Breaking Out
Learning Research from *The Women in Prison Project*

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Abstract This article is about context, power located within institutions, and complexities of interpretation tightly twisted in a participatory action research project with women in prison. This narrative speaks to the encounter between us and the women, the unfamiliarity each of us had with the other's language, and the joint challenge to 'decode' transcripts of incarcerated women's voices. As action researchers we were determined, indeed even smugly pleased, to be undertaking this venture of tutelage, of introducing the women as co-researchers to methods of data analysis. However, we watched a shifting of power (empowerment), as the women became the true researchers through their proximity to and conversations with the transcripts as raw realities, narratives that acknowledged their lives, which we knew only as data. In the end, we came away unsettled, with deeper awareness for the complexity of interpreting 'data,' which constitutes local knowing, the unsaid, and the unspeakable.

Inside the Gate

> The delinquent is an institutional product. (Foucault, 1977, p. 301)
>
> We are the voice because we are living it. (Research participant)

Flashback:

We are agitated, conversation spills over each other's words.

"And then she said…, and I asked, what the heck do you mean, 'cracking the gate,' and then the woman next to her jumped in, and then the woman across the table said …I couldn't get a word in edgewise."

Hunched over the bland food in the prison cafeteria, flat grilled cheese, cold fries, and lukewarm tea, we debrief the morning's attempt to analyze the transcripts.

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"I've been a researcher long enough—why isn't this working?"

"It *is* working—just not the way we figured it would."

An enormous crack has opened between our expectations and what was unfolding in the three separate rooms where we have been sequestered with the women inmates, analyzing the transcripts. Our intentions have been frustrated, and yet, there is no cessation of the outflow of conversation.

"What the holy fuck happened?"

This article explores our involvement in *The Women in Prison Project,* which has critically and radically pushed our thinking about research. The long-term study is a participatory action research project that included women who are and/or have been incarcerated as participants in all aspects of the project (proposal writing, transcription, data analysis, and writing). In speaking about participatory action research (PAR) Greenwood and Levin (2003) advise that participants and researchers collaboratively "define the objectives, construct the research questions, learn research skills, pool knowledge and efforts, conduct the research, interpret the results and apply what is learned to produce positive change" (p. 145). It was the act of interpreting results, however, that caught us off-balance, exposed our own biases, and invited us to rethink our positions as researchers. According to Reason and Bradbury (2008), "Researching with people means that we are engaged with full persons, and the exploration is based directly on their understanding of their own actions and experience rather than filtered through an outsider's perspective" (p. 9). In our case, what should have been a straightforward (or so we thought) exercise in coding transcripts with our participants became an unsettling journey into reflecting upon our practices as action researchers. In this article, we focus on our new understanding of the interplay between power, language, and interpretation, in relationship to local knowing, the unsaid, and the unspeakable.

Upon entering the prison we were at once aware of the institutionalized context of the research and the disciplinary power within its gates.[1] Listening to the women find their way into the transcripts reminded us about "the infinity of the unsaid" (Gadamer, 1975) and that every new interpretation, particularly by the women themselves, brings before us new expressions of the unexpressed. In this encounter between co-researchers from the university and those from the prison, the language-made-flesh, the silences, the unspeakable, and the irreducible narratives shaped the inquiry and the experience with respect to who ought to speak and who ought to listen. Like Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2003), we thought it would be useful to speak about "the politics and scholarship of decisions that we had made" (p. 169). We thought it also

critical to reflect on our work as researchers in the academy, because, as Fine and Torre (2008) so eloquently express,

> …our work is nested within institutions, and typically launched from the perspective of those with the least power, our research collectives must continually revisit questions of the research purpose—*for whom* is the work and *toward what ends?* (p. 408)

With particular curiosity, we wanted to explore the complexities of interpretation in relationship to power and language. What concerned us was the gap between our presumed expertise as researchers and our participants' engagement in the interpretation of transcripts of earlier meetings with the prison community. As Grant, Nelson and Mitchell (2008) remind us, the power differential between researchers and participants and the value assigned to community knowledge are critical factors in the interpretation and co-creation of knowledge. These authors insist that relinquishing control while maintaining integrity means, "respect for the community's knowledge that requires researcher humility" (p. 598). Similarly, Kemmis and McTaggart (2003) remind us, "….PAR researchers are embarked on a process of transforming themselves as researchers, transforming their research practices, and transforming the practice settings of their research" (p. 575).

