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Woman: Mother: Poverty: Interpretive Gestures

by

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Abstract

This inquiry, informed by feminism and philosophical hermeneutics, was undertaken to create new possibilities for understanding what it is like to be a woman, a mother and to be living with poverty. Five women participated in this research by sharing something of their lives in conversation and in coming to understand something of their experience, how it is we can understand anything at all has also been raised as a question. For nurses, the privileged access we have to other lives brings with it the burden or gift of particular knowledge and questions are raised as to what we do with this knowledge. It is suggested that, as nurses, we have a special responsibility to be conscious of what we bring with us to the process of trying to understand, to be open to dialogue with those for whom we care, and to be willing to act with our knowledge in public and political ways.

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Woman: Mother: Poverty: The Call to the Question

We find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did because we do not pass on what we have learned, or because we are unable to listen. For instance, how many times has this all been said before?

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

Woman, mother, poverty - these words are inextricably linked in my mind, each holding lived meanings and material realities interwoven to create a particular woman's life. At the centre of my question is a woman, a woman who is also a mother, a woman-mother who is living with poverty. There are many other aspects or features of her self that come into play - her age, her history, her race and so on - but these three, woman, mother, poverty, I am choosing as central. This is not an arbitrary choice but rather grew out of my experience with low income women. Children and poverty seemed to be central 'facts' in the lives of women I met, 'facts' in the sense of their tangible, sometimes overwhelming presence. Sometimes in the face of these demanding presences, the women themselves seemed to become lost. These women then, are the centre of my questioning, children and poverty ways to elucidate the creation of meaning in their lives.

In searching for a way to clearly articulate the question for this research, I found Burch's (1986) discussion of thinking as a topology very useful. Thinking, he suggests, "arises out of response to what is owing to the situation - its demands" (p.17). Thinking "encompasses two 'topoi' - the ontic space of empirical conditions that define where we are as physical beings; and the ontological space of lived-meanings, the 'worlds' of significance that constitute our 'hermeneutic situation'" (p.17). These two 'topoi' "belong together as a single world of interpenetrating spaces" (p.17). When we are thinking then, about women mothering in poverty it seems important to recognize that each aspect of this question will have both ontic and ontological dimensions. Each encompasses empiric conditions and lived-meanings with the meaning of the whole generated through the movements "among". By dwelling "in- between" the spaces of woman, mother and poverty and tracing these movements, I hope to create possibilities for understanding what it is like to be a woman who is a mother and living in poverty. How does this woman

negotiate her location, her positionality? How does she understand herself as a woman? As a mother? As living with poverty? What are the movements among these? How does she resist provided subjectivities? Does she? How does she constitute herself as a self?

These questions are posed in Burch's (1986) sense of questions rather than as problems. A problem, he suggests, is meant to be solved: "the goal of all problem solving is closure" (Burch, p.7). In solving problems, we look for the right answers, for "'correct' knowledge" (p.7). A question, on the other hand, is concerned with the creation of understanding and the "elucidation of meaning" (p.7). To clarify my purpose here, I will paraphrase Burch's three assumptions regarding the nature of questions:

• the "issue" of women mothering in poverty is posed as a question to be considered and not as a problem to be solved;

• the consideration of this question concerns who we are, more than what we do;

• responding to this question may require that we transform our way of thinking and being in the world. It does not demand "tactical action at isolated points where things seem temporarily out of control" (p.8).

The purpose then, is not to discover an answer or to solve a problem, but rather to create an understanding or understandings of the lived meanings and material realities of a women who are mothers and living with poverty. Most basically, the questioning of this research is ontological: what is it like to be you?

Woman

But before we were mothers, we have been, first of all, women,

with actual bodies and actual minds.

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

There are many ways to understand the choice to focus one's vision and research efforts on the health of women. For me this is essentially a political act, a recognition of the power of gender to shape both lived meanings and material reality. I use the word gender not as an objective or value-neutral category but rather as a way to indicate, as with terms such as race and class, social processes which mark difference (Allen, 1996; Allen, Allman, & Powers, 1991; Thorne, 1997). In this view, women, as well as men, may be thought of as gendered, raced and classed beings with the differences these words mark as

having social meaning, meanings which are continually negotiated in process and in context. These differences and others are not necessarily pre-existent to their being named and experienced as such but rather are "constructed in the process of doing something else" (Allen, 1996, p.95). Bordo (1990) suggests that gender "never exhibits itself in pure form but in the context of lives that are shaped by a multiplicity of influences" (p.150).

This view of women, and men, seems necessarily political in the sense that difference in our society has rarely been understood as simply not the same. Some differences have been and are mostly feared, ignored, actively suppressed. In what could be described as a pauperization of the richness of human community, Western thinking has tended to organize difference into simplistic, oppositional and exclusive dualities, polarities whose meaning reflects clear and pervasive differences in social power: male/female, white/black, culture/nature, reason/emotion, mind/body and so on. These polarities reflect and perpetuate "hierarchical differences in power, with one term clearly superior to the other" (McCormick & Roussy, 1997, p.273). This seems to have occurred despite the limited explanatory power such a framework for understanding holds. For example, as well as reducing or limiting our understanding of men and women to terms of difference and suggesting that women and men can and should only be understood in opposition to one another, dualistic thinking tends to erase or suppress differences among women and suggests that women should only be understood in terms of sameness. By problematizing this notion of woman, i.e. the notion that woman is a word that may be clearly, precisely, essentially and timelessly defined and operationalized, usually though not always in opposition to man, I hope to create possibilities or openings for understanding how particular women, as gendered, raced and classed beings, experience and understand the meanings of being woman. The point is to refocus the question from "woman" per se to the social relations through which woman is constructed, and to the meanings of being woman in relation to other socially constructed differences such as race and class, and in this particular research project, mothering (Thorne, 1997).

This view of gender is part of a movement towards a more fluid and open conceptualization of identity or subjectivity, and seems necessary to account for not only the more obvious visible and material differences among women but also for the many

ways that the meanings of these differences are negotiated in relation to particular contexts. Probyn (1990) suggests that a more fluid, emergent understanding of "already-always" positionality may also be required, that is, it may also be necessary to open up to question the taken for granted meanings of discourses associated with various subject positions such as woman or mother. The meanings of gendered practices and gendering processes cannot "be read off the surface; their meanings to individual women and possible political articulations are never completely guaranteed" (Probyn, p.181). So while women may be thought of as differently positioned by virtue of the ways they are differently gendered, raced and classed, the lived meanings of these positionalities cannot be assumed.

The social relations which work to construct the lived meanings, as well as the material realities, of gender, race and class may also be understood as relations of power. Kaplan (1997) suggests that patriarchal culture provides us with convenient but nonetheless dangerous structures for categorizing people including but not limited to gender, race, and class: "those who claim a dominant position can presume the right to determine which aspects of identities are core, and by which aspects others will be known" (p.34). The construction of "other" this statement suggests is not value-neutral but rather theory laden: "demographic categories ... are not politically neutral" (Allen, 1996, p.95). The other is not only defined and named in relation the dominant group, in this society white, propertied, heterosexual males, but also relations of power and privilege are structured or shaped by this relationship to a supposed norm or centre. Other in these terms is also always understood as "less than" so rather than creating mere difference, relations of power create difference that matters, with some differences mattering more than others.

For women, in all our various locations, the consequences of construction as the most basic or fundamental other have been serious. Smith (1987) refers to the exclusion of women from the making of what becomes our shared culture as a peculiar eclipsing: "a silence, an absence, a nonpresence" (p.20). Using the metaphor of a circle of authority, a circle of voices who count for one another, Smith suggests a "game where there have been more presences than players" (p.32). Key to this analysis, as well as those which frame this issue in terms of margins and centre (Collins, 1989, 1994; Hall, Stevens, & Meleis, 1994; Harding, 1991; hooks, 1984) is concern for what counts as knowledge, as truth, and

whose voices are heard in this accounting for process. Dominant discourses, values, theories which emanate from the "circle of authority" are mainly grounded in the experience and assumptions of those who comprise the circle yet they shape the lives of all of society. I would add to this by suggesting that rather than thinking of women as silent or silenced, attributing a certain quality of deafness to the circle of authority may be both more apt and useful. By this I suggest an understanding of women and others outside the circle of authority as having always been "present" and speaking but in many respects unaccounted for and unheard.

This perspective while useful is not entirely unproblematic. Difficulties arise in attempting to differentiate between what is an "authentic female experience" and "one that along the way may have been 'man-made'" (Probyn, 1990. p.179), that is, accounting for the ways in which dominant discourses influence and shape subjectivity. In employing the same categories to explore and understand the experience of women as have been used to define and circumscribe their worlds, the possibility exists of reinscribing relations of oppression, of "reproducing the conditions that perpetuate injustice" (Allen, 1996, p.99). These beginning reflections on the construction of gender and the meaning of woman then, are in part meant to indicate a certain self-consciousness or awareness of the implications of using these terms. The meaning of being "woman" will, in this research project, not be taken for granted but rather it will be opened up to questioning. In this view, looking to the lived meanings of woman also requires understanding these meanings as existing in relationship to a myriad of social meanings, social relations and relations of power.

Mother

The ideal mother has no interests of her own.... For all of us it remains self-evident
that the interests of mother and child are identical, and it is the generally
acknowledged measure of the goodness or badness of the mother how far she really
feels this identity of interests.

Alice Balint, *Love for the mother and mother-love*

In the winter of 1998 I spent time, as part of my graduate nursing program, at a non-governmental agency which provides support and services to families living with poverty. The vast majority of those who use this agency are women. I chose this placement

because I knew I wanted, in some way, to focus my thesis research efforts on the health of low income women. It was my intention, in spending this time with women who were living with poverty, to find out, as far as I could, what mattered to these women and what in their lives influenced their health. Over time, through my interactions with women, my observations about what was happening in this particular space, and my reflections on both of these, I came to see mothering and motherhood as something quite central to these women's lives but central in ways that were often outside of my experience and understanding.

I think that all women, whether they are mothers or not, have some kind of relationship to the ideology or institution of motherhood, and to ideas of mother and mothering. As Rich (1986) observes, "woman's status as childbearer has been made the major fact of her life" (p.11). But what are we to make of this "major fact"? How are we to understand the lived meanings and material realities of being mother in the lives of particular women, women who are also living with poverty? How do we interpret this major fact from the perspective of women who are living the experience? Daly and Reddy (1991), noting the absence of maternal perspectives and maternal subjectivity in even the most sensitive discussions of mothering, question the "child-centricity" of these accounts and ask instead, "what are the effects of current conditions of mothering *on mothers*? How might *mothers* benefit from a revisioning of motherhood?" (p.3). To be mother, in Western, industrialized cultures, is in many respects to be "for" the child. How is a woman who is a mother also for herself as both woman and mother?

As with woman, many discourses are used in our culture to discuss and define the meanings of motherhood - biological, legal, medical, religious, social, academic and political. Sometimes particular discourses seem to suggest or imply they are offering a simple reflection or explanation of reality as "given", that is, as self-evident or immediately apparent without prior theorizing. Other discourses may admit theorizing but claim the theory, values or views proposed are objective and universal rather than partial and situated. Still others claim only the experience of particular women as their grounding. Often these discourses concerning motherhood are intertwined, usually implicitly rather than explicitly, with other ideological positionings - those which concern beliefs about what

a woman is and is "for" and what a man is and is "for", and those related to patriarchy, capitalism, and ideologies of the family. In the swirl of this multitude of discourses, in which motherhood becomes contested terrain, the woman who is mother often seems lost. She is curiously silent, or perhaps unheard.

Glenn (1994) observes that some of the most contentious and heated debates in the 20th century "revolve around the meanings of mothering and motherhood in contemporary society" (p.1). Yet despite these extensive debates and despite the diversity among women who are mothering, a particular definition and understanding of motherhood has remained dominant. It is an idea of motherhood that is profoundly decontextualized as it is projected outward as universal. Grounded in the context and experience of middle class, white Western society, yet probably not even really reflective of this location, the idealized model of motherhood has clear, mostly unacknowledged ties to gendered biological imperatives, to a particular economic structure, to a particular family type and to patriarchy (Glenn, 1994). What are the consequences then, for women who are not mothering in nuclear, financially secure families? How do these women understand their relationship to the dominant model of motherhood?

The myth of the good mother, of "placid, fulfilling maternity," as Lazarre (1997) observes, holds tremendous sway over women (and men) because it is not "altogether wrong, but leaves out half the truth" (p.xxi). If we look at the some of the assumptions contained in the myth of the good mother we can see that, in some respects, they have a common basis. A "good" mother, a "natural" mother, is "a person without further identity" (Rich, 1986, p.22). All women should be and need to be mothers. Mothering is primarily a psychological role: "'good-enough' mothering requires certain relational capacities which are embedded in personality" (Chodorow, 1978, p.33). Motherlove is and should be selfless, boundless and unconditional. Women, and only women possess maternal "instinct." Mothers live only for their children, and "are dedicated exclusively to their children's well-being" (Reddy, 1997, p.viii). Mothering takes place in a location that is apolitical, that is, in a private sphere, and isolating women and children together in the home is both natural and inevitable. Motherhood, as experience and institution, is enduring, unchanging and unchangeable - in essence, it is "natural."

If instead of natural motherhood is understood as constructed, that is, as a "historically and culturally variable relationship in which one individual nurtures and cares for another"(Glenn, 1994, p.3), ideas of motherhood and mothering become more open to questioning. Motherhood comes to be seen as growing out of the relationship between men and women and out of particular economic and social conditions, themselves socially constructed. And motherhood also comes to be seen as political, as taking place in social contexts shaped by unequal relations of power between men and women, between different racial groups and among different classes. As Glenn (1994) observes, "mothers of all races and classes have been subjected to patriarchal control, but they have experienced that control differently" (p.17). If we understand motherhood as a socially constructed, historically specific relationship or set of relationships, are we inspired to ask different questions about the mothering experience of women living with poverty? During the time I spent with low income women, I frequently experienced a sense of contradiction, a clash between the dominant ideology of motherhood and what I was coming to understand about the experiences of these women mothering in poverty. Low income women seem to live "with" the ideology of motherhood, but they do not live it. What is mothering like in these circumstances?

