to geographical ways of thinking about identity. I must consider the spatial as well as the temporal dimensions of these moments on the map of Sandy's political activism. Like Drusilla Modjeska, though, I have no desire to favour the lyric over the linear, the feminine over the masculine, the spatial over the chronological. Instead of choosing to ignore the temporal, and so to look only at the spatial, then, I shift the heavy emphasis on the temporal by placing my awareness onto them both. Rather than reading these moments solely as a chronological, temporal sequence of events leading cumulatively to the creation of a more deeply developed activist consciousness, then, I read them also as spaces within which the activist, speaking self negotiates its way across, around, against boundaries. Such foregrounding of spatial readings evokes Drusilla Modjeska's call to give life to a story; foregrounding of temporal readings evokes her call to give story to a life. In reading these encounters for their hybrid spaces, those spaces where boundaries blur, I disrupt the chronological, cumulative narrative to foreground the geographics of identity. My delight in this process lies not so much in the moment of disruption as in the *movement* generated as one tracks back and forth from temporal to spatial readings. Such tracking back and forth evokes the movement which, I have argued throughout my thesis, is generated by Drusilla Modjeska's reciprocal emphasis on lyric and linear narrative strategies in creating a native tongue.

We need to keep moving and to keep speaking our selves in ways that will encourage other movements, that will recreate alternative positions. Brought to a breathless and motionless standstill, we need to remember the 'grain' of the self. I hear another self, I hear myself, she speaks and in the movement of other images of selves, alternative speaking positions appear as possible. I am drawn to them and re-find them in the motions of selves. As Barthes (1977: 188) writes of the 'grain', it is 'the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs'. (Probyn 172)

Mapping this moment

This fifth moment of encounter is encoded in the story of the feisty union activist whose turncoat behaviour inspires cries of 'Traitor!' to resound in the corridors of power. This is a

moment in which Sandy's feminist ethics are foregrounded. Sandy's audience (the management of the workplace of a large group of her trade union members) has no understanding of the ways in which her feminist ethics allows her to engage in respectful and courteous interactions with them, while still holding fierce loyalty to her members. I read the space she inhabits in this encounter as one whose dimensions are on a different plane from the space in which she is positioned by management wrath. From her perspective, she stands alongside her members, linked to them, across boundaries of self and other, by the common elements of their cause (they all want to negotiate a non-exploitative enterprise bargaining agreement) and by her desire to represent them, to speak on their behalf. From this perspective, she can still connect with management as courteous colleague across the boundaries separating her from management. But the management cry of 'Traitor!' suggests that from the management perspective, she has betrayed their trust, and so is cast out of the circle of connection with them into the opposing camp. Binary discourses disrupt and are disrupted by the complex and contradictory discourses which Sandy is able to hold as part of her feminist ethics. This is a moment of self-conscious, strategic performance. She performs as the union advocate and representative who will not give in to management appeals to collegiality and friendship. She knows her stance is ethical. In a sense she uses Irigaray's strategy which, she tells us in *This Sex Which is Not One*,

is not to use the rules to win (the game is in any case rigged) but to disrupt the old game in order to initiate new ones, 'jamming the theoretical machinery' in order to enable new 'tools', inventions and knowledges to be possible (Irigaray, 1985b, 78).

In this moment, Sandy is powerful. Her strategies have disarmed her (momentary) adversaries. She knows the power of collective action and of strategic surprise.

Emerging from this mapping is the story of a woman who speaks.

She knows the power of disruptive performance.

She knows the power of love.

She knows the power of authoritative performance.

She speaks authoritatively as both author and subject.

She knows the power of collective action and of strategic surprise.

She knows the power of intuition, insight, narrative, story.

She knows the power of simply being, and of accepting the wisdom which accompanies that.

And lurking in the shadows, in the gaps and spaces around and between these moments of voice are stories of silencing, of despair, of disappointment, of personal trauma, of bewilderment, of exhaustion. Between the story of the confident healthy strong child and the feisty trade union activist I glimpse the grief-stricken young mother, coiled and foetal in despair. Versions of this vision surface and re-surface as she encounters hurt, betrayal, loss, rejection, pain. From these gaps and spaces emerge stories of the woman who is sometimes silenced, sometimes not; sometimes playful, sometimes flat; sometimes authoritative, sometimes lost; sometimes vibrant, sometimes dark.

A chronological mapping would perhaps have focussed attention away from the gaps and spaces between these moments of performance of voice to suggest a movement on to a bright and

glorious future. What emerges from this combination of temporal and spatial mapping is the understanding that voice is elusive: once found, it does not simply stay. Voice and silence exist in reciprocity. There is movement here. Our map is marked with endless tracks, back and forth, hither and thither, *fort-da*.

In undertaking this mapping process I have called upon the locational discourses of Susan Stanford Friedman to mobilize some of the insights which lie latent in the stories I have told. In doing so, I have found that Friedman's focus on the geographics of identity, that is, her insistence that attention to space (location) is as necessary as attention to time (historical moment) in creating an understanding of who we can be(come) and how we can act to initiate social/political change, provides a possible route through the impasse which occurs in the clash of (exhilarating) contemporary feminist discourses and more restrictive, limiting but powerful discourses like, for example, the discourse of economic rationalism.

I have found, too, that an attention to location provides, at the subjective level of speaking (or being silenced), a moment of stasis in the temporal march of discursive understandings of the interactions between knowledge and experience. Such a shift of attention from the temporal to the locational provides a moment of stasis wherein the gap between the (former) striving-to-be-coherent self and the (newly conceptualised) chaotic self closes to reveal a moment of *is-ness*, of simply being. There is movement here, generated by immersion in the moment of stasis. Placing my attention on this moment of being which is also a point in space draws me into an encounter with Drusilla Modjeska's moment of lyric stasis; reading those multiple texts, doing theory on the run, thrusts me into a state of becoming.

In arguing for attention to the spaces where multiple conceptions of power and knowledge play out their effects in material, sometimes bodily ways, I have not superseded Irigaray's call to link the earthbound with the celestial through the creation of a *sensible transcendental*; nor have I trampled on Drusilla Modjeska's evocative unravelling of the *movement* implicit in giving life to a story and a story to a life. Rather, I have found in Friedman's scholarship a way to read these texts afresh. At the dawn of the new millennium in Australia, I argue, consideration of the specific historical and geographical contexts for the discourses which feminist activists must create or resist is paramount.

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