[As we begin writing, we initially fall again into the habit of academic propriety: there is an attempt to dissect the spoken text culled from the typed transcripts of what the women had said during the two days of analysis, to assign it to categories, to code a transcript interpreting a transcript in order to flush out themes. We are tempted to cling to methods of interpretation that presumed our initial engagement: i.e. the collection of data, its analysis, coding for themes, and representation. At the same time, we cannot dismiss that 'something' happened to us as researchers—we had the wind knocked out of our presumptions with 'respect' to research. We begin to write again…]

This article is a narrative of what happened, how we struggled to make sense of our experience as an unfolding critique of interpretation within participatory action research. What follows are our reflections following the analysis stage of the research when we returned to the correctional centre, transcripts in hand, ready to engage with the women in codifying the data. Our intentions of good research practice were interrupted as we are challenged to reconsider what it means to 'interpret' transcripts. *[We bring in the research gaze, imagining that we would decode the transcripts together through known methods of analysis. Instead, the women call us to listen as they respond to each transcript as if in conversation with the absent women whose words are contained within the text.]*

Each of the following sections includes a field-note (written in italics) in which we share a reflexive perspective as researchers crossing through the gate into the action-site of inquiry. Following each field-note are excerpts of interpretation from the women as they themselves spoke to the transcripts and brought their perspective, language, and understanding to the texts. These were the voices that stopped us, that called us to awake-ness: being in front of a text in the presence of the women was foremost in our coming to recognize ways language and proximity play in the interpretation that leads to understanding. Each section ends with our critical reflections inspired by backward and forward conversations with philosophical and research literature (see also the beginning quotes to each section). Both reminded us of what matters if we are to engage with integrity in participatory action research.

Going to Prison

> Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons? (Foucault, 1977, p. 228)

> PAR aims to help people recover, and release themselves from, the constraints embedded in the social media through which they interact—their languages (their discourse) their mode of work, and the social relationships of power… (Kemmis & Robin McTaggart, 2005, p. 56)

We drive into the parking lot. The prison compound is encircled by a 15 foot high wire fence, low-rise buildings scattered through the property: recreation centre, medical building, dining hall, housing cells. The guard housed in the security station buzzes us through the gate—double gates, one locking behind us before the second opens. At the counter in a large book, we write our names, and secure visitor badges to our shirts. "Do you want a personal alarm transmitter?" I hesitate, coming alert. How dangerous is this venture? Then I shake my head in refusal. If I can't trust in the presence of these women, how will they, in turn, trust me? I walk onto the prison grounds, nodding shyly to the women in their blue sweats and matching blue-checkered jackets. I feel simultaneously at ease and without ease. This place feels familiar, like a boarding school, everyone in uniform, a coming home to an institutional place where belonging is a matter of surrendering resistance.

> recovery is all about relapse
> whether you can get up and dust yourself off
> whether you can recognize the symptoms (systems)

if you get caught using
you're out you're back in jail
you're back to step one…

they don't have recovery houses for people who have other addictions.
women are used and abused
comfort zone —
I've broken that cycle for myself

she's broken the cycle but she still feels the pain
and she'll feel it for the rest of her life
unless it's addressed

University women inviting women in prison to join them in a participatory action research project is an event. Although a significant number of research studies are conducted in prison settings, to our knowledge this project is among one of the few engaging participatory action research in Canada.[2] However, introducing PAR into incarceration settings seems an obvious choice as Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) remind us:

> "….PAR aims to help people recover and release themselves from the constraints of the irrational, unproductive, unjust, and unsatisfying social structures that limit their self development and self-determination" (p. 567-568).

What remains important in any participatory action research endeavor is attention to the critical importance of context (Greenwood & Levin, 2003). On the days we go out to the correctional centre, and work along side our participants, we note the differences, yet similarities in dress, each of us wearing our own version of an institutional uniform. We wonder, what language of engagement will guide us through this lived experience of collaborative research?

The principal investigator, also the prison medical doctor, had insisted on involving incarcerated women as active research participants when she first conceptualized and promoted the research project. Remarkably, through the support of the prison warden, the research project was welcomed and a five-year Research Agreement was signed with the provincial correctional services. The university concurred in its own recognition of the ethics of *The Women in Prison Research Project*. However, each individual research survey or undertaking situated under the umbrella of the project required its own Behavior Review Ethics Board certificate of approval.

An invitation to participate in the action research project was extended to all the women in the correctional centre and involved a two-day forum and consultation: *What issues are important for the health of women inmates? What would participa-*

tory action research look like in this facility—how would it happen? Transcripts were made of this first meeting. In small groups, the women addressed issues dealing with family relationships, HIV, Hepatitis C and infections, addictions, life skills and health care in the prison. The insight, care, and knowledge that the women brought to the questions were immediately visible. These initial conversations marked the beginning of our research venture in which a group of women in prison volunteered to engage in the project with researchers by meeting to discuss issues, design surveys, and plan how to present their findings to the prison population.