Poverty

Poverty and caring are, for many women, two sides of the same coin. Caring is what they do; poverty describes the economic circumstances in which they do it.

Hillary Graham, *Women's poverty and caring*

There are many ways to try to understand poverty, its meanings and its material reality. Certainly quantitative approaches, that is, measures of economic status, offer one kind of understanding. In Canada, poverty among women was first documented in 1970 with the release of a report on the status of Canadian women by the then newly established Royal Commission on the Status of Women (Evans, 1991). Prior to this time, women's poverty was largely unrecognized, hidden within the home where economic dependence was assumed to flow naturally from women's primary roles as wives and mothers (Evans, 1991). Although much has changed in Canada in the almost three decades since this first report, what has not changed is the prevalence of poverty among Canadian women, and the

disproportionate representation of women among Canada's poor (Reutter, 1995).

The persistent nature of women's poverty leads some authors to suggest that the term the "feminization of poverty" is misleading because it masks the fact that women have always been poorer than men and implies that poverty has only recently become a concern for women (Abramovitz, 1991; Battle, 1994; Evans, 1991). Evans (1991) suggests that while the prevalence of poverty among women is in itself problematic, it is the "disproportionate nature" of women's poverty and its "relative intransigence" which is of greater concern (p.172). In 1993, 2.8 million Canadian women or 20% of the total female population were living in low income situations (Statistics Canada, 1995). While substantial increases in educational attainment, increased participation in the labour force, smaller family sizes and changes in the structure of family living have improved the lives of many women, women, in all age categories and family types, are still much more likely to be poor than men (Battle, 1994; Statistics Canada, 1995). Single mothers and elderly women continue to be those with the greatest likelihood of living in poverty and there is an especially high incidence of poverty among women of colour, First Nations women and women with disabilities (Statistics Canada, 1995). Interestingly, each of these groups, in addition to being female, depart in some way from dominant societal norms or values which are circumscribed by a white, middle class, male, heterosexual, youth oriented, able bodied perspective.

Many authors link women's poverty to structures of inequality or patterns of disadvantage in society that affect women as a group in particular ways (Abramovitz, 1991; Evans, 1991; Harder, 1995; Stevens, Hall, & Meleis, 1992; Walters, 1994; Walters, Lenton, & Mckeary, 1995). In these views, poverty is centrally about power, and society's economic organization is seen as one way in which oppressive relations of power are enacted in many women's lives, determining their ability to obtain both material and social resources. The undervaluing of women's work in both the paid labour market and in the home, the frequently contested and contradictory nature of women's participation in both of these arenas, and the vulnerability women may experience in spousal, maternal and work roles creates social conditions which enhance the likelihood of poverty across the lifespan. Abramovitz (1991) suggests that poverty should not so much be linked to gender but rather

to "the unequal treatment women receive on the basis of gender" (p.380). Women's poverty then, can be understood as in relation to a social or cultural context, which also has historical dimensions, and incorporates many factors and influences beyond the obvious issue of access to economic resources.

Evans (1991) and others suggest another way of understanding women's poverty through their observations that women's poverty often "reflects their biographies as caregivers" (p.169). Indeed, Daly and Reddy (1991) point out that the "'feminization of poverty' might better be called the 'maternalization of poverty'" (p.1). Women with children, particularly single mothers, are among those most likely to be living in poverty, a fact which lends credence to those views which link women's poverty with their caring roles. In the course of caring for dependent children, many women find themselves dependent on partners or society for economic security, a situation which poses a number of challenges, particularly in a society which "operates to reward self-sufficiency and to penalize dependency" (Evans, 1991, p.170). Interestingly, the whole notion of dependency is itself a contradictory one for many women: "their dependent status ... is not absolute, but is conditional upon their being simultaneously depended upon by others. Thus for many women, being dependent is synonymous not with receiving care but with giving it" (Graham, 1983, p.24-25 cited in Swift, 1991).

These analyses, while very useful and illuminating, do not tell us much about the lived meanings of poverty, the meanings created by women in their day to day experiences of living with poverty. Again, as with mothering, the voices of those living the experience are strangely absent - another "peculiar eclipsing?" There are questions however, that occur to me as I write that cannot be answered with reference to facts and figures but rather require me to listen, to hear and try to understand women's voices as they talk about their lives. What is it like to be unable to make your son a birthday cake because your oven is broken and you can't afford to have it fixed? What is it like to pretend with and for your daughters that you are camping because you have no furniture? What is it like to lose your children to Child Welfare because you have lost your home? What is it like to consider prostitution an option because you must somehow support your family? What is it like to care for an infant when you are utterly alone in the world? What do you do with your two

year old when welfare tells you it is time for you to get a job? What is it like when staying with an abusive partner is your most secure option? What is it like to be eighteen and pregnant with your third child, which you will give up for adoption as you did the others? Are women "different" because they are poor? Is the experience of being a woman, being a mother different because of poverty?

These are not idle or trivial questions but rather questions that came up for me every day during the time I spent with women living with poverty. If we are to understand these women's lives and our own, these questions, and the meanings generated through asking them, must have their place alongside other understandings of poverty.

Significance of the Research

... when we change our view of the world, we have, in effect, changed the world in which we live. By falsely dichotomizing knowledge and action, we fail to recognize understanding as action.

Margarete Sandelowski, *'To be of use': Enhancing the utility of qualitative research*

The questioning I have proposed above is not incongruent with current reconceptualizations of health among health care professionals. Through government documents such as the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* (WHO, 1986) and *Achieving Health for All: A Framework for Health Promotion* (Epp, 1986), health is coming to be seen as much more than the absence of disease. To achieve health, people need access to those things which determine their health, that is, to aspects of the social world including income, housing, peace, and social justice (WHO, 1986). Outside the professional arena, health has long been recognized as being about "much more than body parts, their function and treatment" (Armstrong, 1995, p.294). Feminism and the women's health movement in particular have pointed to the ways in which the politics of everyday life may shape and influence health status.

This reframing or expansion of our understanding of health suggests new and broadened possibilities for health research and practice. Of particular interest to me in this research project, are the ways in which primary health care principles and practice point to the politics of health. Hancock (1994) observes that these principles, particularly those of health promotion, reflect the political nature of health work: "enabling people to increase

control over their health, and over the events and conditions that determine their health, is a process of political empowerment" (p.352). As I have already pointed to some possible political dimensions involved in the creation of the lived meanings and material realities of woman, mother and poverty, these meanings in relation to a woman's health may also hold political significance, that is, they may assist nurses in acting for and with women for empowerment and to improve health.

At the same time, a broadened understanding of health is not entirely unproblematic. Kleinman (1995) asks, "what difference does it make to change the border between a social and a health problem?" (p.16). This is a key question, one without a definitive answer but one which must be considered in the context of this research. If, for example, poverty comes to be seen as primarily a health issue does this in any way invalidate moral and political analyses of the meaning of poverty? That is, if we work to eradicate poverty only because of the health implications, where and how do we account for concerns related to equity, fairness and social justice? Do health and social justice come to mean the same thing? Does health itself become a moral value? Robertson and Minkler (1995) raise the concern that advocates of a "socialized view of health" may inadvertently make health a moral value, "a monolithic concept that attempts to explain everything and, thereby, ends up explaining nothing" (p.299).

It seems that while articulating the health aspects of social problems such as poverty can illuminate the interconnections between for example, powerlessness and health, the moral significance, that is the rightness or wrongness of poverty in and of itself, is weakened. Does the slogan "health for all" carry with it a moral imperative for social justice? If not, then why should we, as a society, care about health for all? Kleinman (1995) suggests that loss of the moral meanings of suffering can bring with it a trivialization and distortion of experience; significance is lost when social experience is rewritten in medical terms. In some ways this is a fundamental existential as well as ethical question: how do we, as a society, respond to the existence and experience of suffering? It seems a matter, in some respects, of choosing how we will interpret our world and of being conscious of the implications of that choice. Our understanding of the lives of women mothering in poverty may possibly be enhanced through the use of a health

framework, at the same time this may also be a potentially distorting lens through which to view the social world. At this point in my research process, it seems most useful to leave this question open.

For nurses, particularly public health nurses who often have a privileged access to women's lives, the understandings generated through this research may be useful in their work for and with women. Women and mothers are a traditional focus for the work of public health nurses, and the health effects of poverty are an ongoing concern (Allemang, 1995). In responding to the shift to primary health care with its demands for increased participation from and collaboration with clients, nurses have been called upon to recognize and work with diversity among people. This has been seen as particularly important in work with marginalized and vulnerable groups, those whose experiences may not be included in what has counted as knowledge, nursing or otherwise (Hall et al., 1994; Hughes, 1995; Neufeld & Harrison, 1995; Reutter, 1995). Beginning to fill this gap in our knowledge may change our practice with low income mothers, and may have implications for both policy development and evaluation.

Nurses, most of whom are women and many of whom are mothers, may benefit from an increased awareness that some women who share these identities experience them differently. Questioning the taken for granted meanings of woman, mother and poverty may disrupt our assumptions about our clients and lead to more thoughtful and appropriate nursing practice, that is, practice grounded in the lives, the lived meanings and material realities, of those we seek to assist. When our practice, as well as health and social policy, is based on the unexamined assumption that we know the realities of others, the possibilities for relationships that are oppressive rather than caring are many. As Sandelowski (1997) observes, "qualitative findings contribute to thoughtful practice by creating more perspectives from which to know" (p.199). I would add to this that meanings generated through this research may help us to not only know our clients differently but also ourselves - as women, as mothers, as nurses, as human beings.

II. Contextualizing The Landscape For Inquiry

The third condition was to invent the ground upon which I could stand; that is, to find

a foundation that would allow me to start with women's experiences and build from

there.

Bettina Aptheker, *Tapestries of Life*

In this section, I share the textures of the landscape which shape and influence my understanding of my questioning and the ways in which I will generate meanings in relation to it. The perspectives that I will discuss as informing my thinking are feminism and philosophical hermeneutics. Feminism is the location from which I begin, hermeneutics a philosophy and methodology I find congruent with this perspective and most responsive to what is called for by my questioning. In some respects, the borders between these ways of thinking are not sharply delineated, each informs my understanding of the other. Each also points to the significance of the lived experience, and given the importance of this idea for this research I am including a separate discussion of how I understand and will use this term. Following this I will discuss some of the theoretical literature related to motherhood and then conclude by examining the nursing and other allied professions' writings and research concerned with low income mothers.

Feminism

... if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only

to each of their oppressions but also to my own.... I am not free while any woman is

unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

There are many ways to write about feminism, indeed there are many feminisms. Rather than aligning myself with one or another of these streams of feminist thought, I will begin by articulating the lived meanings of feminism for me. Feminism for me is a particular relationship to others, to oneself, to the world. It is a stance taken, a commitment to see in a critical and engaged way, a commitment to critical consciousness. By this I mean a conscious recognition of "the need to struggle against all forms of oppression" (hooks, 1984, p.40), with actions taken to reflect this consciousness.

I understand the world as being structured and shaped by relations of power which privilege the positions of some at the expense of others. As a white, middle class woman, I experience both privilege and oppression related to the ways I am positioned within a social hierarchy: "sex, race, and class, and not sex alone, determine the nature of any female's identity and circumstance, the degree to which she will or will not be dominated, the extent to which she will have the power to dominate" (hooks, 1989, p.22). A commitment to feminism then, is a commitment to resist and change all relations of dominance, including those within myself, to challenge the politics of domination on all fronts, and to resist distortions of the meanings of difference, "the mockeries of separations which have been imposed upon us and which we so often accept as our own" (Lorde, 1984, p.43).

This is, I think, a strong statement of the ways in which I think as a feminist in the sense that it does not seem to admit uncertainty, or the possibility that I may be mistaken in my understanding. In many ways though, this is not about rightness or wrongness but rather about how I am choosing to be in the world and the ethic of that choice. As well as being a commitment to resist dominance in all its forms, my feminism is about envisioning a world where people can become who they are, free of oppression, coercion and cruelty. Feminist research then, becomes a way to generate the kind of knowledge that is required to create this world (Chinn, 1985).

My understanding of feminism insists on the centrality of women, in all our diverse realities, but especially those women whose lives have been "least written about, studied or changed by political movements" (hooks, 1984, p.25). I do not hold a unitary, essentialist or universal idea of woman but rather understand gender as "one relevant strand among others" in the construction of social identity (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p.24). While I understand this particular "strand" as in many ways central to identity and social experience of identity, I also realize that this position is not unproblematic. As Di Stephano (1990) observes, for some "gender is no more and perhaps not even as basic as poverty, class, ethnicity, race...." (p.65). Others such as Bordo (1990) counter, could we "even speak of the differences that inflect gender if gender had not first been shown to make a difference?" (p.141). For me these questions do not require resolution. Instead I believe it may be useful to dwell with the tension they create in our thinking about women, and perhaps even

to accept that both positions may enhance our understanding.

Harding (1995) suggests that most if not all of feminist thought is permeated with "at least a latent love of women" (p.252). This idea of love of women can be surprising, even disconcerting to some in a society that in many ways could be considered misogynist. We are not accustomed to valuing women for themselves or taking their experiences seriously. Indeed even the desire to focus one's research on women's lives and women's health is one that often seems to require explanation and defense. Yet as a woman, it feels most "natural" for me to start from the point of view of women. As Bordo (1990) observes, we are each inescapably located in some way: "we always 'see' from points of view that are invested with our social, political and personal interests" (p.140). In feminist research, consciousness of our positionality is acknowledged, interrogated and integrated into the research process.

