

This research journey explores the motivation to study practices of environmental education and the privilege that supports the researcher to do so. This inquiry had started out as a study of how environmental educators work with a critical and social justice perspective, but after the author allowed herself to listen with great care to the co-participants and to pay attention to all her senses, not just her rational thoughts, the research became something else. This paper is excerpted from *Disrupting privilege, identity, and meaning: A reflexive dance of environmental education* (Neilson, 2008). It discusses the practical science of listening to images for disrupting the researcher's own assumptions and use of power and privilege. This piece is removed from an unconventional format – a dance pattern, both real and metaphoric which invites the reader on a disruptive path to challenge themselves and the author as they read. This excerpt stands here alone masquerading as a linear assertion; but the reader is invited to dance away any stifling certainty they may discover.

## Deconstructing Research Practice

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Choosing to explore the stories of which I am part, which I help create, which create me, is a radical undertaking. By radical, I mean going to the root. In exploring our stories of being environmental educators, I am going back to the roots of our social constructions. I did not realize how radical this would turn out to be when I started but, once I committed to this approach, I could not be partially radical. “Partially radical” is not “radical.”

Digging at the roots of my construction of myself as an educator led to the digging at the roots of my construction of myself as a researcher. This meant exploring all the normalized procedures, practices, templates, frameworks and forms, and making deliberate choices after reflecting on issues of power and privilege that arise out of oppression based on race, gender and class, amongst other things.

This approach also matches the description of a radical as someone with both feet planted firmly in the air. This aptly describes how I felt – sometimes flying freely away from the weight of prescriptive methodology, but at other times nauseated from the regular freefall of this approach and the occasional gusts of self-doubt. Borrowing from Joni Mitchell's lyrics, Lorri

Neilsen (2004) evokes elegant cloud imagery when she describes this as “groundless theory”. She points out that, “inquiry is liminal space; knowing is liminal space...our challenge is always to find grace in this way of being, this in between state.” She quotes Rumi (2001, p. 21), “Be crumbled, so wildflowers will come up where you are. You’ve been stony for too many years. Try something different. Surrender” (p. 46).

‘Focus, focus, focus’ was an important message I took from my first committee meeting. In this context, keeping a focus meant continuously exploring the stories of myself as an environmental educator and as a researcher. In order to keep from recognizing as environmental educators only those people who are white, middle-class ecologists, I kept the search for participants broad. As a white, middle-class ecologist, I would be continuing oppression if I used definitions that already normalized “environmental educators” or were based on a white idea of “other” (P. McLaren, 2000). I kept the criteria focused, looking for participants who have a social critical perspective on environmental education. Immediately I was working a tension within/between keeping a focused but broad approach.

### Surrendering to a focused, broad participant search

My pre-recruitment ideas about potential participants included criteria such as age and specific teaching experience. I thought that participants would be best able to engage in this inquiry if they had five or more years of specific environmental education experience; this would give them sufficient experience on which to reflect. They needed to work or have worked in situations where they had to deal with the mainstream. Otherwise, how could they reflect on resisting the mainstream? I was also aiming to recruit a diverse group of participants as so little research seemed to do this.

As people contacted me expressing their interest, I found that I was reluctant to answer their questions as to whether they were who I was looking for. I had earlier realized that my working definition of environmental educators made me blind to some of the existing diversity. I did not want to exclude anyone based on any continuing blind spots I might have. Instead, I told them that if they felt they were an environmental educator who had a social, critical perspective and they wanted to explore their stories with me, I was interested in their involvement. I indicated that I was trying to recruit a diverse group of people, but I did not tell anyone that they

did or did not fit into that selection by virtue of their gender, their apparent whiteness or other seemingly obvious characteristic of identity. Here was another place of great tension. I wanted to take up Peter McLaren's challenge "to denaturalize whiteness by breaking its codes and the social relations and privileging hierarchies that give such codes normative power" (2000, p. 155). To do this, I felt that I could not define race – especially as defined by white "non-race" – as the sole criterion for potential participants (cf. Frankenberg, 1993).

Some potential participants seemed to lose interest when I was not specific about these guidelines. I was unsure about including a couple of people who talked about trying to make environmental education more mainstream, as I was talking about resisting mainstream influences. However, I felt that their perspective might have great potential in deconstructing the concept of "mainstream" and perhaps we were expressing the same concern in different words. Age was another issue that I explored in the recruitment process. I wanted to make sure this inquiry was primarily based on lived experiences rather than on read theory. I articulated these criteria to a couple of potential participants, asking them to assess whether they would be primarily reflecting on theory or practice. I ended up turning away one person who was quite interested but felt that she did not have any specific experience from which to reflect. However, a couple of other people argued convincingly that their experience, albeit of fewer years, would be important for this inquiry because they felt that they had always had a social critical perspective and, as relative newcomers in their place of work, they usually felt at odds with the well-established mainstream forces at play there.