The women became the "insider" research group, attended to by the social and recreation convener, along with the principal investigator whose weekly attendance provided oversight. The women met daily. Over time, they determined a protocol of membership, which included writing a paragraph of their passion (i.e., what they were interested in, and/or wanted to research[3]) and polling the larger prison population on issues of concern. The prison research group consisted of a revolving membership as women chose to sign on to the research team, switched to other institutional duties, or completed their sentences. Some women stayed on the research team only a few days; others became long-term research group members.

The project's overriding emphasis on how to improve the health of women in prison attracted the interest and participation of a large number of health, education[4] and medical researchers from across the country. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2005):

> At its best, then, participatory action research is a social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of people who join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared social world in which, for better or worse, we live with the consequences of one another's actions. (p. 563)

What had been expected to encompass the research initially became subverted as the prison women determined what mattered to them concerning their own empowerment and recovery. As the women consulted each other and other prison inmates, the critical focus became how to survive on "the outside." Over time, they created an investigative participatory practice that was simultaneously fluid and consultative. The initial research question expanded as those of us on the research team outside the correctional centre began to translate our research curiosity to their institutional needs and personal desires. Their questions were: *What are the barriers that stop women in prison from successful integration into society? What do we need so that we stop coming back?* The "we" referred to the inmates themselves and addressed the high percentage that return to prison within a few years.

The majority of the university researchers remained on the outside. Only a few of us

physically crossed the line to gain access to the inside; the other university researchers watched on the perimeter, outside the gate. Those of us who joined the inside site gained another perspective. Our "ability to see what is questionable" changed (Gadamer, 1976, p. 13) as the women reset the priorities of what mattered in terms of the research and its outcomes. Called into question were the practices of the institution (both the university and the prison), along with our presumptions about the anticipated outcomes of the research project. More unsettling, we began to question our own understanding of interpretation as it shifted from being something doable to becoming complex, elusive, and other-directed, slipping out of our control into an in-between space of encounter between the women participants and the transcripts, and ourselves.

The Meeting of Institutions

> The gaze is alert everywhere. (Foucault, 1977, p. 195)

> If action research was to become the central research strategies of universities, then universities would be connected to society in very different ways from those currently found. (Greenwood & Levin, 2003, p. 160)

Walking across the prison grounds, I come face to face with estrangement and recognition. As a woman with a university degree, I find myself gravitating to those of similar experience; I am uncertain around women whose lives are so completely unlike my own, whose stories of child abuse and neglect tear at my heart. My privilege of position seems something to apologize for, to understate. As I seek conversation, I am most comfortable with those who have committed white-collar crimes: custody, fraud, Internet hacking—but it is through those conversations with women whose lives don't intersect with mine, listening as they contribute to the group meetings, that I come to a humble awakening. These women are smart, they have survived the streets, they know what they need. Victims of a system, they hold the keys to its revival. But they live within the immediacy of their own crises: there are no easy solutions. Few on the outside have time or inclination to listen.

> You got no one
> Cause of the life you made
> Because of the choices you made
>
> I'm lucky my mom's all for recovery
> My mom's like a blue shirt, she'll be standing right there for me

My mom says, I'm getting a year—she says she's missed ten years of my life,
what's another year?

my son was what kept me clean…
that's the kind of shit that my record got me [into]
my pipe is my way of dealing with things
can you ever imagine another way?
it's the only way I know
this is what I do this is what I know

when you screwed up once
you don't get another chance
where's your hope?
I have a son
I screwed up and she doesn't—

The creation of a participatory action research group, composed primarily of the prison inmates operating within the correctional institution, interrupted the status quo of the institution itself. What happens when incarcerated women on the receiving end of correctional services are given the opportunity of agency and voice? How shall they be received? Fine et al.'s (2003) research reports that in general most of their participants, who are men and women living at or under the poverty line, are defined as people on welfare, and are

> …depicted as being the reason for the rise in urban crime, they are cast as if they embody the necessity for welfare reform, as if they sit at the heart of moral decay. Although much of contemporary social policy is designed to "fix" them, our investigation reveals that they have much to say back to policymakers and the rest of America. (p. 171)

Similarly, our participants are often portrayed in ways that do not acknowledge their resourcefulness, resiliency, and local knowledge. Yet when given the opportunity, they can "surprise" us (as they have been doing consistently through this research project). Participatory action research is premised on change. We were in a correctional institution that seeks to "reform" incarcerated women, but rarely engages or consults them in meaningful ways as co-agents of change. Our presence and the women's engagement in initiating their work in our project was an interruption. What is remarkable is that this project had the full cooperation of the Warden, without whose support we would never have been given permission to enter through the prison gates. And

yet, as Fine and Torre (2008) write, "…we know that even with permissions, approvals and collaborations at the top, participatory action research is often quite inflammatory. And the ashes of vulnerability—no matter how hard we try to anticipate them—fall unevenly" (p. 408).