It may be on this point that feminist approaches to research can be most clearly differentiated from those grounded in a positivist paradigm. Jaggar (1989) challenges the positivist assertion that trustworthy knowledge can best be generated by the dispassionate investigator, an assertion which she suggests is a myth that "functions to bolster the epistemic authority of dominant groups" (Jaggar, p.142). Reason and emotion are not dichotomous categories but rather, in Jaggar's analysis, are understood as inextricably linked. Predominant societal norms and values are internalized through our participation in the social world and exert a continuing, though often unconscious "influence on people's articulated values and observations, thoughts and actions" (Jaggar, p.139). In this view, research and knowledge development are understood as inescapably value laden with claims to objectivity or neutrality in knowledge creation becoming suspect. Thus, movement in feminist research is towards creating a critical self-consciousness of the values, beliefs and assumptions which shape and influence the researcher and the research process.

Philosophical Hermeneutics

The aim is always to avoid the illusion that our institutions and our practices, that our reason and our faith, that we ourselves have dropped from the sky. Radical hermeneutics is a sustained attempt to write from below,

without celestial, transcendental justifications.

John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*

Philosophical hermeneutics has to do with what Smith (1991) calls "practical philosophy": "whenever we are engaged in the activity of interpreting our lives and the world around us," we are engaged in a hermeneutic endeavor (p.187). As an ordinary or everyday activity, interpretation and those things which influence our interpretations are often unconscious or unquestioned, in many ways, taken for granted. In research informed by philosophical hermeneutics however, it becomes necessary, both practically and ethically, to articulate the ways of thinking that inform my interpretive stances, to as clearly as possible put forward my understanding of hermeneutics as it stands at this moment. This latter statement is meant simply to recognize the constantly changing nature of my understanding as I continue to read, write and engage in interpretive activities.

My positioning in relation to philosophical hermeneutics is shaped through an interplay of ontological, epistemological and ethical questioning pointing to how I interpret my world and thus, to how I understand myself as able or not able to interpret the worlds of others. I am using hermeneutics here to refer to the interpretation of those texts which are available to us primarily through language, that is, spoken, written, seen and heard. Thus the central ideas I will consider have to do with language and meaning, which will in turn lead to consideration of the grounds of knowledge claims.

I will begin with a statement of my belief in the fluidity of human existence, that is, I believe our "being" is better understood as engagement in a continual process of becoming, which is also, in Kierkegaardian terms, a "being-in-the-midst-of" (Caputo, 1987, p.35). Reality or actuality "must be continually produced, brought forth anew, again and again" (Caputo, p.17). Reality, in this view, is never once and for all but rather constantly in flux as we respond to the unpredictable effects of time and contingency. Situating human existence in the "interplay of potentiality and actuality" (Caputo, p.16), human existing as being-between what is and what may be, creates uncertainty and ambiguity but also space for interpretive possibilities. Caputo suggests that it is this "'in-between' land which alone describes the dynamics of freedom" (p.16) and he is not alone in linking freedom and interpretation. Smith (1992) suggests that human freedom may rely

on a defense of interpretive possibility, while Gadow (1994) observes that it is the presence of interpretive possibility in "the absence of final meanings" which makes discourse possible at all (p.306).

This understanding of human existence as constantly in flux points to the constructed or storied nature of our realities. Together we create meanings or knowledges to make sense of our worlds from within the depths of our existence, choosing from among a multiplicity of possible meanings as we actively co-create our realities (Annells, 1997). This view challenges the modernist assumption that individuals alone create meaning and instead emphasizes the intersubjective nature of existence and of meaning creation, or meaning as interaction (Allen, 1995). As Smith (1991) observes, "words like 'understanding', 'interpretation', and 'meaningfulness' are rooted, hermeneutically speaking, in a sense of the dialogical, intersubjective, and conversational nature of human experience" (p.192). This is dialogue in a deep sense of the word, referring to "a deep, patient, and often circuitous descent into the labyrinth of meaning" (Barthes, 1989, p.17).

The creation of meaning in intersubjective relationships requires that we be attentive to language. Rather than an instrumental view of language, hermeneutics emphasizes the ways in which we are our language or in Barthes' (1989) words, "man does not exist prior to language, either as a species or as an individual" (p.13). Thus while we can create understanding or meaning through the language we have, the language we have also constrains the understandings we can create: "inevitably I speak within the language into which I was born, but my language already contains within itself in a sedimentary way the evidence of its own malleability and evolution" (Smith, 1991, p.193). Thus, the hermeneut requires a stammering relationship to language, that is, she must become "like a foreigner" in relation to her mother tongue (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p.4). Stammering reflects tentativeness and wonder about everyday, taken for granted meanings of our language, and a willingness to delve into the depths which organize surface meanings. Stammering in language also points to an openness to a multiplicity of meanings: "AND...AND...AND..." (Deleuze & Parnet, p.10)

Hermeneutics is not so much concerned with getting things "right" but rather with asking what is at work in particular interpretations (Smith, 1991). Questioning the ways in

which meanings are created through and with language becomes central to the hermeneutic endeavor: "discovering what is at work in practices we once engaged in dogmatically, that is, as if there was nothing more to be said about them" (Smith, p.200). This is about making the ordinary extraordinary and the everyday, problematic.

If we are not attempting to discover "right" answers or create correct knowledges or even to defend particular interpretations, on what grounds can philosophical hermeneutics base claims to understanding? How do we respond to the charge of radical relativism, the suggestion that if "any interpretation is possible then no interpretation has any particular value?" (Smith, 1992, p.253). Are some interpretations "better" than others? There are a number of ways to respond to this question. Allen (1995) identifies process criteria, those concerned with the conditions under which the interpretation was produced, and consistency criteria, those which ask, is the interpretation consistent, internally and externally, with the historical period in which it was produced? In both cases however, when discussing preferable interpretations, one must always also ask, preferable for whom, preferable according to which criteria and who created those criteria? (Allen, 1995). These questions underline the connections among interpretive possibilities and the historical, contextualized nature of interpretation. As interpreters, we are situated, we see from the perspectives we inhabit. Our responsibility then, is to account for, in our interpretations, this situatedness, which is also an accounting for ourselves.

This is still a relativism but one that Kleinman (1995) describes as "constrained and engaged", a recognition of that which exceeds our grasp written into our work, and an acknowledgement that "a large residue of human experience resists or exceeds understanding" (p.62-65). In the absence of foundational and universal truths, broadening the horizons of understanding may be all that we can expect (Connolly, 1993 cited in Kleinman, 1995). In these terms, a good interpretation is one that can show understanding in relation to the questions being asked, understanding in the "deep sense that something has been profoundly heard in our present circumstances" (Smith, 1991, p.201). An interpretation is never once and for all but is itself open to interpretation and reinterpretation. This understanding too, must be written into our work.

<u>Everyday Life</u>

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the

product which we live....

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

What does it mean to begin one's research from the perspectives of women's lives? Why be concerned, as feminist research often is, with the "specificities of women's existence?" (Probyn, 1990, p.179). What is meant by 'everyday life'? Why is lived experience thought significant? Young (1990) observes that our understanding of the term 'experience' has become more complicated in light of post modern critiques of the subject. She notes that in both philosophical and ordinary language, 'experience' often has something to do with an origin of knowledge - we "know" things because we have subjective or personal experience of them. Post modern critiques have problematized this notion of subjective experience, pointing to the ways in which subjectivity is constituted through language and interaction - my experience of something is never only my experience but rather constituted by social processes in which I find myself always already positioned within social and cultural constraints. Young (1990), while supporting this notion of constituted subjectivity, also argues for an understanding of the subject which retains the possibility of creativity and agency. From this point of view, experience can be understood as "life activity that takes up the given and acts upon it" (Young, p.13).

Lived experience, which I am also calling everyday life, is emergent, fluid and unpredictable. Women's everyday lives in particular may be thought of as often "fragmented and dispersed": "in the course of a day, a week, women carry the threads of many tasks in their hands at the same time" (Aptheker, 1989, p.39). As do men, but differently. Men are not "primarily responsible for emotional work. They are not primarily responsible for the children, the elders, the relatives, the holidays, the cooking, the cleaning, the shopping, the mending, the laundry" (Aptheker, p.39). The insistent demands of everyday life, the doing of what needs to be done to take care of life, creates the dailiness of women's lives, "the patterns women create and the meanings women invent each day and over time" (Aptheker, p.39). If we can understand the creativity inherent in everyday life, perhaps we can begin to understand everyday life as significant. Part of this

significance may be found in the dailiness of women's resistances to the presence of oppression in their lives as they strive to "circumnavigate the powers of gender, race and class, to build decent relationships, to live well, to invest dailiness with meaning" (Aptheker, p.60). This is an understanding of everyday life as an inherently moral process, as being about what matters or what is at stake in everyday experience (Kleinman, 1995).

Writings on Mothers and Motherhood

We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel,

than about the nature and meaning of motherhood.

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

It is perhaps surprising that despite the significant body of literature created during the past two decades, much of which was written in response to the challenges of feminism, that we still "know" little about the nature, meaning and experience of mothering. It is probably less surprising that much of what we do know reflects the experiences of dominant groups, that is, the majority of writings on motherhood are written from and reflect a Eurocentric, middle class and heterosexual perspective (Dixon, 1991). Yet even this literature with its limited perspective seems to have been unable to influence the conditions of mothering in the sense that the "official" social discourse about mothering has scarcely changed in the past two decades (Reddy, 1997). This, for me, points to the tenaciousness of the ideology of motherhood: as long as mother is conceptualized as an object for the demands of the child, attempts to explore maternal subjectivity and change the conditions of mothering for mothers will be undermined and displaced (Daly & Reddy, p.1-2).

Many of the feminist writings on motherhood begin from a position that suggests that the experience of mothering, as it currently stands, does not serve the interests of mothers or children particularly well. To get to that experience, efforts are made to disentangle the experience of mothering from the institution or ideology of motherhood (Chesler, 1986; Chodorow, 1978; Lazarre, 1997; Rich; 1986; Ruddick, 1986). Rich (1986) for example, suggests the institution of motherhood has been superimposed on the experience of mothering and acts to "create the prescriptions and conditions in which choices are made or blocked" (p.42). Motherhood as institution is understood as embedded

in and growing out of other social, political and economic structures, many of which are seen to rely on, as well as foster, a fundamental gendered division of labour. It is not always clear however, whether women's mothering has engendered a particular social division of labour or if a distinction in private and public spheres has created particular conditions of mothering. Many writers point to this dialectic as a tension in the positioning and experience of many mothers (Baines, Evans & Neysmith, 1991; Chodorow, 1978; Lazarre, 1997; Ruddick, 1995).

The construction of a public/private dichotomy, and the resulting gendered division of labour is a strong theme in the writing of white, middle class feminists. Rich (1986) and Chodorow (1978) point to the ways this dichotomy has left women and children increasingly isolated in the home, and women with almost exclusive responsibility for the care of children but little control over the conditions in which this care will take place, a situation which Rich describes as "powerless responsibility" (p.52). Lazarre (1997) suggests that it is perhaps the function of the myth of the good mother, or at least an outcome of its presence in many women's lives, to enforce or reinforce conformity to the ideology of motherhood, to narrowly define the conditions of good mothering and thus, isolate women from one another. Women who do not conform to the ideal are quickly labelled, by themselves and others, as bad or unfit mothers, and shame silences them. Jordon (1997) points to the social functions of shaming: "when people are shamed and silenced by their shame, they cease trusting their own perceptions and sense of reality" (p.149). The myth of the good mother, with its impossible demands, creates silence and doubt, and leaves women "more vulnerable to other people's reality claims" (Jordon, p.149).

Although analyses of the influence of the public/private dichotomy and the myth of the good mother are useful for understanding the experiences of some women, other writers have rightly pointed out that they have both less and different relevance in the lives of poor women and women of colour (Collins, 1994; Glenn, 1994; hooks, 1984; Lorde; 1984; Segura, 1994; Swift, 1991). Timpson (1996) suggests that many feminist analyses or challenges to the ideology of motherhood have been unclear in part because they have failed to consider the ways in which differently situated women experience these issues

differently: race and class have always influenced which women would be encouraged to have children and in what conditions. Writing which decontextualizes motherhood may distort the experiences of poor women and women of colour, misrepresent the challenges they face, and serve to support ideologies that justify race, class and gender hierarchies (Collins, 1994; Glenn, 1994). Collins (1994) argues that racism and classism profoundly shape the mothering context, not only for poor women and women of colour but for all women. To some extent it is these systems of oppression which create the conditions in which some women can be seen as good or worthy mothers and other women as deficient.

The public/private dichotomy and the ideology of the good mother may have confusing and contradictory influences in the lives of women from non-dominant groups. The juxtaposition of public and private, or work and family, has less relevance for poor women and women of colour primarily because the two spheres tend to be interwoven in these women's lives (Collins, 1994). And the myth of the good mother, with its implicit requirement of conditions of economic security, may never have relevance to poor women except to the extent they are deemed unworthy mothers because of it. Yet social structures and institutions which may influence these women's lives are grounded in the beliefs and values of dominant groups, and they instruct us as to how good mothering is "supposed" to occur, that is, exclusively, self-reliantly and autonomously within an economically independent family unit (Swift, 1991).

A number of authors have documented the systematic stereotyping and stigmatization of poor women who are mothers (Axinn & Hirsch, 1993; Jarrett, 1996; Nesto, 1994; Salomon, Bassuk & Brooks, 1996; Schnitzer, 1996; Sidel, 1996; Withorn, 1996). In dominant social narratives about poverty, poor people are viewed as responsible for their condition by virtue of their passivity and dependence. Poor, single mothers in particular are considered unworthy and aberrant, yet at the same time held to a standard of mothering that in no way takes into account their circumstances (Schnitzer, 1996). As Schnitzer (1996) observes, a "questionable mother-child bond is the most frequent version of this story," a story which often implies depleted maternal and moral sensibilities (p.575). Poor women don't "care" for and about their children as they "should" and so social policies are designed to compel good mothering (Axinn & Hirsch, 1993).