Recruiting for participants and trying to take a participatory approach created another tension in which to bump around. Despite my attempts, I had not managed a way for co-participants to earn comparable university credit (as suggested by Fischer, 1997). I wanted to co-develop the specific research process so that co-participants would have more power and ownership within the work and gain much from participating. It seemed likely that participants might be doing research in this area and therefore, jointly, we could construct some of the research activities to be used in other such research projects. As it turned out, five participants were graduate students or university lecturers at the time of this research. So, although *merely wanting* to be part of this research could be interpreted as a superficial reason to be chosen as a participant, I chose to view people who wanted to be part of this research as knowledgeable and

self-aware individuals whose desire to participate indicated their social and critical perspectives in environmental education and their ability to shed light on this quest.

I have included a great deal of detail about where and how I recruited participants. I have two purposes in mind, both related to the fact that very little research in environmental education gives voice to people outside dominant cultures (James, 2003; Wane & Chandler, 2002). I want to acknowledge this as an issue that is often silenced by brief statements about limitations of research studies. By seeking other voices and then ultimately focusing on my voice, I may have betrayed this goal. However, I offer this unintended betrayal openly for scrutiny.

James (2003) asks, "Can a researcher adequately research racial or ethnic groups other than their own" (p. 75)? This question is constructed on the idea of stable racial and ethnic identities. I think the question should be, "Can a researcher adequately speak for anyone but herself?" In this research, I decided against interpreting the meanings of co-participants' stories so I present large sections of stories in their exact words from transcripts. But I ask myself have I not interpreted their stories at least minimally because I chose and arranged them to present? An alternative possibility for this research would have been to work with the meanings that these people have made of their own stories through this collaboration and our collective meaning-making stories. This process would have represented a fuller collaboration than the present project and would mean that we would look to fully sharing the authorship of this work. Of course, that would have meant a significantly greater commitment of time on everyone's part.

Acknowledging that there are multiple truths in any situation, and that I cannot begin to know any other than my own, has direct implications when I return to the question of how to do social critical environmental education. Invariably I will privilege my own truths. How can I live anything but my own truths? If I acknowledge the limitations to my truths (my knowledge), then I invite other people to share their truths and, through this self-reflective collaboration, knowledge can be created and actions taken that support a larger community of truths. These collective truths are therefore more likely to be more equitable and just than when only one person's truths are recognized.

## Research methods “by ear”

In the discussion of influences on development of identity, I wrote about learning to play music aurally or “by ear.” This experience has had a huge impact on my perception of myself and has widened my sphere of listening. Working with my memories and reflections, as well as those of co-participants, provoked further learning about listening. Visualization interviews, analytic illustrations and the various activities at the research retreat were all powerful tools for listening that helped uncloak hidden privilege and assumptions, as well as strength, hope and joy.

I was surprised at how well the visualization interview, in particular, brought out intimate stories. The longer I reflected on these stories and the trust that co-participants placed in me, the more overwhelmed I felt. I felt a great responsibility to take care of these gifts of stories, and to treat them (the stories/narratives) and the givers well. I endeavoured to respect co-participants by starting with their stories and adapting research methods according to their stories and specific advice. Moreover, I tried to unpack my stories by being aware of/sensitive to the resonance from their stories. I realized that reflecting on my own stories in isolation was not enabling me to deconstruct them. Lather (1994) had warned about “buying into the faith in the powers of critical reflection” that contradicts “the limits of consciousness” (p. 50). This type of listening has been an important site of learning for me, but also creates a troubling tension of unmasking my privilege and the stories that permit me to be blind to my continuing creation of my own privilege and power within this research.

For example, as a researcher I have been attentive to opportunities for drawing out and capturing conversations and questions to create knowledge that supports social justice. While I am conscious of being on a postmodern journey to collaboratively create and highlight multiple truths rather than discover “The Truth,” I struggle with the compelling ideas of rigour and validity so long espoused as elements of “good” research. I tried to find a way to satisfy my problematic (but very real) desire to feel that I was doing “good” research without interfering with my commitment to do respectful research. However, listening well – listening to multiple ways of knowing, to myself and to research partners – takes time. In seeking a consistent approach across participants, I took insufficient time to listen well and speak appropriately during all parts of this research. Lipsett (2001) warned about such mistakes: “Misused, words

can have a sort of taming effect, which makes us a controller of an experience rather than a participant or better yet co-creator of it” (p. 38).