Such interruptions may herald new ways of engagement and reciprocal respect. On one occasion, for example, an inmate who had researched issues of crystal meth abuse was invited by prison management to address the prison staff as part of a staff training session on drugs. She created a PowerPoint presentation, spoke about her personal experience and fielded questions. At the end of the session, a prison guard rose to her feet and said, "After 25 years of working here, I have learnt more from your presentation than I have learnt from all previous staff training sessions about drug use." The reciprocity of sharing information and experience in this instance led to respect and a new willingness on the part of the prison staff to engage and listen. Participation in the research project empowered the women, and gave the women numerous skills that were transportable to the "outside."

Something about the way this research project operated subverted institutional contexts. As university researchers, we looked critically at the carceral institution but soon gazed back at our own institution—the generator and gatekeeper of knowledge. Participatory action research encourages reflexivity within the local setting, and yet, here we were beginning to re-examine our own institution, and our roles as academics. How complicit are we in the active generation of knowledge? Greenwood and Levin (2003) strongly argue, "We believe that, despite the efforts of a growing group of practice-oriented social researchers, there is little sense of urgency about changing existing arrangements in fundamental ways in most parts of the university system…" (p. 132). Still, today, in conventional qualitative practices, we (researchers) go in and take out. The "take-out" is in the not being present, in the not listening. In thinking that interpretation is just a matter of coding the texts with participants (what you might call an "inside job"), "Our informants are then left carrying the burden of representations as we hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality" (Fine et al., 2003, p. 169). If we fail to acknowledge the relationship between research and participants and the politics engaged, we neglect our responsibilities. PAR requires that we open spaces for the articulation of the yet unsaid, and the unspeakable.

Throughout this project, it was continually brought to our attention, as researchers and prisoners engaged in a participatory action research model, that we were operating in the margins of normal institutional behavior—that of the correctional centre, and that of the university. However, it was undeniable that the positionality of our mutual locations impacted our encounter. Both institutions undertake surveillance,

both operate as gatekeepers, within an "economy of power," which fabricates the norm and enforces it (Foucault, 1977, p. 303). According to Foucault:

> Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies. (p. 217)

It was in the act of going through the gate, and in that moment of hearing it shut behind us, that we began to recognize the institutional structures, attitudes, and values that shape our existence both within and outside the gate. This recognition was a jolt every time we recognized our own complicity within a disciplinary network that medicalizes, psychologizes, educationalizes and so on. We were, as Foucault (1977) reminds us, "judges of normality."

> The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements. (p. 304)

Interpreting Power

> Discipline is a political anatomy of detail. (Foucault, 1977, p. 139)

> Where have I backed into the passive voice and decoupled my responsibility for my interpretations, that is, where have you hidden your own authority behind "their" narrations or "their" participatory interpretations? (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2003, p. 201)

Today is our second visit to the prison. First of all, as a researcher, you don't just walk in or out of a prison with digital recorders and laptops and transcripts. The institution itself demands a clear purpose and measures of security. Neither do you simply walk into the lives of the women there whose daily life is highly controlled. More importantly, you don't ask the women to speak into the microphone about their lives as data in the name of research. The women's engagement calls for a high level trust with

the researchers and the research process itself. Co-participation requires acknowledgment of the gate that separates inside and outside, a language of hope, and real means for change on both sides. At the end of our first meeting, several women walk us to the gatehouse. "This is as far as we can go," one says. "We can't go through the gates." We all laugh at this "inside/outside" humor that precedes us through security. What we have not yet realized are the invisible gates of our own disciplines.

> feeling better about yourself is wanting to succeed
> we have no control over anything
> we need to be empowered to succeed
> as a holistic approach that is about every part of your life
> you are not empowered here in this place
> you are controlled
> everything is taken away from us, it's worse the longer you're here
> you get used to the life style here.
>
> can you imagine doing one-on-one counseling
> and then bringing up problems you've never dealt with
> and they look at their watch…
> and you get stressed, and punch someone out
> okay next week you can come back

As researchers, we too are located in an institution: there is the discipline of our areas of study (education, health, medicine, social work), and the discipline of institution, which enforces power relations and expectations of engagement. Expectations of the university researcher manifest a constant drive towards publications, uniform procedures regarding ethics reviews, grant applications, as well as knowledge creation, mobilization, and dissemination. As researchers, we take up the task to engage women in an institutional setting, sponsored by our own university, permitted by the prison officials, and received by the women themselves. As researchers, we find ourselves in the position of comparing (seeking to differentiate, hierarchisize, homogenize, and exclude), and in the process of doing so, naming what is "normal" and who is delinquent (Foucault, 1977).