Paradoxically, at the same time as poor women's mothering abilities are being challenged, mothers on welfare are being forced into jobs (Withorn, 1996).

This situation raises a number of questions one of which concerns the influence of dominant social narratives about poverty and about poor mothers on our understanding of these women's lives and on their own understanding of themselves. Jarrett (1996) investigated the perceptions and experiences of welfare stigma among low income African American women. These women were acutely aware of the assumptions made about them by virtue of their status as welfare recipients including those which suggested they were inadequate parents and those which questioned whether they should be parents at all. Yet these women also believed that they were able to responsibly care for their children. The label "welfare mother" had the effect of obscuring their strengths as mothers while deflecting attention away from underlying issues, that is, the pervasive and destructive effects of poverty.

Nesto (1994) and Salomon, Bassuk, and Brooks (1996) reported similar findings in their work with other groups of low income women. Nesto challenged the idea of dependency among low income mothers. She found that self reliance and competency were more characteristic of the women she studied than dependency, suggesting that being in financial need and being dependent are not the same thing. Salomon et al. also questioned the idea of the welfare dependency trap. They found that the women who participated in their study used welfare in complex ways that reflected the struggles in their lives. Their findings underscored women's resiliency in managing economic adversity.

In reviewing the research that nurses and allied professionals have undertaken with low income mothers, it seems that issues related to stress and coping have received the greatest emphasis. Almost invariably research findings have included observations of these women's strength and competence in the face of harsh environments. Dill, Feld, Martin, Beukema and Belle (1980) were among the first to challenge depictions of low income mothers as unable to manage their own affairs. They found that at times the coping efforts of low income mothers were ineffective not because of deficiencies in the women themselves but rather because of the exigencies and unresponsiveness of their environments. This finding has been repeated in the work of Wagner and Menke (1991)

and Sachs, Hall and Pietrukowicz (1995).

Low income mothers themselves reportedly experience considerable strength in and through their roles as mothers. Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1995) found through interviews with homeless mothers that along with will power and a determination to survive, their sense of themselves as good mothers was a source of strength. However, this study did not go on to explore how these women understood and lived the experience of being mothers. Similarly, Montgomery's (1994) exploration of the strengths of women who survive homelessness revealed that sustaining relationships, including those women had with their children, provided the context for individual strengths to emerge. Their children, rather than being a burden, sustained them and gave them a reason to persevere. Again however, this research only touched on these women's identity as mothers. Sands (1995) found that motherhood was central to the life experiences of low income mothers with serious mental illness, that is, their roles as mothers gave meaning and focus to life. Not surprisingly, these women also experienced considerable vulnerability in their roles as mothers, related to both their status as poor women as well as women with mental health problems.

Poverty does seem to add significant vulnerability to the experience of mothering. Stevens, Hall and Meleis (1992) examined the role related vulnerability of low income women from five racial/ethnic groups. Vulnerability was experienced by these women as a web of contingencies and as cumulative. Vulnerability in work roles, such as exposure to racism and few opportunities for advancement, intersected with and enhanced worry about children, childcare and their mothering abilities. At times this vulnerability was expressed as a sense of powerlessness in terms of being unable to protect their children from an unsafe world. Similarly, Barbee's (1994) interviews with low income Black women experiencing depression revealed that, when given voice, these women named poverty and the effects that poverty had on their relationships with their children as a major cause of dysphoria. A sense of powerlessness it seems, can be engendered when women lack resources to meet role expectations, their own and those of others. This is confirmed in Shields' (1995) study of women's experiences of the meaning of empowerment. Though not concerned with the experiences of low income women specifically, the women who

participated in this study emphasized the need for basic resources - money, food, stable housing and childcare - as essential in facilitating an empowerment process.

Each of the studies reviewed above points to a need to for deeper exploration of the ways in which low income women understand themselves as women and as mothers. The context of poverty clearly has an effect on the experience of mothering, yet in most of these studies this experience is not the focus of questioning. The researchers are mainly concerned with how women cope with harsh environments and difficult circumstances, and while these are important questions and concerns, they do not tell us much about what it is like to live the experience or what meanings women create in and through the living of it. In addition, little or no attention has been paid to how these women experience themselves as women. Given that the strengths these researchers have found so evident in the lives of low income mothers remain invisible or unrecognized in public discourses about them, it seems to me that a different kind of understanding of the lives of low income women may be needed, one that focuses on the meaningfulness of these women's lives as they are lived.

III. Processes Of Inquiry

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground

You cannot always tell by looking what is happening

More than half of a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet....

Marge Piercy, "The seven of pentacles", *Circles in the Water*

To raise something as a question is to invite oneself and others to wonder. It is to create space to ponder, to consider and reconsider the meanings of things we often take for granted. In this research I want to raise the lived experiences of women mothering in poverty as a question, and to open up our thinking, about these women and about ourselves, to question. This requires a radical thinking, a thinking which undercuts our common sense ideas about things, a thinking not meant to provide us with answers but rather a thinking intended to simply allow us "to take the measure of what is truly going on with us as human beings" (Burch, 1986, p.4).

Smith (1991) describes the character of genuine inquiry as "a kind of dialogical messing about" (p.198), which is not meant to suggest or imply inquiry undertaken lightly but rather points to the need for a thoughtful, fluid response to what is called for by a question. So while this inquiry does not have a method in the usual sense of the word, it can instead be thought of as informed and shaped by certain understandings which will guide its processes. I am influenced in my approach to this inquiry by feminist thought and philosophical hermeneutics. I understand these as ways of thinking that are sensitive to and responsive to the emergent and imperfect nature of understanding, and to the always unfinished nature of knowledge. These are also perspectives I believe can accommodate, even embrace the complexity inherent in women's lives and the storied nature of our existences.

The processes of this inquiry will be discussed in terms of generating text, interpreting text and hermeneutic writing. Although each is discussed separately, I understand these as overlapping both temporally and conceptually (Sandelowski, 1993). As written here, these describe my intentions with this inquiry, what it is I thought, prior to actually beginning this work, that I would be called on to do. Following this is a section which describes the concrete events of this research, the practicalities of connecting with

potential participants and the nature of these contacts. Then, after a discussion of ethical considerations, I will introduce the women whose participation, whose willingness to share their lives, is what has made this work possible at all. Finally I will revisit the beginnings of this chapter and discuss how my understanding of what I was doing, what I thought I was doing, changed through the doing of it. This is not a movement towards redundancy but rather speaks to the nature of hermeneutic inquiry. This is inquiry that one not only undertakes but that one undergoes, and the movement from the beginning to the end of this chapter is in some senses a "report" of that undergoing. The beginning represents my sense of a process I believed would offer me the greatest possible chance of understanding, the end, how I came to understand, through this process of trying to understand something, what it means to understand anything at all.

Generating Text

... a text which calls us to practice a thinking hearing: a thinking which listens,

a listening which is thoughtful.

David Levin, *The Listening Self*

Caputo (1987) observes that "hermeneutics in the early sense always involves inscribing the figure of the circle on the surface of the flux" (p.12). Although the metaphor of a hermeneutic circle is also used to describe interpretive processes, I want to employ it here to suggest the boundaries of this inquiry. The circle on the flux suggests movement. The circle flows with the flux, which is life itself, and at the same time, its boundaries are susceptible to the movements of the flux. Life flows into and out of the circle - its boundaries are permeable. So while the women who participate in this research, including myself, could be thought as the centre of this circle, much will pass through the boundary I am drawing around us. In part this reflects an understanding that a person cannot be understood apart from her world (Walters, 1995), but also the idea that understanding cannot occur apart from the world. I will draw on any text - written, spoken, seen - which furthers my understanding and challenges me to open up my thinking.

The primary texts however will be those I create together with the women who participate. The means for doing this will be conversation. Kvale (1996) uses a traveler metaphor to describe research conversations: "the interviewer wanders along with the local

inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as 'wandering together with'" (p.4). Conversation in these terms is also relationship in the sense that it is a wandering "with" characterized by spontaneity, responsiveness and purpose. The texts will be created in the interactions between us.

Because these conversations are central to this hermeneutic endeavor, it is essential to attend to and be sensitive to the conditions under which and through which our words are spoken. Establishing trust and a sense of mutuality are central concerns, however this does not mean that the relationships between myself and the other women will always be completely reciprocal and egalitarian. As Cotterill (1992) suggests, power, control and vulnerability in research relationships are best understood as fluid and shifting, changing between and during different conversations. The need then is not to set fixed conditions for conversation but rather to continually attend to and respond to the shifting power relations between myself and the other participants. My intention is to create conditions which are as democratic as possible, and achieving this intention forms part of the ethic of this research.

During the text generation part of this research I will also be making efforts to refrain from interpretation, that is, I will try to be as fully present as possible as listener. Anderson and Jack (1991) describe this as "listening with the third ear," listening while attending to my own responses and the process of the conversation (p.19). This is not to say I leave myself out of the conversation because I understand my ideas, thoughts and responses as part of this research, but rather I will try to be aware of the ways in which I may think I already know the meaning of what a woman might say to me, and what we might say to each other. When I think I already know, "I am already appropriating what she says to an existing schema and no longer listening to *her*" (Anderson & Jack, p.19).

This is also an ontologically oriented listening, a listening that may develop or expand our capacity to think, and our capacity to think differently (Levin, 1989). Levin, following Heidegger, calls for an open and embodied listening that is also a letting go: "a listening structured not by the intentionality of conceptual grasping, but rather by the body's *felt sense* of the saying, a listening attuned through feeling" (p.22). Attending to

the felt content of our understanding enables the words we use to resonate rather than be "immediately caught, enframed" (Levin, p.22). This view fits well with Jaggar's (1989) understanding of emotions as ways in which we "engage actively and even construct the world" (p.137). Our emotions are integral to how we make sense of our worlds, they exert an influence whether we choose to acknowledge this or not.

To create written texts, my conversations with women will be audiotaped and transcribed. Transcription will include the words spoken between us and a record of the nonverbal features of our conversations. Other data that will be included as text in this inquiry will be any existing literature found relevant and my own writing. My own writing will take different forms to meet several purposes. Journalling, with both interpretive and reflexive notations, will be used to account for the process of my understanding, evidence of the "dialogical journey" that hermeneutics must be (Smith, 1991, p.198). This is, as Smith suggests, a "profoundly ethical aspect of hermeneutic inquiry"(p.198). I will also create a "paper trail" to trace and make visible my decision making process.

Interpreting Text

I've heard tellers begin "The way I heard it was...." and then proceed with another

story purportedly a version of a story just told but the story they would tell was a

wholly separate story, a new story with an integrity of its own, an offspring, a part of

the continuing which storytelling must be.

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller*

In some respects, interpretive possibility rests on the belief that "any situation is a story, a humanly constructed set of meanings that make sense out of phenomena" (Gadow, 1994, p.306). The point here may not be so much to offer an interpretation, or to replace one interpretation with another, but rather to show a full range of interpretive possibilities (Smith, 1992), and in doing this, to point to a deepening sense of "the basic interpretability of life itself" (Smith, 1991, p.199). The complexity of hermeneutic inquiry arises in part from this very interpretability of life, from the multiplicity of possible meanings which characterize our situations. Indeed, Barthes (1989) suggests that a "true" reading of anything would also be a "mad" reading, "not because it would invent improbable meanings, not because it would be 'delirious' but because it would perceive the

simultaneous multiplicity of meanings" (p.42). A good interpretation in these terms may be one that carries within it a sense of its own inadequacy: "the surfacing of meaning ... always involves an act of suppression" (Smith, 1992, p.252).

The metaphor of a hermeneutic circle is often used to evoke a sense of what is called for in an interpretive process. The shape of a circle suggests fluidity and repetition, a tracing of movement among part and whole, continually expanding our circle as we integrate new understanding but always returning, again and again, to our beginnings - the texts of our conversations, our understandings of which are changed through and by our comings and goings. This is a creative, imaginative process, a dialogue or conversation among all aspects of the context of an interpretation, and it is a conversation which never fully ends (Smith, 1991).

In somewhat more practical terms, an interpretation is also a reading. This is reading however which attends to both the logic of reason, that which makes this story readable, and the associative logic of the symbol which associates this text with "*other* ideas, *other* images, *other* significations" (Barthes, 1989, pp.30-31). It is reading which opens outward, which disperses (Barthes, 1989). Meaning then, is not sought or found within the text but rather created through interactions or dialogue among reader, text and context. Barthes (1989) suggests the reader does not decode or decipher but produces and accumulates languages, "he lets himself be infinitely and tirelessly traversed by them: he is that traversal" (p.42). In reading, the reader moves within the "in between" or intersubjective spaces asking not what meaning is here but how is this meaningful? This is meaning arrived at "referentially and relationally rather than... absolutely" (Smith, 1991, p.197).

This understanding of interpretation points to the centrality of the interpreter and to the question of who I am in this process. However rather than being answerable, this question merely creates yet another level of ambiguity in the interpretive process. As a being always Becoming, I am "at once encumbered and free, situated and transcendent" (Gadow, 1996, p.38). In many ways, this writing concerning how I intend to proceed is an attempt to map out the situatedness of my beginnings, to show the ways in which I "make sense of the world from within a particular 'horizon'" and at the same time, point to

the changeability or fluidity of this horizon or my "anticipation of being transformed in the face of new lived realities" (Smith, 1991, p.193). Accounting for myself through the interpretive process, for my situatedness and my transformations, becomes part of the text and context of the interpretation.

Hermeneutic Writing

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence....

Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

Smith (1991) describes hermeneutic writing as "strong" writing, writing which contains within itself a desire for provocation and disruption. My sense is that as nurses, as a society we already "know" something of the realities of women mothering in poverty but it does not seem to be a knowing which has moved us to think or act differently in relation to these women or our world. So what seems to be called for here may be the writing of a different understanding, a writing which is also "an invitation to consider the boundaries and limitations of one's own understanding" (Smith, 1991, p.203). Lorde (1984) writes, "there are no new ideas.... only new ways of making them felt" (p.39). The purpose of hermeneutic writing then, may be to destabilize existing understandings through the presencing of new ways of thinking, to create a sense of the "full play of possibilities at work in any situation" (Smith, 1992, p.253). In a sense this is a re-writing of existing scripts, with a writing in of movement and interpretive possibility, a stammering of language as it comes to grips with its own inadequacy.

Part of the integrity of hermeneutic inquiry is achieved through accounting for one's interpretive process, a showing of how I came to understand something as meaningful, or meaningful in this or that way. I will be obliged in my writing to provide other readers with enough information about this process that they will be able to assess the validity and trustworthiness of my interpretations. Readers should be able to follow my thinking and be convinced by the coherence of my position. At the same time, my writing must be open and tentative enough that they may make their own interpretations.

<u>Connecting</u>

To a certain kind of mind, what is hidden away ceases to exist.

Susan Griffin, A *Chorus of Stones*

In qualitative inquiry, sampling is purposive (Sandelowski, Davis & Harris, 1989). As researchers we look for those who can speak to our topic, who are interested and willing to participate. For this research, I was looking for women who were currently mothering, defined as having at least one child living with her, and who were living with poverty. I used the 1997 Statistics Canada Low Income Cut Offs (LICOs) for urban areas with populations over 500,000 as a measure of a low income. These figures represent incomes at which persons are considered to be substantially worse off than the average, and it is notable that none of the participants in this study had incomes as high as those consider to be a low income.

My intention was to try to connect with women primarily through nongovernmental organizations which offer support to women and families living with poverty. As part of a movement to democratize the research relationship, I felt it important to avoid connection by association with organizations and persons, such as child welfare workers, income assistance workers, or public health nurses, who might hold and wield authority in the lives of low income women. This is not meant to derogate either these workers or their organizations but rather to acknowledge the sometimes oppressive relations of power low income women may experience in these contexts. Instead, I met women through a downtown family resource centre (Calgary Urban Project Society), a women's centre (Bridgeland Women's Centre) and through a notice placed in a networking newsletter for women's organizations in Calgary (Women Looking Forward). I chose to recruit from at least three locations in order to help maintain participant anonymity.

At both the family resource centre and the women's centre I spent some time talking about my proposed research with staff members and with women using the facilities. My hope was that even if they were not interested in participating themselves, these women would know someone else who might be. One woman I spoke with agreed immediately to participate, and two others became involved after being told about this research by someone else. I also posted notices and left information sheets at both these locations. The fourth

participant saw one of these notices and contacted me for more information. The fifth and final participant called me after seeing a notice I had placed in the Women Looking Forward newsletter. A sixth woman did contact me after seeing a posted notice and express interest in participating, however our attempts to meet were unsuccessful. With this exception, everyone who contacted me became part of this research.

After these initial contacts, either in person or by telephone, I arranged with each woman to have a longer conversation to discuss the research in more detail, to review the consent form and just get to know each other a little better. As well as talking about the research and about what a woman felt she had to offer, we also talked about who I was and about what I thought enabled me to do this work well, about my status as a student and novice researcher. Though I encouraged the women to take time to consider their decision to participate, each was very willing, at the end of these conversations, to sign the consent and arrange time for our taped conversations. Each woman expressed quite clearly to me that at the root of her desire to participate was a hope that doing so would help other women.

Three of the women involved in this research were complete strangers to me at the beginning of this process. One woman I had met last year during a nursing practicum, and one woman and I found we knew each other slightly upon meeting, that we had acquaintances in common. I had thought that this might create a reluctance in this woman to participate but instead knowing me and knowing something about me increased her trust of me and her willingness to participate. Recruitment of participants took place over approximately six weeks in the winter of 1999.

My intention had been to meet with each woman for taped conversation two to three times but I found one conversation of approximately one and a half hours with each woman provided me with sufficient "text" for this research. I had expected some hesitancy, or slowness in sharing, that a woman would have to get to know me before she would feel comfortable in sharing something of her life with me but this was not the case. Our conversations were easy, beginning with a recap of my interest in hearing something about what it is like to be a woman mothering in poverty and then with a question along the lines of "tell me a little bit about who you are?" Conversation progressed according to a

woman's responses, and I tried very much to follow where she was going, to be conscious of the ways in which I might direct a conversation according to some other fixed agenda. Since I was interested in what it was like to be a woman mothering in poverty, I was also interested in what it was like to be her, to be this woman here, in particular. This kind of questioning called for a certain openness, a willingness to let this woman lead the way, so that I might really hear what she chose to say or not say. Our conversations ended with mutual agreement, when neither of us had anything more we wished to say. All of the women were open to a second interview at a later date if it seemed necessary.

Integrity

... but within this multiplicity of what can be thought...not everything is possible.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

There are two aspects to the ethicalness of this research, those measures called for in all research and which are designed to protect participants, and those specific to the integrity of hermeneutic inquiry. In attending to the former, the proposal for this research was submitted to and received ethical approval from the Faculty of Nursing Research and Scholarly Development Committee which serves as the faculty level ethics review committee from the University of Calgary General Faculties Council Committee on the Ethics of Human Studies. Then, prior to participation, informed written consent (see Appendix A) was obtained from each participant. To ensure that all aspects of this consent were clearly understood, particularly the limits of confidentiality i.e., my obligation to report information related to child abuse, we read the consent together, with me reading aloud and stopping frequently to allow for questions or clarification. I understood, and ensured each woman understood, that her consent would be considered processual, that in my role as researcher I was responsible for assessing "the effects of involvement... and continually acquiring new permissions" (Munhall, 1993, p.403). As I obtained consent, each woman was informed of my interests and intentions, the planned processes of the inquiry and my intentions related to findings. I stressed that women were under no obligation to participate and might withdraw from the inquiry at any point without consequence.

Specific measure were also taken to ensure participant anonymity and

confidentiality. The audiotaped conversations were transcribed without identifying signifiers, and these tapes will be erased at the completion of the study. All tapes, transcripts and research notes have been securely stored. Additionally, each woman has chosen a name by which she is known in this study.

There are also ethical considerations which speak to the conditions under which conversations occur and I have been concerned here to create conditions as democratic and as non-coercive, as possible. I connected with women at a distance, as it were, that is, posting notices, talking generally with women about what I was doing without specific invitation to participate until a woman herself expressed interest. I did not approach women in association with any power structure in their lives as I did not want a woman to feel her participation as an obligation, as compelled. Though it seems at times a small detail, it was important I think, for these women to choose the times and places of our meeting, not only for the sake of convenience but for comfort. Though three women invited me into their homes, two met with me in public spaces expressing some embarrassment at the conditions in which they were living. Interestingly, I did not invite women into my home for something of the same reasons - I felt discomfort with my comfort, with the conditions in which I live. Though not particularly affluent, I am still significantly financially, materially better off than the women who participated in this research and I suspect I thought that visible evidence of this would somehow widen the gulf between us.

It would be naive of me to believe that differences in our material circumstances, as well as other differences between us, did not influence our conversations however I am unsure how this may have worked itself out. Though I don't believe these had a coercive effect, my presence is less than intimidating, it seems possible that our differences may have affected what the women thought I would be capable of understanding about their lives and so they may have censored themselves, consciously or unconsciously. Though there are ways that the relationships between us were grounded in honesty, about myself and my intentions, and reciprocity, there were also ways that fully mutual relationships, if such things even exist, were not possible. Mutuality was present in that there was give and take between us, and though I did not share with them as they shared with me, I was also not simply present to "extract" data (Hall & Stevens, 1991). Rather I was fully present in

each conversation as someone who wanted to hear what this particular woman had to say about her life, with her and for her I was an interested, respectful, responsive listener.

Attending to relations of power was necessary not only during our conversations but also afterwards as I struggled to take care of what the women had told me. For me, the conversations, the relationships have continued long past our face to face meetings and in many ways, still continue. Working with the transcripts of our conversations, reading and writing, I have needed to be prepared to allow these women, these texts to really tell me something, a hearing which is also a letting go. Gadamer (1989) writes of this as self forgetfulness, a willingness to lose yourself in order to find yourself. This is not the same thing as self extinction, but rather I have needed to allow another truth to be *asserted* in the face of my own, and in doing so, I have allowed myself to be challenged (Gadamer, 1989). To have refused this challenge would have been to have simply imposed a meaning I already held, it would have been to not allow these women to have made a difference.

There are also other considerations specific to the integrity and ethicalness of a hermeneutic inquiry. Of primary importance here are the ways in which one accounts for oneself through the inquiry including attending to one's situatedness as well as the transformations of self which occur through the course of the inquiry. It is a matter, in many ways, of making one's own journey visible such that those who follow are able to clearly trace one's trail. As Smith (1991) suggests, this is a profoundly ethical aspect of hermeneutic inquiry. As well as keeping a record of my thinking throughout the inquiry through interpretive and reflexive journals, I have written into the report of this research an account of my self, my efforts at consciousness, my changing understandings of my topic and of the process of interpretation itself.

In addition, any interpretation must account for the obvious limitations of all interpretive work, those aspects of human experience which will always exceed understanding. My interpretations are offered as tentative rather than absolute or True (Walters, 1995), though I do believe there are truths in what I have written. This remains though for the reader to judge. My responsibility has been to provide enough information about my thinking and rich excerpts from the transcripts so that a reader may judge for herself the trustworthiness and coherence of this work. The plausibility of the work

remains always grounded in the texts themselves, the transcripts of our conversations, and though my reading is a reading that opens outward, it is these that have served as limits or checks to possible interpretations. As Allen (1995) observes, one is always "accountable to the texts" (p.179).

I have not considered it necessary to obtain validation from these women about what I have written, though I will share with them my interpretations and be very interested in their responses. I have not sought validation because I have not been simply reporting on our conversations, but rather creating meaning in part through having had these conversations. Interpretation is an imaginative, creative process, one which is always going on and though writing in some senses "fixes" the process, it is must be thought of as continuing beyond what I have written here. Even now as I re-read what I myself have written my understanding changes both of what I have written and what I have written about: "what has fixed itself in writing has raised itself into a public sphere of meaning in which everyone who can read has an equal share" (Gadamer, 1989, p.392). The texts of our conversations, this text here, all are now open to interpretation and reinterpretation by whoever reads them. Or as Jardine (1994) writes, "in interpretation, *nobody* is above and before all the others, not even the 'author' of the text" (p.11).

This is both the strength and weakness of the written word, of text, that it has a "life of its own" (Gadamer, 1989, p.392). The texts of the conversations between the women who participated in this work and myself hold the possibility that each time they are revisited, that each time they are re-read, even by the authors themselves, we may understand them anew, we may understand them differently and thus, we will always be producing new interpretations. Our understanding, even of or perhaps especially of ourselves, is never finished. So though the women who participated in this research have been essential in this work, it is also true that this research is not about them, it is not about their experience, it is about an experience of which they have knowledge, it is about what it is like to be a woman, a mother and living with poverty. Accurately reporting what women said to me is not what I have tried to do here, rather I have wanted to write something plausible, something possible, something which we could read, nod our heads and say "it could be."

The Women

Dandelions were what she chiefly saw. Yellow jewels for everyday, studding the patched green dress of her backyard. She liked their demure prettiness second to their everydayness; for in that latter quality she thought she saw a picture of herself, and it was comforting to find that what was common could also be a flower.

Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha*

My intent here is to briefly introduce the women who participated in this research. The kind of information offered here is similar to all that we, as nurses, often know about those for whom we care and so as well as being a kind of "factual" information, representing one way that we can know someone, it can serve also as a point of comparison for what follows, which is another way we can know someone.

Terri

Terri is 31, mother of four children, two of whom live with her, aged seven and three, and two of whom she gave up for adoption at birth. She has been married for four years and in this same relationship for the past ten years. She does not currently work outside the home, although she does volunteer at her daughter's school and at a family resource centre. Her husband's average monthly salary is approximately $1000, though this often represents a "good" month. Of note, the Low Income Cut Off (LICO) for a family of four living in a centre this size is $32,759. Terri and her family have very recently obtained an apartment in a social housing complex where their rent is 30% of their income. Prior to this they were facing homelessness, about to be evicted from the hotel in which they were living.

Maria

Maria came to Canada, with her husband and young child, in 1976 as a political refugee. When they arrived here they received some government support but also supported themselves working as cleaners. Maria is now 48 years old and has four children, three of whom are still living with her. They are 15, 14 and 12 years of age and Maria has been on her own with them since the youngest was six months old. The children's father is in their lives but not in a position to offer financial support. Maria has received social assistance for the past twelve years, and currently receives $1050 per

month. As noted above, the LICO for a family of this size is $32,759. In addition to caring for her children, Maria has spent time volunteering in the community, with the food bank, community kitchens and a women's centre. She has also worked off and on as a child care worker.

Ann

Ann is 35 and a registered nurse. She has two children aged five and eight years. About 18 months ago Ann went to a women's shelter, leaving her abusive husband and her marriage of 11 years. Since then, she has been neither physically nor emotionally able to continue to work as a nurse though she is seeking other, less demanding employment. Her standard of living has plunged since she left her husband and she is currently living off a loan from her family. If her job search is unsuccessful, she is contemplating applying for social assistance though she wishes very much to avoid this. Ann charged her husband with sexual assault when she left him. He received nine months probation and a conditional discharge. He still has access to the children.

Amber

Amber is 21 years old and has been on her own, on and off the streets, since she was twelve. She has one child aged four and a half. The child's father is not involved. Amber has no income of her own, though she occasionally takes on temporary minimum wage jobs. Amber recently moved back to Calgary after several years away. She was living for a time with a sister and the sister's boyfriend but when this relationship broke down she was left to find a new situation. She approached an old friend who agreed to let Amber and her son move in with him. This has now become a more intimate relationship. Amber's boyfriend does contract work and his income covers their rent but the bills are beginning to pile up.

