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An entry into a creative, rhizomatic narrative inquiry into young people's identity construction

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Located in a larger study that attempted to challenge taken-for-granted or homogenizing assumptions about constructions of adolescent identity and to interrogate radically the process of qualitative research in this field [O' Grady, G. (2012). "Constructing Identities with Young People using Creative Rhizomatic Narrative." PhD Thesis. Queen's University Belfast], the paper picks up the narrative of the research journey at a moment of meeting with Kim Etherington, Professor of Narrative Research at the University of Bristol. It opens with the conversation that ensued and my introduction to the figure of the rhizome [Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. ([1987] 2004). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by B. Massumi. London: Continuum, 8) which, alongside other poststructuralist ideas, I subsequently used to conceptualize and frame the inquiry. In grappling with the questions posed in our conversation, I hope to make visible three interweaving themes in this paper: My difficulties initially in 'inhabiting' the philosophical positions I took up in this creative narrative inquiry; my growing commitment to a form of narrative inquiry that challenges inherited dominant understandings of subjectivity and research methodologies and finally, my encounters with 'otherness' in the construction of self/other as a thematic thread that interwove all the narratives of the young people in the larger study.

Keywords: narrative; rhizome; adolescent identity; othering

Introduction

The inquiry in which this paper is located, grew over six years from its original position as an orthodox social science research study on identity construction in adolescence, to a creative, rhizomatic narrative inquiry (O' Grady 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). That shift in style brought with it a change in purpose. The focus became, not only on exploring how young people constructed identity but also on mapping the organic process of doing the research and writing my way through the epistemological and ontological territory in a struggle to find a method to both work with and 'present' the participants' identity narratives. That struggle became a major thematic thread as I attempted to make transparent the social and cultural discourses that constituted the multiple, contradictory subjectivity of myself as writer and that of the young people. The purpose of both interweaving strands of the research was to 'show' how identities were constructed in the 'between-the-two' (Deleuze and Parnet 2002, 13)

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spaces as both the participants and I moved through the text of the inquiry. Pedagogically, my aim was to facilitate a group of young people, in a second-level school setting, in an exploration of the social discourses they drew on to construct their individual and collective identities; to make visible cultural norms and to attempt to hold open a space for them to re/image/symbolize/story fixed, limiting notions of themselves.

Why was this important to me? I began this work with a curiosity about how youth in 'late adolescence' develop a sense of self. As a guidance counsellor in Ireland in the nineties, I worked with students in preparation for entry to third-level education and started to question the often stressful practice of listing courses in order of preference on a Central Applications Office (CAO) form. I began to wonder about the inherited developmental psychological knowledge that was informing and validating it. I wondered about stage developments and the idea of 'late adolescence' being the opportune time to develop a unified, coherent sense of self as espoused by people like Erikson (1968, 1980), Marcia (1980), Harter (1990a, 1990b, 1999), Kroger (2004), among others. I wondered if the notion of an integrated self had not more to do with social/cultural requirements than a cognitive/developmental achievement. The shifting, multiple, at times contradictory desires of the young people I worked with were not easily synthesized to a vocational first preference. Positioning myself alongside students, the big story of Development did not appear to speak to their lived experience (O' Grady 2013). Coupled with this, in the personal counselling strand of my role, I was feeling uncomfortable with a humanistic approach that located the 'problem' in the person, largely ignoring the context in which the problem was produced. Young people who found themselves 'outside the norm' often blamed *themselves* for their experience of isolation. These concerns remained with me in later years as a teacher/counsellor educator and led me, in my first research study (O' Grady 2003), to engage with the writings of Kenneth Gergen (1991, 1992, 1996, 2001) and other social constructionist researchers like John Shotter (1993, 1995, 1998, 1999) and Rom Harré (1998). Their anti-essentialist stance towards knowledge, the focus on language and social processes and the underscoring of all knowledge as contextual and culturally specific was liberating but challenging. The notion of identity as narratively constructed – as dependent on the meaning that discourse gives it – shook at the roots of my humanist understanding of self, bothering the linearity and taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that formerly guided my work with young people (O' Grady 2013).

Theorizing the person as constituted narratively jars with a singular, bounded notion of the person, and so in 2008 when I began this inquiry with young people into how they constructed and re-constructed their identities, it was important to find a method of re/presentation that disrupts unified thinking. Drawing largely on the French philosophers, Deleuze and Guattari's figures especially the rhizome ([1987] 2004, 8) and the feminist, poststructuralist ideas of Davies, Richardson and others to conceptualize this study which I completed in 2012, enabled me to challenge traditional, inherited research structure and match form with content (Gale and Wyatt 2008a). Hence, the narrative theories that shaped my thinking throughout the period I was engaged in the research are poststructuralist/social constructionist ideas, with their emphasis on language/discourse and the construction of self as that which happens in social contexts, in the space between people.

The narrative process was made more accessible by the use of visual image-making, at times helping to unfold the taken-for-granted, unrecognized social, cultural, institutional stories that we all take ourselves up in and are taken into. I employed a creative narrative approach in using metaphors/figures to conceptualize the inquiry and in drawing on arts-based methods – self-portrait drawing, collage and mask-making – to facilitate the young people in an exploration of their identities[1].