The university researchers — both inside and outside the prison — seek to open the gate by asking: *how do we improve the health of women in prison?* However, in our academic discourse, we talk of the women in the prison as being in the margins, which is essentially delinquent from the norm. At the same time we are reminded continually of the disciplinary institution in which we are conducting research: interruptions from lockdowns, counts, scheduled mealtimes. For us, the economics of power is palpable in both institutions. The mandate of the university is to produce knowledge, and does

so within a technology of power and production. We are, one might say, imprisoned by our own "realities" of what qualifies as success (e.g., tenure, merit, publication record). Foucault (1977) argues that power produces:

> The individual is no doubt the fictionous atom of an 'idealogical' representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power, that I have called discipline. We must cease once and for all, to describe the efforts of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (p. 194)

From a critical research perspective, power and knowledge are never dislocated from each other; they are complicit cellmates. In their article, "Power & Knowledge," Gavenata and Cornwall (2008) explain:

> Power and knowledge are inextricably intertwined….the control of knowledge as a way of influencing consciousness is critical to the exercise of power. Knowledge mechanisms such as socialization, education, media, secrecy, information control, and the shaping of political beliefs and ideologies all become important to the understanding of power and how it operates. (p. 172)

The oppressor and the oppressed in relationship call us to attention. As researchers in collaboration with our participants, it is critical that we learn to identify those "forces and bodies," as Foucault (1977) argues, that are engaged to "carefully fabricate" the realities of our shared existence, silencing us even as we seek to re-imagine the world. As researchers, it is our responsibility to recognize the ways that our relational and institutional contexts perform us. And yet to do so, puts us at risk. In her article, Salverson (2008) speaks to the difficulties of witnessing trauma and the necessity to "to step out from behind a mask of solidarity and to engage with Others, to approach a stranger with a vulnerable availability that makes witnessing an active and transitive encounter—" (p. 254). In her argument related to the complexities of engaging in the unsayable, the unsaid, Salverson quotes Butler:

> The question is not whether certain kinds of speech uttered by a subject are censored, but how a certain operation of censorship determines who will be a subject depending on whether the speech of such a candidate obeys certain norms governing what is speakable and what is not. To move outside the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject… The question is not what it

> is I will be able to say, but what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all. [Butler (1988, p. 133) as quoted in Salverson, 2008, p. 252.]

If power produces knowledge, produces what we experience and impose upon others, our question then becomes: Is it possible to release ourselves from the hegemonic economies of power? If we so choose to engage, is it possible that we may create an economy of belonging, of reciprocity, of shared responsibility that empowers?

Language and Proximity

> Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 389)

> In other words, meaning is negotiated mutually in the active interpretation; it is not simply discovered. (Schwandt, 2003, p. 302)

And what is odd is the similarity of event that occurs. Small teams are all in different rooms, each team has a transcript, highlighters, instructions for coding, and university researchers assigned to teach the women how to code. There is heightened excitement amongst the "outsiders" determined to teach these women what it means to become a researcher. And yet, in each room, the highlighters are set aside. Barely four or five sentences into our coding, the women invite us into a new way of interpreting the data, a reaffirming and elaboration of the transcripts through telling their own stories, scaffolding onto each other's comments, an interpretation that comes from their experience, the wisdom of years living the system, inside, outside the gate. And in each room, the researchers fall silent, and begin simply to type into their laptop computers the conversation that emerges.

> as soon as I walk in the mall they call,
> they know my face,
> they know I'm a crackhead makes me feel like small
> and I'm not going to sit there and wait for the cops to come
> I'm not going to argue there
> you better not be selling drugs here,
> she presumed I did meth
> I was just there. I didn't know what to say to her
> That's just labeling me by the way I look

> I think most women in here are women who have gone through trauma
> we're being punished for being abused
> killing the pain with drugs
> getting the help you need
> the only way we know how to deal with pain
> it's a band-aid

What happens when we come into close proximity with our co-researchers in prison, wearing our security badges, dressed in the clothing of expertise? A fear of proximity (how close?) as well as concern for the responsibility to what is left unsaid stirs our attention: How should we engage? Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (2002) reminds us:

> Preparing for an encounter cannot be reduced to covering the other with clothes, images, or speeches which render this other familiar to us, but requires finding gestures or words which will touch the other in his or her alterity. (p. 151)

On the day we arrive at the prison, with transcripts from the first meeting in hand, we inform the insider research team that we will teach them how to code and do analysis, not yet realizing that it is we who do not understand the task at hand. The members of the insider research team who sit alongside us reading aloud the text once spoken by others, bring to the interpretation lived expertise, which renders their voices powerful and knowing. In this conversation with the text, we constantly interrupt by requesting clarification. "What do you mean by 'cracking the gate'? What is a 'blueshirt'?" Even as we introduce our language as researchers, theirs mystifies us. There is an undercurrent of mis-translation: How can we understand each other if we do not even know each other's language? It becomes clear that language goes beyond mere words or sounds; we begin to understand that our co-researchers, as they engage with the transcripts and each other's responses, are seeking to voice the raw realities of their own experiences. We hear the language of the street, language of abuse, language of the drug deals, language of loss. It is clear the data cannot be reduced to a set of propositions.