Jane

Jane is 37 years old with one child aged eight. Three years ago she split up with her partner of ten years and since that time has been struggling with a low income. Jane works full time, with children, earning approximately $19,000 per year. She is close to the LICO for a family of two, $21,760. For almost three years, Jane and her daughter have lived in a social housing complex, with rent controlled at 30% of total income. But being on the

upper end of poverty, so to speak, brings with it its own difficulties. If Jane begins to earn even a little more money, she and her child will no longer be eligible for subsidy and they will have to find their own housing on the open market. So though relatively stable at the moment, Jane fears being thrown back into dire poverty through having to make her own way without assistance.

Changing Understandings

Reaching an understanding in language places a subject matter before those communicating.... Thus the world is the common ground, trodden by none, recognized by all...

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

At the beginning of this chapter is an account of generating text, interpreting text and hermeneutic writing that represents my understanding of these processes prior to undertaking them. Though these processes as outlined were very useful, I find that now my understanding of these has deepened, become more complete, more complex. I had expected then that my understanding of hermeneutics would change through the experience of trying to understand something of what it is like to be a woman, a mother and living with poverty, that I would be changed in and through this experience and I have found that this has been the case. This happens I think, because trying to understand something in particular also requires that we consider how it is that we can understand anything at all. We come to understand ourselves, how it is we understand, through understanding something *other* than ourselves and this understanding of something other is, at the same time, a self-understanding: "it is true in every case that a person who understands, understands himself" (Gadamer, 1989, p.260). Prior to undergoing this experience I might have been able to say this but without what I now believe I have, which is a felt sense of the saying. Facing myself, trying to work out what is at work in me, trying to discern what it is I believe such that something may be meaningful to me in this or that way, has been what Jardine (1994) might call a "lovely agony", a case where the "bad news somehow turns out to be the good news" (p.vii). Though it can be disheartening to find oneself other than one would wish, or than one expected, this kind of self understanding is also an opening, an opening outward to something other than the self, to a world where

understanding happens. In some respects, all interpretive work, all our attempts to understand something, can be thought of as "an invitation to consider the boundaries and limits of one's own understanding" (Smith, 1991, p.203), but the "good news" is that it is only through knowing something of these limits that we may choose to extend them. Though we are bound, our capacity to read, to understand, is a like a magic that frees us, though not completely (Gadamer, 1989).

We are always already interpreting our worlds, making sense of what happens, creating meaning, and how we do this is related to what is at work in us, that which is often beyond our "wanting and willing" (Jardine, 1994, p.vii), but which allows us to make something meaningful. In interpretive work we don't often know in advance what this is, just as we don't necessarily know what we will be called on to be or do, but rather we must be prepared to risk all for the possibility of understanding. We set ourselves up to be challenged, disturbed, to have our understanding disrupted. We begin because we have questions, because we see something as questionable and this is a risk because the opening our beginnings create is also a breaking open, a shattering of what "is" without guarantee of what will be - we can't tell how things will work themselves out. When we shatter what "is" we open other possibilities for understanding, but we also create uncertainty, ambiguity - another good news, bad news scenario. But this is, I think, what we are called on to do, that is, to disrupt, to shatter, to disturb, to make things "mean" differently and thus to open up the world of meaning. We do this not, as Smith (1992) says, "in defense of particular interpretations but in defense of interpretive possibility" (p.253).

An interpretive inquiry shows a process of what is possible, a process of how we come to understand, and seeing something of how this occurs can help us to open, to loosen our thinking. We confront here the impossibility of understanding something once and for all, and find ourselves in the midst of a multiplicity of possible meanings which threatens to overwhelm, unless we can loosen our grip on our desire for certainty and simply accept what is there, accept that what is there is what there is. And what is there is something quite wonderful, a world which presents "different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints" (Gadamer, 1989, p.284), a world to which we can orient ourselves but which we can never fully know, a world which constantly invites our

exploration. The interpretive writing which follows here is such an exploration, the unfolding, as it were, of my process of trying to understand something of what is it like to be a woman, a mother and to be living with poverty. It begins, in a way, with my beginnings, or rather with a beginning, and winds through what I think can best be described as trying to understand this experience from the inside out and then the outside in (Smith, 1991). And I must say here that though I am revealed in it, though I am inextricably linked to it, what follows is not about me but rather it is about something of which I have now had "certain experiences" (Jardine, 1998, p.44).

IV. Women Mothering In Poverty - From The Inside Out

Beginning

The subject is forced to wade into the complexity of events, to make a first cut into a

relatively dense thicket, a thicket that is (almost) impossible to clear.

Clearings hardly happen.

John Caputo, *Against Ethics*

The difficulty for me is beginnings. Should I start with *this* story or with *that* story? Should I shape the writing in *this* way or in *that* way? How will I arrange things? What difference will it make to what happens next? Certainly as the writer, I must begin somehow or rather somehow I must create a beginning. Perhaps I should consider that the real beginning may be just this very difficulty: how to decide where to begin and what this "trouble" gets to say to us about where we are in the world. *This* beginning sets me down already in the middle, in the midst of things.

I believe this difficulty of beginning to be related to what Caputo (1987) describes as restoring life to its original difficulty (p.1), essentially a "problem" of how we are in the world: we are always already in the midst of things, and being already in the midst of things our beginnings seem engineered to allow us the comfortable and perhaps comforting illusion that we can say, *this* is where it all started, *this* is what it was all about. This illusion, like all illusions, holds its power through our own forgetfulness, in this case, the ways in which we forget that since we are in it, neither beginnings nor endings are within our grasp. Our desire for beginnings, always comes, as it were, too late (Gadamer, 1989, p.490). A problem perhaps, but only insofar as we would wish it to be otherwise and so make our eminently understandable but ultimately futile attempts to pin down, to hold fast to the idea of beginnings. What we are left with, the way things are, is the capacity to say only, at this moment, *this* is what it looks like from here: "a reading of life which catches life at its game of taking flight" (Caputo, p.1).

Reading life in this way however, is not the same thing as stopping its flight but rather reading into it its complicatedness, its movements, its ambiguities. In many ways it is about abandoning the desire to say once and for all, *this* is what being a woman, a

mother and living with poverty is like, *this* is what is going on. Rather, this reading is about trying to see the multitude of possibilities this experience in the world is capable of holding. In some respects, it not about answering the question of what this experience is like, but rather about simply asking it, about seeing this experience as questionable. My intention then, is not to recount what a woman has said to me or try to guess at what she meant, I see these as neither possible nor desirable. Rather, I hope to create a space, a clearing around the experience of being a woman, a mother and living with poverty, such that a conversation about what is going on may occur. I want to offer an interpretation that is open, generous and interesting, one that will raise questions about what is often taken as given in this experience, one that will create doubt about what it is we think we already know.

All interpretation is a kind of highlighting (Gadamer, 1989). In my conversations with these women, in my reading and writing, some things have stood out for me. As I thought about these things, questioned both them and my thinking about them, some things stayed standing "there", that is, this interpretation has required from me a constant working out of my fore-understandings in terms of what is there. This is a there-ness that needs to be guarded against being located either in me or in the women who shared their experiences with me. Rather, it is a there-ness which points to a world, a world which contains the experience of being a woman, a mother and living with poverty. So it is not so much that every woman has her own experience, her own perspective, though this might seem true, but rather, in the world, it is the experience itself that is multiple and contradictory. If it were only a matter of each of woman having her own perspective, the experience would be located only in her and we would have nothing to say to one another - the world that we share would be lost.

So what I am trying to write here is something that could be true of the experience of being a woman, a mother and living with poverty, something that is possible, plausible, even convincing. This writing will be neither generalizable nor particular, nor will it be exhaustive. Rather, my hope is for us to begin to see the ways in which this experience is questionable, to write about the experience in such a way that our understanding of what it might be like is opened. A way to do this is to try to follow the movement of how

something shows itself, and to show it in its multiplicity. What follows then, is not about theming, or about seeking out what is the same among these women and what is different. Rather, it is an assembling of multiplicities where the multiplicity is found not in the number of terms used but in the "AND": this AND this AND this... (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p.57). The experience of being a woman, a mother and living with poverty, in this world, then becomes about shaming AND control AND hardship AND struggle AND pride AND fighting back AND valuing family AND making decisions about what matters AND having no choices AND being vulnerable AND being strong AND getting used to things AND taking care of children AND taking care of oneself AND resisting deprivation AND having no illusions AND hoping for a better future AND feeling trapped and hopeless AND needing to be seen AND enjoying simple pleasures AND being treated unfairly AND living on the edge AND.... It could be that it is about all of these things and some of these things but perhaps most significantly it will be about the AND, the ways in which a thing is not so much meaningful in itself but rather, in all its relations.

The women I talked with, Terri, Maria, Ann, Amber and Jane, and I are located in the midst of all of this, in the places between, between what I have written here and what has made the writing possible.

A Woman, A Mother and Living With Poverty

A person is a place where the eyes of the other come over me, overtake me,

pulling me up short.

John Caputo, *Against Ethics*

Terri

Terri and I met for the first time almost a year before this research began. I was involved in a senior nursing practicum at a family resource centre and she was coming in, with her children, every day. Terri was noticeable to me in part because of her appearance. She seemed fragile and almost bird-like, though obviously weighted with pregnancy. She and her daughters appeared untidy to me, sort of messy and looking some days like they had just rolled out of bed and put on the first clothing that came to hand. I found out later Terri and her family lived in a place without furniture. They had money for rent and utilities and nothing else.

I think it was learning this about Terri, the real conditions in which she was living, that started my questioning process. This and hearing her say that she pretended with her girls that they were camping. Her everyday life required her to make meanings they could live with, required her to make sense of things not particularly sensible. Knowing something about Terri forced me to confront assumptions I didn't know I held - assumptions about messy women, about what it means to be careless with one's appearance. These assumptions, it pains me to say, were about laziness, neglect, indifference. And it was only knowing something of her circumstances that made me realize what I had been thinking, that made me recognize how I had been reading her life off the surface. I was assuming things that had to do with me and I wondered about how much this happens and what it means for us - for low income mothers and for nurses who work with them. It's this whole thing about how we think we already know something and what this means in terms of what happens next.

I think it is important to recognize the ways in which Terri represents for me who this research is about. To me she is the woman struggling well with her circumstances. It was meeting her and thinking about her and thinking about my own assumptions and expectations that got me started on this path. Part of my thinking has always been that her struggle for basic necessities in the context of this very affluent society seems so wrong, so unnecessary. Is she typical? I don't know. I think she is admirable although I am less likely to romanticize her situation now than before I had talked with her - her struggle is not so much heroic as about routine, ongoing hardship. And I am also less likely to romanticize her situation because she herself is so matter of fact and because she deserves more from me than sentimental thinking - indeed, her life demands it. So while I continue to admire Terri's willingness to engage with what her life offers and her attempts to live well, I am also more able to see that she is not an uncomplicated woman. It's curious that I should somehow be surprised by her complicatedness as if who she was could in fact, be read off the surface.

When Terri agreed to participate in this research she warned me that she would only talk to me about those things she would be comfortable saying around the kitchen table, meaning our talk would be about ordinary, everyday things. I didn't understand the need

for this warning until I learned that the baby she had been carrying last winter had been given up for adoption. I admit this unsettled me - Terri had seemed to me a very involved mother and it was hard for me to see her as giving up her child. I found it even more distressing to learn that she had given up this child because she believed that she could not afford to keep him, and worse, that this was the second time in her life that she had had to make this decision. I believed this to be clearly and simply wrong. Terri though, seemed to refuse this interpretation and insist on her own - that it was a hard thing but that it was something she chose, something she chose in the context of her reality, a reality that didn't include the money or the energy to take on another child.

Terri tells me she is a mother first, wife second. Her day, she says, revolves around her children's lives - schooling, extra activities for the girls, these are central. There is nothing very surprising about this, indeed, such a stance is almost a given in this world where mothers are expected to put their children first and to arrange their lives to meet the needs of others. I wonder though, if Terri's seeing herself as mother first has something to do with the arduousness of her motherhood. Her struggle to provide for her daughters is difficult and consuming, and in giving up children, she has had to think long and hard about herself as mother and what this means for her.

Terri met her husband when she was quite young and they have been together for most of the past ten years. Because there were difficulties in both their relationship and their life circumstances they didn't marry until about four years ago. Terri describes her husband as sometimes aggressive, as pushing her to do things that she doesn't want to do and trying to control her. At the same time, it doesn't seem that she is bowled over by his aggressiveness, that is, she has a strong sense of self that stands against this. Her decision to stay with him and to eventually marry him was a thoughtful one:"... and I figured there was a lot of things, because of our personalities, clash - I'm passive, he's aggressive - it took us a while to work into a relationship where I'm not under his thumb or anything like that - I had to become a person in my own mind. I went from my mom's house, living on my own briefly and then meeting him so I mean I hadn't developed my own personality yet... being an adult yet... so I had to do that first..." (Terri: Transcript 1)

This idea of needing to become a person in her own mind is something that really

stands out in Terri, the sense that she knows something about who she is and how she is in the world - and this knowing is what provides the ground of her decision making, of making choices that have often been quite difficult. When she was pregnant with her first daughter she was unmarried and her boyfriend (now husband) was in trouble with the law. Her decision to keep this child, rather than give her up for adoption as those around her urged, was one she made on her own and was based on what she discovered she felt for the child within her. She had Lisa and they were happy she says. A few years later she became pregnant with Julie and though her husband was not too pleased, she felt she had to keep her too.