Located in this larger study, this paper picks up the narrative early in the research process, at a moment of meeting with Kim Etherington, Professor of Narrative Research at the University of Bristol. At this point, I was struggling to find footholds in what felt like a shifting knowledge landscape and so, on the recommendation of my colleague and mentor, Ruth Leitch, I contacted Kim! In a more traditional research study, this process knowledge can often remain invisible, however, in narrative ethnographies, the process and product are interwoven. Richardson writes, 'The product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production or the method of knowing' (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 970). It is hoped that in highlighting the 'messiness' (Denzin 1997, 224) of this stage of the research, the paper will dispel the notion that there is a correct way to 'do' a creative narrative inquiry and may offer encouragement to our many doctoral students who often experience difficulties at this point.

The following invites the reader into the conversation with Kim and opens up the context of my introduction to the figure of the rhizome and how I used it and other poststructuralist ideas, to frame the study and conceptualize identity. In grappling with some of the questions posed in our conversation, I hope to make visible three interweaving strands: My difficulties initially in 'inhabiting' the philosophical positions I took up in this inquiry; my growing commitment to a form of narrative inquiry that challenges inherited dominant understandings of subjectivity and research methodologies and finally, my encounters with 'otherness' in the construction of self/other as a thematic thread that interwove all the narratives of the young people in the larger study.

In attempting to disrupt inherited, linear writing styles, the writing moves in and out of spaces and back and forward in time; questions posed at the beginning are 'answered' towards the end. The 'spaces between' enter into some of the rhizomatic story trails taken in the workshops with the young people. I begin the conversation with a 'realist' tale as a narrative device.

The meeting with Kim

> Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy suggests that the research process itself is a space–time where bodies and forces intersect creating new possibilities for thinking and doing. (Hickey-Moody and Malins 2006, 18)

On a balmy summer's morning on 9 July 2008, I spent time talking about my research with Kim Etherington[2] in her garden conservatory in Bristol. Remembering moments during that visit, leads me into the heart of a metaphor that has no centre. It is as a result of this meeting that my attention was drawn to the figure of the rhizome and hence to the notion of 'rhizomatic narrative'.

Our conversation began with my story of the research so far: The labyrinthine path through realist and relativist epistemologies in an effort to locate myself in a research

study on adolescent identity construction; my desire to facilitate the exploration of identity categories/positions that young people take up and are taken into, how they construct their identities in terms of the stories and social discourses they draw on; my search for creative narrative methodologies.

As I spoke, my shoulders tensed, knees locked and my neck did its cracking thing. I was performing a familiar position: I was positioning Kim as the expert, locating her as 'wise woman' in the complex folds of the discourse of narrative inquiry, myself being subjected within that discourse to the category of student. She resisted this position, repositioning herself as a fellow companion on what I had been calling, the 'sod of bewilderment' (O' Grady 2012). However, it was clear that she had passed this way before. The territory was not unfamiliar to her and she shared her knowledge.

There were moments, as we spoke, when my body softened, belly folded out over the constraining waistband, buttocks eased into the chair causing the plaited wicker to sigh. These were responses to a warm glance, affirming tones. They were listening moments: receptive, awake to the birdsong. I became conscious of the early-morning sun catching the angles of the glass panels in the roof, refracting light from the apex. Richardson's crystals (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005) come to mind now: 'prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns and arrays casting off in different directions' (963).

Our conversation moved in shifting directions from theoretical stories to personal stories of childhood, location/dislocation, research practice, work – our individual angles, takes, positionings, inviting a response from the other. Sometimes our stories 'bumped up against' (Clandinin et al. 2006) each other, as in the case when we spoke about where my research was going. Remembering the image of the crystal: what we see depends on our angle of repose (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005), it seemed that from where Kim stood, I needed to begin with the story of the young people:

> First of all, what story are the young people telling you as they explore their creative narratives and construct their identities? What story do they want you to tell, to whom and why?

Also, she wondered, 'Why are you doing this research? What is your own story of adolescence?'

From where I stood, the narrative telling of the research story had begun two years previously with lots of personal narrative threads as I explored the elusive philosophical roots of narrative inquiry. The epistemological and ontological ground that I had traditionally positioned myself on had become increasingly shaky because other ways of understanding how knowledge is produced and alternative ways of making meaning in the world had opened up to me. Blaise Pascal in *The Two Infinities* understood this in a more foundational way:

> We burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the infinite. But our groundwork cracks and the earth opens to abysses. (cited in Gergen 1991, 81)

But yes, it seemed to me now that the 'telling' of it was very theoretical. Although I had spent two years working on this project, completing one of two creative

programmes with Irish Senior Cycle students in which they had explored identity narratives, the voices and images of the students had not yet materialized in the text that I had sent to Kim. She also reminded me:

> You are researching the categories young people are positioning themselves in but look at the assumption you are making. Narrative Inquiry is about moving from a position of 'not knowing'.