> For you understand a language by living in it… Thus the hermeneutical problem concerns not the correct mastery of language but coming to a proper understanding about the subject matter, which takes place in the medium of language. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 385)

These women who are all dressed alike sit in their chairs, some slouching, others with arms folded, others half-hidden behind lank strands of hair. Their stories come

forward, scaffolding one upon the other between the lines of transcripts. Each woman's story is unique and as yet a mystery that has found shelter. As we, the university professors, invite them to language their experience, to respond to the voices of those whose lives they recognize, the women lean forward. Their listening, even those whose physical stance suggests otherwise, is intent. They scaffold experience upon experience, and within their words, a new possible understanding (beyond the transcripts) of what matters emerges for us. Writes Gadamer:

> Texts are "enduringly fixed expressions of life" that are to be understood; and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning. Nevertheless, in being changed back by understanding, the subject matter of which the text speaks itself finds expression. It is like a real conversation in that the common subject matter is what binds the two partners, the text and the interpreter, to each other. (1975, p. 388)

Similarly, in cultivating "the way to nearness" with another, Irigaray invites us to take on another relation with language "which favors the act of speech in the present, and not a language already existing and codified" (2002, p. ix).

As we engage in interpreting the spoken text of others, we begin to listen to the unsaid between the lines transcribed on the page. The incarcerated women recognize these omissions: they speak to them, and we, the university professors, begin to write their words verbatim into our computers. Our questioning is limited to prompts, to invitations. "What do you mean?" "Why does this matter?" Our questions alert us to our own ignorance, and silence us so that we might listen. This is the gift of the interpretation offered by the women inside. Such engagement requires a new language, which does not appropriate or integrate the other into what one already knows, and "let[s] the other appear and light ourselves up through this entry into presence irreducible to our knowledge" (Irigaray, 2002, p. 165). We learn.

[A phenomenon occurs. Inquiry and interpretation go beyond our current understanding of what it means to undertake data analysis. The data breathe: here the transcripts serve as openings to what matters, not as an end means of data analysis, but as a new way of reciprocal engagement and understanding. Understanding what is not understandable to those of us from the 'outside' happened in three separate instances: we had to listen, oh my god, something is happening here. Who is this research for?]

We had anticipated that our expertise in the analytical practice of coding texts would play a critical role in the interpretation of the transcripts. Yet, as the day unfolded we began to question this assumption of expertise as we, the university researchers

were left standing on the outside looking in. Ultimately, we began to wonder what is our role as facilitators in the process of interpretation of local knowledge? Who is doing the interpretation and what is our context of engagement?

Irigaray reminds us to listen to the other, but in the listening to never lose ourselves. In our encounter with the women in prison, we learned something about ourselves. Becoming vulnerable, as we discarded our guise of expert, we listened to those of close proximity to the texts, speaking to their experience, reading between the lines, rewriting the lines to create a new text of empowerment, theirs and our own.

What we learned during the research experience, and particularly through our attempts at data analysis, are that issues of interpretation require a willingness to engage outside the methods set forth by methodology, and that we must be present, listen, and care, and "let the other be other while speaking, speaking to them" (Irigaray, 2002, p. 29). In our listening to the experiences of the women, we recognized the immediacy of their understanding revealed within their conversation in response to the transcripts. This was not typical data analysis as we knew it, but a living interpretation of text understood through language and proximity.

The epiphany from observing this unexpected backward and forward conversation the women had with the transcripts, as a process of understanding, alerted us to meaning beyond the lines of text. "Nothing that is said has its truth simply in itself, but refers instead backward and forward to what is unsaid" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 67). Without the women's dialogue with the transcripts and each other, much more of the local knowing, the unsaid, and the unspeakable, would have remained unspoken. Working with the raw realities that are the unspoken text of our transcripts, we began to understand that the transcripts prompted stories as yet untold—those close to the heart, those offered in shared recognition. If we had interrupted this process, called the women back to the task as we had initially defined it (coding the transcripts and identifying themes), we would have marginalized these spontaneous tellings. As Fine et al. (2003) remind us, "In the hands of relatively privileged researchers studying those whose experiences have been marginalized, the reflexive mode's potential to silence subjects is a potential concern" (p. 170). However, by stepping aside and witnessing the women's engagement with their stories and those stories inhabiting the transcripts, our withdrawal opened up new possibilities of interpretation. The women rightly balked at our intentions to tackle the transcripts, highlighters in hand. Instead, they engaged in a dialogue of meaning-making that is the inhabiting of difficult lives. And, to our credit, we knew we needed to listen.