There are ways in which Terri tells the story of her motherhood in shorthand - kept her, gave him up - that glides over the realities, the lived meanings of these decisions and which in some ways leaves the implications of these words unspoken. Yet what happened is clear: "...umm third one... at that point in our lives, you know Dave, we were always low, low income and what not, didn't know about any help or anything like that so we were just struggling and we didn't qualify for any help through social services... Um... so got pregnant with Julie... financial burden... it was even hard to get along... got pregnant with the third one, couldn't afford him, we knew we couldn't afford him, even if we wanted to keep him and what not and I knew I was so busy with Lisa and Julie... they kept me running ragged and I only had so much energy I could spend in the day, so I knew I couldn't keep him personally... so I gave him up for adoption... to a wonderful family..." (Terri: T1)

How do you explain or describe the decision to give up a child? Clearly it seems something requiring explanation and maybe even justification and just as clearly Terri has had to fight to hold onto her own understanding. Giving up her babies is part of her reality that has to do with not having enough energy or money to keep them. It has to do with the way things are: "I knew it was the right thing to do and I just did it" (Terri: T1). She knew it was the right thing to do because she knows her life from the inside. And knowing all this, she also knows something about the futility of self blame, and so refuses to "feel harsh" about herself in these circumstances: "...I was thinking of keeping him until reality kicked in..." (Terri: T1). I still have questions though about the kind of reality we live in

where wanting to be a good mother means giving up one's child.

After the baby was adopted some women Terri knew expressed disbelief that not only had she gone through with the adoption, but that she had been able to go through with it. These women could not understand how, when Terri saw her child, she could still surrender him. This was a decision they say they could not and would not have made. These women, women in situations not unlike Terri's, saw her as having another choice, a choice that would have been about the claim a child makes on its mother and maybe also about the claim society makes on mothers. And their disbelief holds questions: what kind of mother are you? what kind of woman are you?

But Terri seems to have been responding to other claims, including her assessment of her own abilities and needs, and the needs of her present family. Her decision can be understood as a choice responsive to these other preexisting claims, claims that attend to her own need to be free of children at some point i.e., her daughters are now old enough that she can walk away from them and be alone for a few moments versus the incessant demands of an infant. This is a valuing of herself, that these moments are necessary too. So in the giving up there is also the gaining of something, something that women, particularly mothers are not supposed to want and not often allowed.

A question: what is the experience of finding yourself "with child?" Does every woman do the balance sheet kind of thing, determining whether or not it is possible and/or she is willing to accept this child? Is there something about every decision related to a pregnancy that is essentially pragmatic? That has to do with evaluating one's reality as carefully as possible? That has to do with decisions made not about what I want but what is possible? And then... different decisions because what is possible differs from woman to woman?

Terri's actions, practical and pragmatic as they appear, do not mean that her experience is not also one of great loss, and one that has required her to consciously refuse to feel badly about herself - to shrug off expectations, her own and those of others. But it still hurts, it was hard. I asked her what she had lost in giving up her boys: "My boys, them themselves, you know, knowing them on an intimate level cause I'll never have that, I'll know them in only a social... lot of things have been closed off between me and the

boys, and we'll never get that back and I know it. I mean I see my boys, and they don't know me..." (Terri: T1).

I had expected that our conversation about her giving up her babies would be difficult - but it wasn't. I think this is mainly because Terri would not allow it to be - that the emotions or distress she may feel around this are hers, and it's a privacy she protects. Though I thought both of us might be sad, for the most part neither of us expressed sadness - we were more pragmatic, both of us and not just Terri, as if underneath my/her/our expectations we both knew why this had happened and even if we didn't see this as a "good" thing, it was still an eminently understandable thing. I don't know what the implications of this are.

The pragmatism evident in Terri's understanding of giving up her babies runs through her whole life. This is something that might also be called resignation if it weren't proffered so hopefully. There are many things that Terri describes as being "normal" that really don't fit my understanding of this word. On giving up her babies: "to me it's normal now, I don't even give it a thought, it's just a normal part of my life" (Terri: T1). On being poor: "I'm kind of used to my circumstances now, this is the way life is..." (Terri: T1). On living without furniture: "it took us a long time to get used to that but then, you know, we stopped... we didn't even notice it after awhile..." (Terri: T1). On being put down: "it's just the way life is I guess..." (Terri: T1). For me this raises a number of questions. How do these not very ordinary things become so ordinary? How is it that we may become used to things that in the beginning distress us?

It seems as though almost anything that occurs over time and with a certain degree of regularity can become accepted, usual, routine, can attain an aura of inevitability. And if something begins to feel normal, its previous unusualness becomes lost and we seem to forget that there was something about all this that we needed to respond to. Instead, it becomes something unremarkable and rather than raising questions about how a thing came to be, and if it is acceptable or reasonable, we don't even notice it, we simply acquiesce. We lose our sense that things could be otherwise and we go along, sometimes too often finding ourselves helping others to adapt, to make the best of things as they are. And now it is our acquiescence itself that has become ordinary, usual, routine. Being able to adapt

and helping others to adapt to circumstances is not necessarily to be avoided, but there is something about our willingness to go along with things that is in many ways very frightening, as though what is happening has nothing to do with us.

Before Terri got "used to" her circumstances she was ashamed. She says she was ashamed of being poor and being unable to provide for her family. Seeking assistance was part of this experience of shaming because then it showed in the world that they could not make it on their own. But asking for help is not an uncomplicated act when you are poor. On the one hand, there are ways in which you need to be seen in order for others to see and to respond to your need. For Terri, it was a housing crisis: "I bugged them on a daily basis to find us a place to live because we were about to be evicted on to the street because we were in a hotel and couldn't afford it anymore. On a daily basis, that's what I tell everybody, you're on that waiting list, go down there every day, eventually they get sick of you and they'll find you a place - well I figured if they saw me on a daily basis they'd realize I was really desperate so... they might realize that 'oh maybe she's really really needing to get in' and bump me up on the list a little higher..." (Terri: T1). In this case Terri is hoping that the people in the housing office will be able to read her presence there as evidence of her need, and that they will respond to her in her particularity, as *this* woman whose need for housing is occurring right now.

At other times however, being seen in all your need can be quite threatening. As Terri observed, when you require social assistance, "you're looked at a lot closer" (Terri: T1). You are subject to monitoring, surveillance and evaluative processes that people with money rarely, if ever, experience. You are exposed to people who will read your life in particular ways, ways that you may not be able to control except through concealing yourself. The last time Terri and her husband applied for income assistance the social worker they dealt with noticed that they moved around alot: "... and she says, 'is child welfare involved?' We never went back. We didn't want them trying to investigate us and what not, 'cause they'd find something faulty..." (Terri: T1). Terri has little faith that these others, these people who may hold some authority over her, will be able to read her life correctly. The safest thing to do sometimes may be to disappear even when it means giving up the possibility of assistance.

It seems a delicate negotiation, this careful movement between being seen and concealing oneself. For most of us, being seen carries with it a certain vulnerability, a sense of being open to the world. When we feel safe, when we are safe, we are able tolerate being seen, sometimes we even enjoy it. But when our world is less certain, when we have less reason to trust that those around us will see us with clarity or with our "best interests" at heart, it may seem far safer to melt into the background, to fade away. Sometimes being seen in all one's particularity becomes simply too frightening.

Feeling ashamed. Being shamed. There are ways in which these are connected to wanting to fade into the background, to go unnoticed. Sometimes we talk about being shamed as losing face. Are there ways in which how we are proceeding keeps impoverished women faceless, anonymous? Is there something in how we go about helping that makes people disappear?

Terri offers a very generous interpretation of society's inadequate response to people living with poverty. Of the decision makers whose policies influence her life she says: "They've probably never been in that situation. They probably don't know any different" (Terri: T1). People whose actions and values have effect in her life don't know what her life is like and this happens, in part, because they, in a very concrete sense, don't see her. Meeting face to face may be necessary to create a shared understanding about what is going on: "Or at least sit there and study a family that's going through it... you know, instead of just making general notions about, from reports, you don't meet the people face to face - you don't meet the person face to face you don't know what they're going through, you don't know the emotions, the trials and tribulations you have to go through just to get through... you know from one pay period to the next pay period" (Terri: T1). There is a sense in Terri's words that this kind of knowing might make a difference, that is, if we were able to meet each other in our particularity, this knowing might engender some kind of recognition of the other that would make proceeding in ignorance untenable or at least uncomfortable.

When Terri talks about what it feels like to live with only the barest necessities, to be "allowed" only food and clothing she asks me, "do you know what that does to the person?" And she tells me: "...it makes you feel like crap" (Terri: T1). Living like a "third

class citizen", being treated like dirt, feeling like crap. Boundaries comes into being as these words are spoken, shifting, intangible boundaries sorting insiders from outsiders. Outside, a sense of exclusion, women who sometimes feel like dirt. If dirt is what is leftover after we clean up, after we tidy things away, and if dirt is what we throw out or trash, what does it mean that some people in our world feel like dirt? What does this say about our world and how we have arranged things? If as Hyde (1998) writes, "dirt is the anomalous, not just what is out of place but what has no place at all when we are done making sense of our world" (p.176), it does not seem wholly unwarranted to consider the possibility that the presence of impoverished women could be understood as a by-product of particular social arrangements. That is, after we have ordered our economic system, our social system, our political system to our satisfaction, what is left over, what has no place, is women mothering in poverty.

Maria

Maria came to Canada in 1976 as a political refugee. She came here reluctantly, at her husband's urging, not believing they were in any danger. A traditional woman, Maria felt herself bound by and to her husband's wishes. Leaving her family and everything she was familiar with was very difficult - an uprooting that she does not seem to have overcome - if overcoming this is even possible. It is not that she has not made a life for herself here but rather that she seems imbued with a certain quality of lost-ness, as if she still doesn't quite have her bearings. She says that when she first came here she was lost all the time and would always have to walk the same path because it was the only way she knew. It seems still that the path she is on is the only one she knows, a path she trods heavily, reluctantly and without hope of a different way in her life.

Are there ways in which this is true for all of us? That is, that we fear becoming lost if we veer off a known way, if we wander. Or is it not that we fear becoming lost but rather we fear recognizing that we are always, in some ways, lost, on paths that are mostly unknown to us. Lost then, becomes just how it is that we make our way through the world. I wonder if it is this sense of lost-ness in Maria that I find familiar, that I find understandable - a sense that comes through despite our language difficulties. Though

Maria's lost-ness has elements of the concrete in it i.e., it is cultural and geographic, it also feels existential. If we understood ourselves and others as mostly lost perhaps we would proceed more carefully.

The conversation Maria and I had was difficult. She speaks English with a heavy accent and I was not always sure that we were using words in the same way. It was a struggle, I think, for both of us and I still feel I only understand a portion of what she said and probably less of what she meant. The words are all down on paper, transcribed and there for me to read but what a story was actually about is often unclear. So there must be, for her and those she speaks with, a sense of missing the meaning of things, a loss of shared understanding which I must assume creates a certain loneliness for Maria. Certainly she says directly that the worst thing for her is to be alone.

Maria had one young child when she came to Canada. She didn't have any more until twelve years later though she would have liked to. There was some trouble with her ability to conceive related to an IUD she didn't know she had - I am unclear about this part of the story. After this was taken care of, the children came quickly - three of them, one right after the other. These three are now 15, 14 and 12 and Maria has been on her own with them since the youngest was six months old. Though she wanted these children badly, having them so close together has been difficult - there was no chance for rest, no relief from the work of caring, no family to help her out.

Maria's most frequent refrain or description of her life is "it's hard, it's too hard" (Maria: Transcript 1). And in listening to her it is clear that it is hard. But it is not one thing or the another thing that is hard but rather the enduring of one thing after the other. It seems the constancy of the struggle is what threatens to overwhelm, the cumulative effect of daily, routine hardship. It is the absence of relief. What is hard is having enough money to pay for utilities but then not enough for food. And then it is needing food from the food bank but not being able to get there. It is to be always without enough to manage so that every little thing counts, everything you need or want requires great deliberation: "how am I going to get this?" (Maria: T1).

Getting by has always been a challenge for Maria and her family and she has often had to fight hard to continue to receive social assistance. Even now she is trying to prevent

social services from reducing her benefits. But really and realistically, what else can she do? What kind of work could she get that would support her family and who would have cared for her children in the meantime? With her limited English and her lack of skills, what is she supposed to do? And Maria not only knows this, she lives it. Something about knowing that this is it, that this is what she can, for the most part expect, seems to drag her down. In Maria's words I hear the ways in which she feels hemmed in by her life, and a bemused sense of "how did this all come to be?" The question of choice is somewhat peculiar here insofar as the ways in which her life could have been otherwise seem pretty limited, yet of course, as for all of us, it could have been different. Did Maria make the choices which shaped her life? Could she have chosen otherwise?

The hardest thing in Maria's life is to be alone. After that comes the worry about how she is going to manage, how she will get this or that thing that they need, how she will pay this or that bill. These two things are not unconnected in her mind - being lonely and being alone with financial worry. Being on her own exacerbates Maria's worry, and her worry reminds her of how she is alone. Maria's worry about money is heightened because she has little control over how much money she receives, and when she will get it. She is in a dependent position in a system that is ultimately antagonistic to her - a system that doesn't really believe she deserves the money she receives and for whom she must not only continually justify her need but also, in some very real ways, her existence. And as long as she is on welfare she says, she will be a "nobody" (Maria: T1)

At the same time, Maria engages in acts of resistance, she fights back when she feels threatened and tells me this is a good thing because after she fights, she feels stronger. Somehow these acts of resistance build her up, make her feel like she is somebody, somebody to be reckoned with. This is a woman who since coming to this country has learned how the system works, probably because she has had to learn and so is now capable, when pressed, to use it to her advantage. She knows for example that when denied an apartment big enough for her family, she could phone a lawyer and force the housing authority to respond to her need. She knows that there are laws in this country which protect women from abusive partners and so could call on them when her ex-husband threatened her. In actions such as these, she seems to have found ways to have an

effect in her life. An important part of this is affirmation: "You feel good. You feel good because they listen, somebody listens... if I know more English or something, I think it would be even more" (Maria: T1).