She elucidates this in her book (Etherington 2008):

> … a 'not knowing' attitude … seems to me an ideal attitude for researchers who truly seek new knowledge, rather than trying to find knowledge that fits with, and reinforces, previously chosen theories about people and the world. (21)

Her message, it seemed to me was that while I had an inquiring, discursive style, I was continuing to carry a grid. I think of Davies and Gannon's (2006, 16–34) chapter on 'The ambivalent project of subjectification'. They quote Walkerdine (1991):

> Young girls of primary school age are presented with, and inserted into, ideological and discursive positions by the practices which locate them in meaning and regimes of truth. (16)

Examining closely the processes of this subjectification through collective biography work, Davies' stories show the simultaneous struggle to submit to and master appropriate inscription within the social order of schools. So yes, as someone who worked hard at her inscription as 'good' student, I carry a grid. I make the assumption that the young people I worked with are also located in 'regimes of truth'. The 'grid' was the subject of much of my earlier writing (O' Grady 2012, 90–139): an attempt to lay bare the multiple layering of discourse/the palimpsest of inscriptions that constitutes this body of writing and the material body of the writer.

But was I missing the point?

The discourse of techne

A traditional academic mind-set needs to create *categories*, needs to know and to control *in advance* (Gale and Wyatt 2008a, 16). While I spoke and wrote about puncturing habitual ways of understanding knowledge production and blurring boundaries, while I was keenly aware of the harmful effects on young people of a singular discourse of self, I continued to think in terms of fixed mental systems of categorization. I located myself, and continue to be located, between two competing discourses: the poetics of the narratives of *mythos* and the rational scientific measurable world of *techne* (Gale and Wyatt 2008a, 16). Jean McNiff (2006) understood this, catching herself, at times, using the same form of binary analytical thinking to critique the substantive issue of binary analytical thinking, creating a circularity that she could not break out of. As I write this, I am conscious of the institutional gaze that has kept me on the 'straight and narrow' all my school life: Foucault's metaphor of the *panopticon* design comes to mind; extending the gaze of the public into the realm of the private, increasing the odds that one would not transgress. This gaze, according to

Foucault (1979), becomes 'psychologized' as part of the apparatus of individual self-control. Like McNiff (2006) (citing Bar-On 2002), I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction, using the master's tools to rebuild the master's house. She writes:

> I learned from childhood, from my culture, to think in terms of categories of analysis; so it is difficult to break out, because this would mean changing my form of logic; and this kind of fundamental mental change can be frightening. (2)

And so to the rhizome!

> For Deleuze and Guattari ([1987] 2004) the rhizome is an 'image of thought' (149) in the same way as the tree of knowledge. But whereas the tree of knowledge signifies a unitary system with diverse branches, the rhizome signifies the uncertain, horizontal development of thought, 'semi-aleatory' and mutative. (Keating 1998, 5)

The last article I read before leaving for Bristol was in *Qualitative Inquiry* (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008, 632–650), titled 'The Narrative Construction of Self: Self-hood as a Rhizomatic Story'. So when Kim asked me if I had heard of Deleuze and his figure of the rhizome, I responded, 'vaguely'. She continued to speak about our conversation being, in a way, 'part of the rhizomatic story of the inquiry, another entry point, another place of departure that needs to be mapped if you choose to go the narrative route', and suggested that I read a recent Doctoral thesis by Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt (Gale and Wyatt 2008a). It was too heavy, I thought, to carry back to my guesthouse, especially because my intention was to take home her three books (Etherington 2003, 2004, 2008). As I was leaving, Kim held the thesis up to me again, and feeling a wave of both annoyance and gratitude, I put it in my bag and thanked her. The bulging, mirror-embossed, cloth bag reflected and refracted the midday sun as I walked back along the leafy park road.

Heavy

   Weighed down

      Dancing light particles.

Reading Gale and Wyatt's thesis

As I moved in and out of the shifting writing spaces of Ken and Jonathan's nomadic inquiry, I experienced the terrain as un/familiar and recognizable. So many bits echoed the work I had already been doing and many more hailed me on to new territories and landscapes of desire (Davies and Gannon 2006). *Between the two: a nomadic inquiry into collaborative writing and subjectivity* (2008) is an experimental, transgressive and nomadic exploration into the subjectivities of the two authors as they write and respond to each other's writing via email. Reading, I felt excited, drawn into the inter-mezzo space/s where writing is 'elusive, mercurial and continues to *stutter*,' troubling the 'Kantian noumenon: it *must* have body, it *must* have form, it *must* be a thing in itself' (8, emphasis in the original). The rhizome as an image of thought flattens hier-archical arrangements and ceaselessly establishes connections. It troubles notions of unity, foundations and identity. The rhizomatic, rupturing, non-linear, structure of

their writing embraces the ambiguity of meanings. All of this validated my own discursive meanderings and shifting writing styles while also pointing a way to framing how I might work with the young people's exploration of identity. It reinforced for me also that the process of writing articulates the becoming of the writer.

I play with Deleuzian/Guattarian figures to 'capture' the rhizomatic shaping of the writing thus far.