Gavenata and Cornwall (2008) make the point:

> …what is empowering about participatory research is the extent to which it is

> able to…create more democratic forms of knowledge, through action and mobilization of groups of people to act on their own affairs, in a way that also involves their own critical reflection and learning. (p. 182)

Our learning about the experiences of the women, and our ability to receive what they were offering required us to see the limitations of our expertise. This instance marks the act of researcher becoming vulnerable to the other: an encounter that acknowledges the 'gift of insight' that participants bring to the research. There is no catch, only responsibility, such as we are able, to set aside traditions, expertise, expectations, and respond to who and what matters with hospitality. As Derrida (2003) reminds us:

> Pure and unconditional hospitality, hospitality itself, opens or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign visitor, as a new arrival, nonindentifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly, other. (p. 17)

Between the Gates: Coming to Understanding

> There are no guarantees, but wide-awakeness can play a part in the process of liberating and arousing, in helping people pose questions with regard to what is oppressive, mindless, and wrong. (Greene, 1978, p. 51)

> Action research must similarly conceptualize "understanding" in a sophisticated way, not assuming that "understanding" is a simple, unmediated process of grasping something in consciousness. It means also that we must think of interpretation as a process of interpreting ourselves as well as the object we are trying to interpret. (Kemmis, 2008, p. 125)

We are gathered together in the gymnasium, the entire population of the women's correctional centre. Members of the prison research team introduce via PowerPoint presentations the research that they have been conducting. There are presentations on a variety of topics ranging to 3rd level housing to in-prison mother programs to the effects of cocaine. Afterwards the prison Aboriginal Elder invites members of the research team to come to the drum, an enormous drum around which six of the women seat themselves. Those who are menstruating wrap blankets around their waists; and as they drum in unison, their drumsticks heavy and proud on the drumskin, one by one, the women sing the women's warrior song. The lyric is repeated again and again as each woman sings solo. I am feeling self-conscious; I cannot remember the words, an avalanche of earlier singing experiences, all unsuccessful, steal my voice. The Elder comes next to me, her

body leans lightly against my right shoulder. As I pound the drum, her strong voice joins my struggling alto. I try hard to maintain the rhythm, to remain present in the languaging of this moment. There are nods of encouragement, recognition. In this correctional centre, all women learn to sing the women's warrior song before their release. Where is my warrior song? How can I be so afraid to sound my presence in the presence of others? How do I learn to "crack the gate?"

> when they crack the gate….
> total anxiety stress care, happy, you get that happy feeling in your chest
> overwhelmed, by the outside world,
>
> even the cars seem like they're going too fast
> the simple everyday things seem like too much
>
> entire structured system—told to do what to do, how to do it when
> to do it, and you have a blue shirt standing…
>
> you're out you got a bus ticket
> back to where you started

In our final reflections on our experience of the two days of data analysis, we contemplate what the women have called our attention to, and we linger with silences of what is left unsaid, that which is unspeakable. Three key matters — power, language, and interpretation — emerged as we wrote our way through the experience, and even now we feel hesitation in pronouncing these as our findings. Perhaps we should simply say that questions continue to surface concerning: possibilities that emerge when hospitality is embodied in research; new and appropriate ways of engaging others in interpretation of experiential text; representation of findings in the presence of new questions, particularly when we discover that which is truly questionable deep inside the research; the positionality of our being situated within institutional power; and how to write the research experience with an integrity of representation in the absence of other.

How do we continue to crack the gate of traditional research that normalizes "realities," and give ourselves permission to create openings in our own gated institution? Maxine Greene (1978) calls us to being wide-awake, with attentiveness to choice of action, and recognition of what it means to operate within a set of norms. She writes:

> If individuals are wide-awake and make decisions consciously to interpret a poem properly, to try to understand a period in English history, or to participate in some type of social inquiry, they are choosing to abide by certain standards made available to them. *In doing so, they are becoming acquainted with what it*

> *means to choose a set of norms.* They are not only creating value for themselves, they are creating themselves.… (p. 49, italics inserted)

It is only in becoming aware of the norms within which we operate that we can begin to trouble them, and seek other ways of engagement, such as we experienced in *The Women in Prison Project.*

Through this process, we have come to see what is questionable in our own research and its applications. We went into the research with a traditional notion of data, to be collected and codified; we came out questioning what constitutes "data" and the challenges of "data analysis." In particular, our engagement in the act of interpretation with others has given us pause. Is a story or an experience a fact (indisputably the case)? How are these tellings (interpretations themselves) to be further interpreted? And by whom? Within what context? For what purpose? We now better understand the complexities of interpretation tightly twisted in threads of local knowing, the unsaid, the unspeakable, tangled in knots of power, language, and knowledge. This understanding opens for us, a reconsideration of how we engage in research with others, and in particular, the responsibility and practice of such engagement.