## Reflections on/from images

After I transcribed the visualization interviews, I drew images of the ideas, metaphors, and questions that came to mind upon my first reflections. Rather than being an analysis of what each person had told me, these represented what had resonated with me after meeting with each person. The influence of co-participants had a cumulative effect on my thinking so some illustrations sprung out of previous participant conversations rather than the one I had just transcribed. In addition, some of the images represented an initial missing of an important idea raised, a misreading of what someone meant, or a hurried over-generalization. As dian marino wrote, “the ‘messy’ layering capacity of drawings can be a reminder of the ‘untidy’ way we experience reality” (1997, colour plate).



Mountain, Maize, Book and Body

*We are in constant reciprocal relationship with the environment as we physically take in the elements through our noses, mouths and skins, and release back into the world through respiration, perspiration and elimination. As we begin to look at this constant give and take, the basic assumptions regarding what is “me” and what is “not me” begin to break down. Is breath “me” or “not me”? Food? Our cells? We are indeed an integral part of the world around us, and it is us. Looking around in nature, we see the continual movement that takes place in the wind and water, the clouds, trees and animals. We live in a world, which, like the human body with its tides of breath and blood, is in constant flow. (Tellmann, 2001/2003)*

I did not have specific plans to use drawings to tease out my thoughts or assist the analysis. But when I initially read over the transcripts from the first interviews, I was struck by how embedded, inter-related and connected are the influences that affect our sense of self, environment and education. *How I see myself affects how I see the environment: Am I part of the environment? Is the environment outside of me? How I have experienced the environment will affect my idea of self and education. My education influences how I see the environment and who/what I am.* In other words, experiences, emotions, and stories – things that influence us – act holistically to help create our complex and ambiguous truths.

Although I felt comfortable drawing my reflections, I did not feel comfortable asking anyone to *read* the illustrations without written text. I had believed that I was working toward supporting complexity and ambiguity in the research, but I felt compelled to accompany each illustration with a letter that explained what I had done and a statement about what the illustration was trying to convey. Four months prior to the research retreat, I had participated in a workshop exploring community mural-making through York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies and The Catalyst Centre, run by Sergio Valdés Rubalcaba of the Universidad Atonoma de Mèxico (UNAM). Here I learned about brainstorming with wordless images. However, in the context of research, the concept of communicating in such a way seemed confusing rather than complex, and the ambiguity seemed too great. I had forgotten the lessons about meaning-making and wordless images: the potential meanings constructed by the viewer are less confined/controlled by the artist when *the meaning* is not presented in written text. Text can also be quite frightening (Happonen, in press) especially when, in some cases, I did not choose my words carefully enough nor anticipate the potential reaction to my words. Nevertheless, I gave each co-participant a copy of the "reflective illustration" connected to their interview and asked them to comment on my reflections.

Rather than seeking advice from participants on the possible implications of this action, I trusted my intuition and gave everyone a reflective illustration and accompanying letter that I had created from my resonance with their initial interview. As the researcher, I had the privilege of deciding when to seek advice and when to follow my own feelings without further consideration. In hindsight, I realized that, had I acted as if co-participants were co-researchers as I had initially envisioned, I should have sought advice from them on this matter. Undoubtedly, someone would have had specific knowledge and experience with similar approaches to help me

consider such issues as how questioning of myself might be perceived as a questioning of others, and that misunderstandings of participants' long cherished stories might be offensive or hurtful to them. The very act of asking might have reinforced their power to read me as a co-participant/co-researcher struggling to understand my stories rather than the researcher judging theirs.