Inquiry as rhizomatic

the story moves stops starts stuttering along lines of inquiry, nomadic
'thresholds and doors where becoming itself becomes'
a 'body without organs'; multiple connected social
the lonely senses awaken in the 'intermezzo' 'interbeing' middle space
movement against the grain – connection – rupture
and … and … and …

Grace

Rhizomatic writing as transgressive; making visible the 'knowing of the noun'

My initial reaction, however, to their article on this subject, published in *Qualitative Inquiry* (2008b) as 'Two Men Talking,' was one of discomfort at the intense intimacy of the writing. Reflecting on this now, I turn to their dissertation for what Deleuze and Guattari ([1987] 2004) refer to as a 'line of flight'; 'becomings', 'tiny connections' and 'movements' which are operative at the minute or molecular level. Ken's response to Jonathan in 'Obsessions and Desire – 12th May 2007' (Gale and Wyatt 2008a, 229) makes visible for me the way we (re)cognize each other as this or that. He calls it 'the knowing of the noun'. If the intimate exchange between the two men speaks to their sexual orientation, then we have a noun for that. But if it doesn't, we are unsure, uncomfortable. Speaking about cognition as knowing, Ken writes, 'I do not deprecate this knowing … I deprecate its dominance in the discourses of self that culture forces us, everybody to inhabit' (229).

My 'at sea-ness' about the relationship of the two authors may account for the initial discomfort that I felt despite my feminist leanings: My desire to 'pin down' and categorize, rubbing up against a desire to 'open up to'. Henriques et al. (1984) and Ryan (1997) remind us that the competing discourse of femininity and feminist discourse, construct the female subject as contradictory. We have been for so much of our lives, storied in the former that it continues to speak us *in spite of* ourselves. Ken and Jonathan use their rhizomatic writing to transgress and transcend simple classifications of self. Inspired by them, I remained watchful of myself as a living contradiction moving through the intermezzo spaces of my study as I attempted to make visible the ways – often gendered and heteronormative – in which the young people performed their identities, and to hold open a space for both myself and the young people to transgress fixed notions of self/identity.

*Kim's specific questions form a rhizomatic shoot, which ruptures and reconnects at a later stage in this paper.

Rhizomatic writing as multiple and connecting: mapping and entering the field of the study

The most important characteristic of the rhizome is that it has *multiple entryways*. (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008, 637, emphasis in the original)

In using the figure of the rhizome to conceptualize the study I applied Deleuze and Guattari's principles of multiplicity and connectivity. It is rhizomatic in terms of its structure: stuttering along lines of inquiry (Gale and Wyatt 2008a), creating multiple entryways, connections and ruptures (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 23), and in terms of its subject matter; the construction and reconstruction of self/identity through the young people's creative narrative work and the nomadic process of writing (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005). Using the rhizome as a metaphor for the narrative construction of identity, I listened for heterogeneous, connecting, rupturing storylines that were at times coherent but more often, contradictory (Deleuze and Guattari 1976; Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008). Like Sermijn et al., I make the assumption that there is no single entry point that can lead me as writer to my own *true* identity/story, or that of the young people with whom I worked. The entry taken shifted depending on audience, research context, school context, the questions participants and I posed, gender, status and the gaze of the other (Foucault 1979; Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008).

> A Rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. (Deleuze and Guattari [1987] 2004, 25)

To puncture the notion of an asocial, autonomous/bounded self, the narrative vignettes I recorded in my inquiry were always, whether directly or indirectly, narratives of 'the between' (between the writer and the literature, between the individual young people who participated in the creative narrative programme/s and between the young people and me as facilitator). A critical further intermezzo location in the inquiry was the creative liminality between creator/performer and artefact: the group members became the audience, receiving and responding to each other's creative narratives.

Select narrative trails into the young people's storied identities

Writing my way through some of the narrative 'trails' taken by the young people in the workshops and one-to-one conversations, I conceptualized three movements. All three are performances of co-constructed identities as the young people and I spoke ourselves into existence in the group and began to loosen up fixed notions of gender, hegemonic masculinity/femininity, sexual identity, ethnicity and more. *The first movement* focused on the conversational territory crossed by the young people as they both positioned themselves and were positioned/repositioned in the discourses that circulated in the group. Rhizomatically unfolding the sharp, amusing, untamed, disconcerting, emotive, experiences of the young people were made visible in conversations about sport, exercise, fashion, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, personhood.

The entry into the rhizomatic, 'between-the-two' story below, constructing sexual identity, was sparked during the audiencing of Evan's first self-portrait. He had drawn himself wearing earrings in both ears and the following 'performance', with its shifting subject positions, began as the boys try to pin down its meaning and its signification. In so doing, we see them monitoring and policing proscribed limits to masculinity:

Evan   Well the left ear is if you're straight, the right ear you're gay.
Andy   Both together is bisexual.

Grace   I've seen lots of lads with two.
[Laughter]
Finn   Oh, both are bisexual.
Evan   That's not true. No it's not true.
Finn   It's one hundred percent true … like that's why lads get their ears pierced.
Conor   Like lads can have both ears pierced as well.
Andy   No they can't!
Conor   Yes they can!
Evan   If you're black you can have.
Conor   Loads of people do.
Evan   Nobody knows. They say you're gay just to get at you, that's all …
Conor   I wouldn't wear it in the right ear myself.
Evan   Yeah you're …
Conor: You're just looking for it if you wear it in your right ear.
Andy   I don't wear anything.
Finn   I always wear this watch.
Conor   I wouldn't wear earrings in the right ear … Coz I'm not gay.
Andy   You're kind of gay.
Conor   F–k off (under his breath).