As researchers, we are motivated by a desire for knowledge on one hand. On the other we wonder, as Gadamer reminds us, about the consequences of what has been omitted and misinterpreted:

> And yet, over against the whole of our civilization that is founded on modern science, we must ask repeatedly if something has not been omitted. If the presuppositions of these possibilities for knowing and making remain half in the dark, cannot the result be that the hand applying this knowledge will be destructive? (1976, p. 10)

Our action as researchers was to step outside the confines of our expectations and to listen to what was unfolding before us as the women engaged with the interview transcripts. Stepping into the potential and goals of participatory action research did not simply mean, as we formerly thought, teaching incarcerated women how to be researchers like us (i.e., decoding transcripts), but rather engaging in a particular set of actions and relationships of inquiry within a spirit of reciprocity and respect that offered hope and possibility. Our action as researchers working within such a challenging and unsettling context required that we abandon our familiar position of expertise; the women themselves reminded us what participatory action truly means. "It *is* working—just not the way we figured it would." Turning to Fine and Torre (2008), we echo their words:

> Participatory action research provides a vital way of resuscitating and maintaining a questioning and participatory democratic practice, one with the potential to unleash a diaspora of radical struggle, hope and possibility across generations. Participatory action research is a strategic tool by which research collectives can interrupt the drip feed, engage critical questions, produce new knowledge, provoke expanded audiences and ask, in the language of the poet Marge Piercy (1973) how can we "be of use?" (p. 417)

What we have learned as researchers, our turning point, is that our ongoing work is to deal with the omissions and the misinterpretations inherent in research as best as we can. Not to do so is to abdicate our responsibilities as researchers and educators, because that is when the research, if imposed upon others, becomes dangerous. What remains is how we negotiate the in-between space of the unsaid, the not-yet recognized, the unspeakable, and that which is beyond our grasp of knowing.

And what happens when gates close? The insider researchers and those of us on the outside were recently reminded that institutions have disciplinary power: 23 months into the research project, with the arrival of a new warden, we were told to close our anticipated five-year prison project. A number of women who worked with us on the inside and who have now been released back into their community wish to continue working with us in this endeavor. How will their presence be welcomed within our institution?

We realize, that we have, in this encounter, learned to rethink our presumptions of interpretation within the paradigm of participatory action research. In the end, we came away unsettled, with deeper awareness for the complexity of 'interpreting data,' which constitutes local knowing, the unsaid, the unspeakable. Our contribution to this careful look at interpretation, in uncomfortable locations/unfamiliar encounters, encourages us to look again at how we are choosing to interpret other's work (and our own), how we engage in collaborative interpretation, and what is possible and impossible in the venture we call research.

Our challenge as researchers in the academy is to listen with wide-awakeness, so that we might learn how to create a welcoming, thoughtful space for the unsaid, the unspeakable that haunt the lines between the transcriptions and conversations with the women who have offered their presence in this writing.

> if you had some hope
> if you choose a direction that would heal you
> if you had some support
> … I want my place back

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Women Into Healing Website. http://www.womenin2healing.org

Notes

1 We were surprised to hear from inmates that "cracking the gate" is slang for the opening of the prison gate upon release, representing the freedom and challenges that await them. For us "gate" and "gatekeeper" become important literally and metaphorically as we seek to understand the interplay between the incarcerated women inside the gates of the prison, and our own struggle as researchers within the invisible gates of our disciplinary and methodological contexts. Who controls the thresholds of institutions? As researchers, we are producers and gatekeepers of knowledge within an academic institution that determines who and what may enter and leave. In our interdisciplinary research we passed through a series of disciplinary gates—within disciplinary architectures of power (i.e. medicine, health, education, and social work).

2 See for example: Fine, M. & Torre, M. E. (2008); Townsend D., (2001); and Paredes ICJ & Colomer Revueltab, (2008).

3 These resulted in PowerPoint presentations on a diverse range of topics including drugs, housing issues, co-dependency, breast cancer, parenting skills, First Nations histories and mythologies, spirituality. For a complete listing and viewing of power point presentations see the Women into Healing Webpage.

4 Researchers from education joined the project after its start date, after it was determined that education was emerging as a critical component regarding the emergent outcomes of the research as it progressed.

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