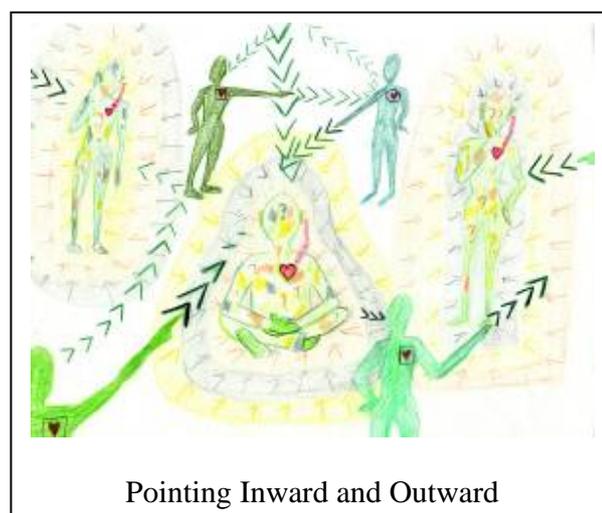
In reassessing how I used these illustrations, I was dismayed to find that my actions mimic Convery's (1999) description of privileging self-construction as "a principled and sensitive self, struggling against oppositional forces" (p. 135). However, unlike the researchers that he suggested were obliged to accept the overt stories of participants without question, I made deliberate attempts to destabilize stories to get to what they might conceal. I see that I was judgmental of some participants' stories. I am ashamed to admit it but, by not taking enough time to consider the importance of these stories and of how participants might read what I had originally envisioned as self-reflections, my actions were hurtful in some cases. Conversely, ignoring or being superficial with other stories may have been equally disrespectful. I had thought that I was focusing on disrupting my stories, when in practice I was also challenging the stories of participants. When one of the co-participants showed me what I had actually done, this ultimately destabilized both my story and the process of this research. This revealed much about me as an educator and a researcher, and resulted in a change in this inquiry. But does that make the outcomes morally defensible? I offer the spiralling story tellings and retellings in the hopes of recruiting the reader to join the attempts at deconstructing my stories and understanding the moral stories evoked.

One of the prime reasons for sharing my illustrations and beginning thoughts with each co-participant was a concern that I would offend or disappoint someone if I did not have anything to say in reference to his or her stories. However, by sharing the over-simplified, rudimentary first reflections of the individual interviews, I unintentionally offended, which is why I took a great deal of time before I presented much of this text to the participants. I wanted to take care and put a great deal of thought into what stories and fragments of conversations I chose to use. A tension arises out of my power and privilege within this research to make these choices. I only used quotes and paraphrases that were approved by co-participants. However, I made the initial selection for them to consider. I deliberated on what co-participants had offered as important for environmental education: namely partnerships (Sarah); coming together in

stewardship (Christine); and engaging collectively (John). I take these themes to be important for research also. However, every time I thought about sharing developing ideas and inviting further input before the first draft was completed, I thought of additional things to analyse and write; I felt that I had not done sufficient work to honour participants and their contributions. I felt that I would be asking more than I was giving and I could not forget that we had formal written agreements that did not include using more of their time to help me get another degree.

Christine Grant (2003) discussed this same challenge when trying to create music collaboratively with other jazz musicians; you have to offer skilled playing and quality musical ideas to be able to receive music from others. Listening well and being a good sharer of time is only part of the collaborative contract (Grant, 2003). This was especially important as I began to realize that this research endeavour would primarily explore my stories, not those of the co-participants. I needed to make sure I fully considered the implications of this decision, for although attempting to present the meaning of participants' stories would be an abuse of power, it would also be abusive if I contributed to participants feeling ignored or silenced within our collaboration.

Allowing volatility and acknowledging mistakes are important ways to make it safe for other people to make mistakes and for welcoming alternatives to the dominant mainstream stories of research and environmental education. However, admitting mistakes is not an excuse



for carelessly making more especially when working with the sacred stories of participants. According to Jerre Roberts ([www.tejasstorytelling.com/faith.html](http://www.tejasstorytelling.com/faith.html)), sacred stories can be thought of in multiple ways: a container that holds “our heritage and our history, our faith and our hopes,

our values and our visions;” a connector that “links us to our past and to those who went before us;” and, “mirrors that reflect our experience, hopes, dreams.” Our stories may indeed be sacred, but this sacredness does not mean that I should reinforce all stories uncritically, especially those with potential (or history) of being oppressive. Manji (2003) asks why she should not expect Muslims to be interested in confronting oppression within fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic practice. She suggests that in making these challenges we should focus on our own implication in the oppression, and also to be wary of the “soft racism of low expectations” that some sacred stories are not robust enough to survive such scrutiny (Manji, 2003).

I tell many of the same stories as the other participants, so focusing on how I am implicated in oppressive parts of stories does not necessarily remove me from the problematic position of critiquing other people’s stories. The focal point then becomes *how* do I explore these stories. Form of communication is important; in-person conversations allow for instantaneous appraisal of the emotions involved and evoked but written or drawn communication does not, and the permanence of the latter allows hurt to be relived upon subsequent readings or viewings. As well, meanings of common stories may not be common or as sacred from one person to another, so “out loud” musings may not be appropriate to share. I found that I was less careful with the stories whose details were closest to my own stories because I assumed the meanings were the same as those I made. Conversely, I may have been too superficial in the exploration of other stories. This tension was not easy to work within, but asking why and how I explore a story and what might be the implications of deconstructing this particular story at this particular time, helped me. Once I had carefully made my way through this tension, I could ask approval from the participants for using their stories without too much worry that I would offend them or require a great deal more of their time and effort.

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