We see in the exchanges above that the pressure to 'stratify/territorialize' as a subject is strong. Bodies actively and strategically put themselves together in order to have a political social voice and to say 'I' (Malins 2004, 85). However, cracks appear in the strata, for no identity category is ever stable, no mode of organization fully sedimented (87). As the boys jockey to position themselves on a heteronormative discourse of masculinity, Evan rejects the assertion that an earring in both ears is a signifier of bisexuality since he has, on other occasions and in his self-portrait, decorated both lobes. My iteration at the beginning perhaps serves to normalize this practice in terms of the frequency with which I have observed young people wearing earrings. Andy and Finn, however, take up an inflexible position insisting that there can only be one interpretation of the practice. And they further consolidate their position by stating, in Andy's case, that he doesn't wear anything and in Finn's case that he wears a safe, functional item of jewellery, a watch. In so doing, they construct themselves as unambiguous and further marginalize Evan as having an ambiguous sexual identity. Conor's positioning in a more liberal discourse, offering boys the option of having both ears pierced, supports Evan's stance. However, in taking up this position, he risks being labelled 'kind of gay' by Andy, in spite of his double assertion that he would not wear an earring in the right ear, as it would be 'asking for it'. In stepping out of line, Conor's previous positioning in a macho discourse remains fragile. Evan's reference to the right of black people to wear two earrings, while exoticising black, loosens the notion of an essential way of interpreting this practice. Opening a line of flight to further dialogue, connections and linkages at a later stage.

The second movement took trails through some of the busy chatter generated by the collage work and the quieter dialogue, which arose from the mask-making activity. In this performance of the young people's identities, we saw how both the boys and girls come to regulate their bodies in relation to dominant social norms of femininity and masculinity. Ideas of beauty, sexuality and body shape were challenged for the

'naturalness' of these discourses and were easily made visible and embedded in their social context largely because the young people used popular teenage magazines with culturally validated bodies to construct their collages. However, this understanding of the body as a social construction was accompanied by a repeated return to an understanding of the body as natural, fixed and asocial in the young people's talk:

> It's my body and I'm not influenced by what anybody else does (Cathy)

> This is just the way I look (Oisin)

Cathy's second collage below, which she titles 'In a spin', makes visible to herself and the rest of the group, the overwhelming bombardment of fashion/lifestyle images on her and on women in general by the fashion industry. The co-constructed conversation helps to locate desire in its cultural context and loosen up fixed notions of beauty and fashion, while validating Cathy's experience, as her own (Figure 1).

Cathy's creative conversation in group

Cathy   I'm taking in all this stuff from the media, other friends, television, DVDs like it's everywhere … shops, shop windows. So I just kind of started to draw big eyes and pack everything in, like jeans, shoes, bags, sunglasses, watches, make-up and on and on … Like I still want it but like there's a lot.

Grace   Why do you think you want it or desire it?

Cathy   Well, you look better with it or like everybody my age has those things, kind of.

Grace   I wonder who decides you look better?

Figure 1.   Cathy's 2nd collage.

Cathy	Mmmm!
Grace	When I look at the collage I feel kind of dizzy.
Cathy	Yeah I put 'spin' in there.
Grace	Funny, you know when politicians are being prepped for a talk they have spin-doctors. You know we often say 'put a spin on it'.
Cathy	I think like advertisers and those put a spin on stuff, like to make things attractive for teenagers so we'll buy.
Grace	So advertisers sell the look to teenagers.
Sandy	'If you buy this you too can look beautiful' yackidyack.
Grace	When you look at the collage Cathy what effect has it on you?
Cathy	It makes me feel like kind of it's too much to take in. I'm glad I drew it though, it makes me think. Like I buy into it
Grace	So you buy into a story about what it is to be beautiful. Yeah, it's a story we buy into. Your portrait is staring us in the face with that message. It's good because … mm … because sometimes these stories exclude people and they may feel less valued than others because of it. [Took the opportunity to politicize the conversation further]
Finn	Like it's back to what we were saying, how does the story benefit people and how does it not, like who benefits and who doesn't. [Finn absorbs this refrain of mine easily because it fits well with and extends his own discursive identity performances, which articulate a liberal, ethical story by and large].

Cathy chose to sit on her own while creating her second collage. She worked on the image with a great sense of purpose and declared that she liked doing it, when she finished. She gave herself the space to *see* how the images that construct her and her peers as glamorous, are sold to them by advertising media. The collage helps her to see how she buys into the story of hegemonic beauty. While she experiences the desire for this in herself, she is aware that it is because of her location in the story that is being sold to her in western culture.

Sandy's contribution above underscores the product/lifestyle spin on how advertising works. She sees the workings of power in the way product is sold. In all her dialogue so far, she positions herself as outside and rejecting the discourse of toned, glamorous femininity and the type of lifestyle it gets you. From a poststructuralist perspective, however, her choices, like that of all the other girls, stem from her access to particular discourses and her 'positioning within categories made real through those discourses' (Davies 1993, 31). In resisting this form of femininity none the less, and the more overt displays of power that she spoke about at an earlier stage in terms of parental coercion as a child into wearing a dress, she constructs herself as a being who can 'position herself in opposition to the impositions of others' (Davies 1993, 31).

Finding lines of flight out of fixed/limiting stories of self was the focus of the *third movement* of the trails. In her collage below, Sandy punctures the male/female dualism by constructing herself as male, and gender and power as contingent. In so doing, she keeps subjectivity in play. It is a momentary release from her strong identification with being the 'faraway forigner.' She elaborates on this in her one-to-one conversation with me:

Figure 2.   Sandy's 2nd collage.

> Sandy   It's kinda what I am and strive to be. Erm … erm … It's kind of an opening up feeling. I feel lots of possibility and like I don't feel confined to any category, the box is opening up and I know I can go back into it if I need … Like I'm not going to go yayaya in the middle of class. I'm also happy I left the man in the middle holding the flag, he's powerful; a kind of Joan of Arc figure. So yeah, I think the collage shows that I am not only the 'Faraway Foreigner', I can be lots of different ways depending on who I'm with, where I am, like what's going on. This picture gives me a wow feeling, yeah.

This opening up of herself to movement is a way of engendering connectivity and acknowledging multiplicity. The complex rhizomatic flow of multiplicities does not get reduced to a grid of organization (male/female/unified self/place in system) that limits the connections the body can make with other bodies (Malins 2004, 84). Sandy's body retains an 'impetus for forming assemblages which allow desire to flow in *different* directions, producing new possibilities and potentials' (88, emphasis in the original). The shift in positioning from 'faraway foreigner' allows for movement out of the box, a movement away from organization and stratification. The energy is playful and loosed. Sandy is aware of this becoming as transitory ' … a mobile assemblage, that arranges and rearranges itself … ' (St. Pierre 1997, 413) (Figure 2).

   In many of the students' creative narratives at this point, there was a temporary move from our habitual dualistic way of speaking, to creating new images/metaphors with which to articulate ourselves. This re/territorialized discursive space formed an assemblage which allowed for an opening up of possibility, tiny movements outside normative strata. The dominant western discourses that work on the body – hegemonic masculinity/femininity, white as invisible, black as ethnic difference, vulnerability as weakness, shyness as personal inadequacy and good student as obedient – were temporarily challenged and openings created through image and metaphor. These might be summarized below as:

Fe/male power

Robust delicacy

Vulnerable strength

In/visible colour

Playful shyness

Rebellious obedience

These new metaphors speak to individual experiences that can be re/membered as the young people re/position themselves in future conversations. These moments were between-the-two activities and were experienced as an opening up of the body to possibility.

Kim's questions

Returning to the conversation in the conservatory now and to the questions Kim asked, I draw on epistemological issues to frame my responses and justify the location of the inquiry on a shifting knowledge base. Returning to these questions focused my attention on a thematic thread that interwove in all the young people's narratives – Otherness in the construction of self/other. I create a space here to explore it further in the process of identity construction.

So, to Kim Etherington's opening questions: She asked what story are the young people telling me? To whom would they like me to tell it and why? And what is my own story of adolescence? These questions were so helpful in sharpening my focus for the research. It is always important to consider *who* is asking the question. What an amazing paradox that the person who introduced me to Deleuze and Guattari's work is herself a writer of 'realist tales'. In a Masterclass at the Maynooth University, Maynooth (Etherington 2011), she described narrative inquiry as having realist and relativist strands, locating her own narrative style in a 'realist epistemology'. Realism is the doctrine that an external world exists independently of our representation of it (Etherington 2005). Relativism posits that nothing ever has to be taken as merely obviously, objectively true. Relativism unravels truth claims and oppressive practices (Edwards, Ashmore, and Potter 1995). In narrative terms, the teller of a realist tale makes sense of what is going on by creating a stable solid version of what and why this or that happened, and in order to do this, they must create a sense of self as unified and coherent (Crossley 2000, 41). Kim concluded that a 'story needs recognizable parameters or it will seem chaotic or meaningless' (Etherington 2010, slide no.20). However, a poststructuralist take on that would locate the 'coherent story' in the western dominant traditional discourse of how a self-story should look (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008). This traditional discourse considers a story as linear, plotted and temporally structured like an embroidered quilt (e.g. Bruner 1986, 2002; Connelly and Clandinin 1986). From this viewpoint, the narrative self of a person can be seen as a traditional story with a beginning, middle and end (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008).

I have come to view this idea of narrative selfhood and thus the re/presentation of this type of narrative as ironing out the multiple positionings, contradictions, ruptures and disjunctive elements of the postmodern take on the narrative self. In this respect,

the poststructuralist discourses I position myself in as researcher/writer challenge the assumption that there is a deep truth that can be discovered. Derrida's statement that 'the thing itself always escapes' (as cited in Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 968) 'throws into radical doubt the heremeneutic assumption that we can, in fact answer the ontological question "What is … ?"' – the question that grounds much interpretive work and that took up so much textual space (as performance) in my inquiry prior to working with the young people. However, before returning to Kim's questions specifically, I would like to puncture the boundary between realism and relativism and locate myself in the poststructuralist 'liminal' view that:

> The self both is and is not a fiction, is unified and transcendent and fragmented and always in the process of being constituted, can be spoken of in realist ways and it cannot, and its voice can be claimed as authentic and there is no guarantee of authenticity. (Davies and Gannon 2006, 384)

There is not one story to tell. The narratives that the young people told about themselves are a heterogeneous collection of sometimes streamlined, sometimes untamed story elements. The multiple, connecting, rupturing, rhizomatic between-the-two stories of sport, leisure, fashion, politics, economics, relationships, gender and personhood, spoke of the young people's desire to belong, of a vulnerability to the other, to the discourse context, constant self/other surveillance, the construction of difference as 'other', a taking up of positions in dualistic discourses and tiny movements beyond. All of these 'hidden' stories were made visible in the identity performances of the research. I re/presented and interrogated – with the help of the young people – how their storied identities were constructed in 'spaces between teller and listener, speaker and setting, individual and culture'. Riessman (2008) refers to this type of narrative analysis as 'dialogic/performance analysis' (105). The question moves from an interrogation of 'what' is spoken, to 'why' and 'for what purpose'. Kim's question, 'To whom do they want you to tell their story?' again provides an opportunity to differentiate realist and relativist ways of producing knowledge. The discourse context of the telling itself became the focus of this inquiry. The young people performed to each other, taking up positions in particular storylines while always being susceptible to being spoken through other discourses (Davies 1993).

> To emphasize the performative is not to suggest that identities are inauthentic … but only that identities are situated and accomplished with audience in mind. (Riessman 2008, 106)

This 'performance' of identities (Foucault 2000; Riessman 2008) was what I attempted to 'capture' in my inquiry, not to record a story or stories told to me by the young people, nor to tell my 'own story of adolescence.' In terms of the latter, the only personal narrative of adolescence I shared with the young people was my awkwardness in being so tall at that time of my life. It was designed to create a communicative bond and to make visible taken-for-granted ideas by locating body size/validation in its cultural context. Other stories of that period of my life didn't connect with the rhizomatic movement of the young people's conversations. As we cannot know in advance what will happen in narrative inquiry, I could not have set out to tell my 'story of adolescence': the stories told, unfolded as part of the rhizomatic

movement of the writing, connecting and rupturing; constituting the subjectivity of the writer and the research participants.

As part of the 'performativity' of this inquiry, however, I found myself asking the young people the above questions after the workshops in their one-to-one creative conversations and, in two cases, in follow-up phone-calls. When asked to whom they would like me to tell their stories, in most cases they replied, to other 'students' like themselves, whether that was a person who was most commonly positioned in a marginalized category like 'nerd', 'foreigner', 'gay' or in a popular category – 'footballer', 'rugby player', 'rebel', 'slender/glamorous'. Their rationale for this was that it might help others to understand how their identities are shaped by the popular storylines and discursive structures that circulate in the school and in society:

> You can tell my story to First Year students who are into football and that. Why? Because they sometimes go over the top trying to build muscle. You can enjoy football without having to go along with the others keeping up muscle tone to a crazy extent, just coz that's the image we have of footballers. (Oisin)

> Maybe those who don't belong, foreign, people like myself who are not from this country. Like we're called 'international students' and straight away that puts us into a different category. So maybe tell principals and those guys who make the rules. (Sandy)

Because these questions were asked in the individual creative conversations at the end of the programme, we can see that this experience, to a large extent, and the young people's learning, influenced the responses. They were performing to someone who had facilitated their exploration of identity images, had worked with them to deconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions and to make visible cultural norms in their conversations. This was the discourse context in which the speaking was made possible but on the other hand shaped and limited what could be said. Most responses highlighted an awareness of one's own habitual positioning as either 'outside' as other or as 'inside' and distancing from other.

Otherness in the construction of self/other

> A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections … (Deleuze and Guattari [1987] 2004, 8)

Returning to the question about 'what story' the young people were telling me connects me to questions about 'otherness', to identity theories that perhaps construct that 'otherness'. It is a *haecceity* moment, 'a moment of heteronomy in which a sense or a knowing of other and difference can be held in a captive but elusive and mercurial moment in space and time' (Gale and Wyatt 2008a, 76).

The notion of identity that I challenged in my inquiry is the idea of identity as unity and stability, and identity as a universal, naturalized substance. What began for me as a concern about developmental psychology's concept of stage development and of 'late adolescence' as being the pivotal time when young people develop a consistent and coherent sense of self, has now become the bigger issue of how this inherited discourse might actually be continuing to construct 'otherness' in the process of identity construction. Erik Erikson, the original and hugely authoritative voice on identity in adolescence, provides an elaboration of what that means:

> The self of childhood, derived from significant identifications with important others must during adolescence, give way to a self derived from yet transcending those foundations – to a new whole greater than the sum of its parts. (Erikson 1968, 161)

However, according to de Castro (2004), integration takes place at the cost of ' … repressing what is in oneself a source of distress, pain, horror and shame - in essence, what is not 'adult'' (472). From this perspective, might developmental psychology's discursive construction of 'late adolescence' actually be contributing to the construction of 'otherness' by naturalizing the process of integrality? As Hall (2001) puts it, the assumption of unity in the term 'identity' is discursively constructed by a closure: 'every identity is defined by what "is missing" – even if this other that is missing from it is silenced and inarticulate' (110).

Social discursive contexts in which identities are constituted are therefore often loaded with urgencies to protect the self from what may cause pain or anxiety. In the young people's identity performances, there was constant monitoring, policing, self/other surveilling as they constructed who they took themselves to be and not to be. Their discomfort at times was visible in how they spoke, moved their bodies and in what was unspoken. That which was perceived as culturally unacceptable was kept at bay consciously or unconsciously for much of the time. I particularly think of some of the girls' creative images: Ciara's 'duck' image in her collage, which was viewed by her as childish, only came out to play in the one-to-one conversation. Maggie's blackness, that which was most visible in a group of white people was invisible in her drawings (O' Grady 2014a), and the miniscule 'I'm shy' stickers on many of the girls' collages, were never articulated.

It was Sandy who risked being positioned in the category of 'other' (that which is pushed aside, rendered abject) as she articulated taboo positions in the hierarchy of relations among the young people. However, because the whole purpose of this research in school was to make visible how the young people were positioning themselves in terms of cultural discourses, she was given a big voice and hearing as she participated in the process of de/essentializing 'otherness' and locating it in its cultural/discursive context. In resisting hegemonic discourses of femininity and their popular identity position, Sandy's stories highlighted difference and opened ways for herself and others to glimpse the multiple shifting possibilities of the heterogeneous self. Evan, while being vulnerable to teasing, was not physically isolated in the group. He, like Finn, managed eventually to straddle the divide between being the same as and different to the others. The 'footballer' and the 'rebel' status positioned them in the same discourse through which the boys, largely, articulated themselves. However, in some taboo aspects of the masculine script (swot/fashionista), they de/essentialized the category and the essentialist notion of self that it confers.

And so …

Poststructuralist theory matters when we are working with youth in our attempts to hold up to them the options the culture gives us for self-understanding to configure themselves in rhizomatic ways. Experiencing an epistemological 'wobble' in the early stages of this study enabled me to enter into the relativity of this work as a researcher and hold open a space for the young people to engage in this messy, creative, critical place of becoming. In this paper, I invited the reader into that nomadic

writing space as I made a first entry into the field of narrative inquiry; to find footholds in the philosophical landscape in the early stages of the study and subsequently map and enter the field of research with the students in school. In responding to the questions that arose in the conversation at the beginning, I attempted to frame my rationale for a growing commitment to a form of narrative inquiry that challenges inherited dominant understandings of subjectivity and research methodology. In attempting to disrupt inherited, linear writing styles, however, the writing fell short. Paradoxically, I found myself 'smoothing' the original presentation of the narrative with its more visible disjunctive elements, so as not to lose the reader. The challenge is managing to stay true to the rhziomatic call within a postmodernist/poststructuralist framework methodologically and in the (re-)presentation/s, while simultaneously telling an engaging 'story'.

The field of narrative studies is inter-disciplinary 'a many layered expression of human thought and imagination' (Riessman 2008, 13). Susan Chase argues that it remains 'a field in the making; the 'realist tales' of early twentieth century sociology, psychology and anthropology are now making room for ethnographies that include subjectivities of investigator and participant alike, an extension of a larger 'interpretive turn' in the social sciences away from the realist assumptions of positivism' (Chase 2005, 651). I see my inquiry as being located in this research territory while at the same time remaining in motion, de/re/territorializing its position as either this or that.

In her hugely comprehensive book, *Understanding Narrative Inquiry*, Jeong-Hee Kim (2016) views the shift from the study of narrative as text to the study of narrative in context as a new narrative turn:

> The focus on what is done in interaction and context, and how it is done, would provide a new direction for narrative research as it can provide a meeting point for narrative analysis and narrative inquiry … It contributes to extending the trajectories of narrative inquiry as it allows us to pay attention to inconsistent, fragmented, immediate short conversational narratives that may otherwise go unnoticed … (262)

To this end, Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn (2013) encourage researchers to draw on rhizomatic approaches to engage in a narrative inquiry that attempts to capture the multitude of 'polyphony of the different voices' (115) in their research. Pushing the boundaries of this form of narrative inquiry are, among others, Mazzei's (2013) conceptualizations, 'Voice without Organs' (VwO) and McGarrigle's 'Dawn Chorus' (in this issue); both continuing to destabilize fixed, limiting ways of understanding how research stories can be re/presented and knowledge produced.

Notes

1. As part of the research design of the study, I facilitated two programmes with a group of 10 Fifth-year students and 11 Transition Year students (February–May 2008/February–May 2009). Each programme involved 12 two-hour creative workshops over a semester in two Irish Community Schools. In each case, the self-selected students (5 male/5 female in first programme and 5 male/6 female in the second programme) were facilitated in an exploration of their 'identity narratives' using arts-based educational activities such as drawing, collage-making and journaling. The young people selected their own media to work with as they creatively constructed and audienced portraits of themselves in their world (O' Grady 2012, 2014a, 2014b). All names used in this research are pseudonyms.
2. Kim kindly gave me permission to include this conversation for the current publication.

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