Maria talks a lot about fighting, standing against, standing up - for herself and her children. She resists attempts to control her because she is on welfare, because she is poor. Resistance as necessary to survival - not only the survival of her family but also a sense of self, a sense of herself as being a woman who can influence her own destiny: "to be somebody" (Maria: T1). Yet at the same time the struggle is almost overwhelming: "okay I am in this mess.... like I am on social services, I can't get out, I'm drowning, I'm drowning, I'm drowning." (Maria: T1) Maria does not know how to get out of the mess she is in, or how to shake off her sense that she is "good for nothing" (Maria: T1). I think in part, this is what her fighting is about. It is as though fighting, resisting, refusing are the ways she saves herself from drowning. The struggle is necessary because the possibility of drowning is always there, always present.

With Maria I have the sense of strength and vulnerability co-existing in the same moment. The strength, resistance holds the vulnerability at a tolerable distance. A sense of hopelessness that is never reducible to helplessness. Certainly there are ways in which the hopelessness that Maria voices seems true, that is, it is an accurate assessment of her possibilities - its hard for her to see how anything might be different except in a wistful sort of way. There is a sense for her, that her life is a trap:

> M: Sometimes they are wrong, but sometimes they are right because you are stuck in welfare and you don't know how to get out. Some people know how to get out because they go study but people who are, I don't know, the people who know the language, they do better than the people who don't know the language
>
> C: It feels like you are stuck?
>
> M: Yeah I feel very stuck. I feel like, I don't know, good for nothing because sometime my son will say, 'mom you got to go to work'
>
> C: Your son says that to you?
>
> M: Yeah because 'I have to pay for you to be home', he say because sometime he work at Taco Bell... So he make ninety dollar but for him, he's oh a big man, you

know... he say 'mom I pay for you to stay home, you have to go work, find a job or something'... its funny when they say that (Maria: T1).

When Maria was telling me this story she appeared sad and for me too, there is something about this that is hurtful. Part of it, I think, is the idea that it is Maria's son, who is without doubt part of the reason she has been dependent on social assistance, telling her she is somehow undeserving, lazy - as if her life as it now stands has nothing to do with him. He, arrogant with his first paid job, discounts her work in taking care of children, making this labour seem worthless and meaningless. What seems so terrible is that what he is saying is not unlike what the rest of "society" says about women like Maria - it is just coming from a place closer to home. And if Maria is not valued by those who love her, who have reason to know her in her particularity, how can we expect those with a less direct stake in her life to care? There are ways this story reflects dominant social values - not only about self-sufficiency and being responsible for oneself but also about the status of women and about how easy it is to hold women in contempt for their lives.

For Maria, her children are her life because she has created them: "I think without them, I don't know" (Maria: T1). Life without children is unimaginable, unthinkable. Life with children is her reality. At the same time, if she had not had children, particularly the three youngest, her life may have been easier. Maria doesn't suggest this, I do because when I look at her, I mostly see her struggles and her fatigue. But much of Maria's pleasure in her life comes from having the children in it. She is proud of them, they make her laugh and make her cry - they add a texture to her existence that would otherwise be missing and which to her mind is clearly worth her efforts.

Ann

Ann has become poor only recently. Eighteen months ago, after an eleven year marriage, she left her abusive partner. After years of abuse and a final brutal rape, Ann found herself, with her two children, on her way to a women's shelter. Yet even as she drove she wondered what she was doing, why she was going to a shelter and "taking up a bed that could be used for an abused woman" (Ann: Transcript 1). Ann talks about this as denial, denying the reality of what was happening to her. Ann still has trouble thinking of

herself as a "battered woman" or an "abused woman" because these words don't seem to account for the complexity of her life. To think of herself in this way would be to think of herself as weak and without control and she resists this. Like many women, Ann's vulnerability is partial, occurring in the context of taking care of things, of being strong. Ann was raising her children, caring for a home, holding down a job, holding things together. She was also being battered. But this, she thought, "this is the way that everybody lives" (Ann: T1).

Are there ways in which Ann is right? Is "this" the way that everybody lives? In some ways it seems possible, particularly if we consider that at least some part of being in relation to others involves negotiating how power and control will play itself out between us. It also seems likely that we are not always careful about how this happens. So it seems there will be ways in which we all, at different moments, participate in violence, in relations that involve forcing our will upon another. And there will be times when we feel the effects of another's force. So in this way, maybe Ann is right. We make our way through the world doing what we need to do, trying to protect ourselves, trying not to hurt others, sometimes not succeeding.

In her marriage, Ann was unprotected. The violence she experienced was real and particular, about power and control and blaming: "... because that's what he told me day after day after day... he told me if only I was a better person or if only I could be a better mother or if only I... could be more reasonable... he wouldn't have to act that way..." (Ann: T1). I don't think it diminishes Ann's experience to notice the ways that the words spoken to her carry echoes of messages we hear every day: if only we could do better, be better, be more or less this or that, then our lives would be better. And a message for low income women in particular: if only you were more responsible, we wouldn't have to treat you this way. These words, "if only you", seem so powerful, locating problems that belong to the world inside each of us. For Ann, this message was so deeply planted that she still believes, on some level, that she created it all, that she "made this monster that he was" (Ann: T1), and sometimes this makes her feel like she must be crazy. Why would she have created this kind of reality?

Our understanding of some thing or situation sometimes depends on what questions

we ask of it. When Ann asked herself different questions about what was happening to her, her understanding changed and she realized that there were other ways to think about her experience: "I was never thinking what's wrong with him that he is doing this to me. I was thinking what's wrong with me that I make him do this to me..." (Ann: T1). But for Ann it is not simply a matter of switching around who is to be blamed but the rather more complicated undertaking of understanding herself in relation to the mess she was in: "I will never say that I was not responsible because... I allowed him to do it and... I was perfect for him" (Ann: T1). There is a sense here that life is often more complicated than our thinking about it sometimes allows. If we believe that something can only be this or that, his fault or her fault, then all we need to do is to identify, to pin down which it is. If something can be both this and that, as well as something altogether different, we don't always know how to respond or what to do. With Ann, I'm not sure how to respond to her understanding of herself as jointly responsible, with her abuser, for the abuse in her marriage.

Seeing herself as partly responsible for the abuse in her marriage may be part of the meaning of being strong for Ann, a refusing to look away from what happened. It may be a way to resist thinking of her life as having been out of her control. Certainly, in the midst of the violence, Ann carried on with everyday life and this did require strength, just as it did, in some ways, allow the violence to continue. Yet carrying on in order to survive does not seem the same thing as creating violence but rather seems to be about adapting oneself to its presence. Being careful, sometimes provoking, sometimes placating, to manage the unpredictability of violent episodes may make these eruptions more predictable and in this way, Ann may have given herself a sense that it was she who was in control: "... not that I've never provoked him, I certainly did, certainly on occasions I would provoke him because... I knew at some point he would explode... he would build up and he would build up and he would build up and he would explode and sometimes it was so much easier to get the explosion over and done with..." (Ann: T1).

Ann held herself together through her marriage because she didn't believe she had the option of falling apart. Some might call this being strong and Ann does see herself in this way: "I think I have been strong, the whole time I was with him I was strong because

you know how much energy it takes... to be hit and bashed and ridiculed and humiliated and all that stuff and then to get up the next day and to brush your hair and to go to work and pretend that nothing happened..." (Ann: T1). In some respects though, this way of being strong seems incongruous, even jarring. Do we think a woman is strong when she can take it, and especially when she can take it and carry on? I am in no way critical of Ann, I would not presume to be, yet I find the idea of pretending that nothing has happened when something rather terrible has occurred, a rather disconcerting meaning of being strong, which is not the same thing as saying that Ann has not been strong. Still I am reminded of the harm that occurs, that is perpetuated in our world when we refuse to see or we refuse to look, when we pretend that nothing is going on.

But being strong has come to mean something different to Ann, and her strength now relies on refusing to look away. Part of leaving her marriage was about protecting her children, protecting her daughter especially from ending up in the same kind of situation that she was in. Insight arrived one evening as she watched her husband hold her seven year old daughter responsible for his anger, and even more devastatingly, watched this daughter accept responsibility. As Ann says, "from that minute on, I was not married to him anymore in my mind" (Ann: T1). It took her some time to actually physically leave but she knew she needed to show her kids a different way of being together. This too has been a lot of hard work but like holding herself together through her marriage, it doesn't feel like a choice.

Leaving an abusive relationship, emotionally battered and unable to work left Ann vulnerable to poverty. Forced to make decisions about what matters to her, she chose, for herself and her children, to be safe rather than comfortable. And though living in poverty is stressful, it is neither as stressful nor as precarious as her previous existence. Ann is happier now, she has something more and something different to offer her children. As she says, priorities change.

Though I have come to appreciate Ann's strength as a woman, when I first met her and through much of our conversation, I was more taken with her vulnerability. It seemed a palpable presence, present not only in Ann but there, hanging between us. This vulnerability does not seem to be about weakness but about woundedness, about being

unprotected. The vulnerability of being women, an openness to wounding that seems part of our bodies. I responded to Ann's account of her rape as a woman who could all too easily imagine what it was like. Her vulnerability made me feel vulnerable. Yet in my openness to her suffering, I still found myself reluctant to probe, to get too close to her woundedness as if I could protect myself by not knowing too much.

Knowledge of our vulnerability sometimes comes to us through our bodies. Physical assault and rape can shatter any illusions we may have about how we control our worlds. And if we didn't already know, violent disruptions awaken us to the knowledge that we are soft-skinned, fragile, uncertain creatures. Sometimes when we recognize our own vulnerability in another, we are frightened. We try to create distance, we shield ourselves, we invent ways of being that we think can protect us. Sometimes though, even if we are frightened, we can recognize in our shared vulnerability a bond and think about proceeding more carefully with one another.

Women, though not inherently vulnerable are, I think, uniquely vulnerable in this world. Motherhood and mothering may bring home to a woman ways she is open to wounding, ways the world she inhabits will not necessarily protect her. When Ann became pregnant with her first child she was very happy. The pregnancy was not planned but she was pleased because she knew she wanted children in her life. Her husband's response surprised her: "he just didn't speak to me, he just couldn't cope with it at all, and then when he finally spoke to me he just exploded and he said 'well it's obviously not mine, what have you been doing?'" (Ann: T1). It seems there are ways in which a pregnancy always "belongs" to a woman - it's not mine, it's yours. And this seems a belonging she can not easily abandon, a woman can never so simply say, it's not mine, it's yours.

Ann felt herself to be alone after the birth of her daughter, alone and now responsible for their child: "I was just exhausted, I was so tired, I was really - I never knew it would hit me like that. I was depressed, I was very depressed. I was very scared. I was very... just overwhelmed by the whole thing" (Ann: T1). Knowing the situation at home, Ann didn't want to leave the hospital. Nobody would be there for her in any practical way - how could she cope? Needing others because of the ways your child needs you, creates part of the vulnerability of motherhood. To care for children well, there is a

need for support - emotional, material, practical. Though this need is often misinterpreted as dependence and as a weakness of women, it seems really to be more about what is called for from mothers, about the claims that are made by their children and the world.

None of these vulnerabilities are Ann's alone in the sense that to be human is to be vulnerable. The uncertainties of life, which Ann sums up as "if I'd known then what I know now" (Ann: T1), belong to all of us. It seems not so much that suffering is inevitable or destined but rather that if we live, we are open to wounding - our desires may be thwarted, our needs unmet, our bodies and minds bruised and battered. The "problem" is that we act as if this were not that case, as if only some, specified ones among us are vulnerable. Perhaps if we locate weakness and vulnerability in specific places, we can convince ourselves that we are protected. We can tell ourselves the pain in the world is not about us, it's about them - the weak links, they only suffer because of who they are and what they do.

Amber

Amber is a young woman who challenges me, who calls upon me to open my understanding, to try to become a more expansive and generous thinker. Our conversation revealed in me and for me unrecognized or perhaps unacknowledged biases and assumptions, and I initially responded to this or rather resisted it, by wanting to eliminate her from my inquiry. The problem wasn't me you see, it was her, she didn't fit. Gradually I came to see that it was not so much that Amber didn't fit with this inquiry, after all she is a woman mothering in poverty, but rather she wasn't who I had imagined this inquiry to be about, my expectations had been too narrow to hold her experience. This experience of being caught or pulled up short by Amber and her experience helps me to see the ways that we cannot always know in advance what our presumptions and preconceptions are and so must be always alert for those moments when we think we already know. Our prejudices sometimes only become known to us when we allow them to be disrupted by an other. The process of understanding then, becomes a working out, in relation to this other, of our presumptions and assumptions with the knowledge that we will not get to say all by ourselves what something is, that the person, the text will also have something to say about

it. As Gadamer (1987) writes, "the important thing is to be aware of one's own biases, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (p.269).

Amber presents herself as a very experienced young woman with no illusions about the world. She is 21 with a four year old son and she has been on her own, more or less, since she was twelve years old. She grew up lonely and poor with a single mother who had mental health problems. At age twelve, Amber decided she needed to get away from her mother in order to save herself, and so ran away from home. After experiencing a violent rape that she didn't tell anyone about, she returned home and was sent to live with her father. After a few months, she was sent back to her mother and then at age thirteen, Amber packed up everything she had and left. She never went home again.

When Amber left home to take up life on the streets she was, to my mind at least, not much more than a child. She would dispute this I think, understanding herself then and now as "much older than her years" (Amber: Transcript 1). Hardship ages a person, and Amber in her young life has seen too much of the darker side, the underbelly of life and there are ways that her understanding will have been shaped by this. This is of course, only one way to read Amber's experience of life, as rough and ugly and miserable, and I suspect that this view reveals far more about me and how safely I am positioned in the world, than it does about her reality. Our experience of life seems so different that it feels as though we inhabit different worlds, our worlds are worlds apart. But if we really lived in different worlds it is hard to see how any understanding could be possible and so it may be that, despite the gulf between us, we belong to the same world after all. That we can live in the same world so differently may tell us something about this world, that it is the world itself, and not only our experience, that is multiple and contradictory and that the difference in the way we experience the world is not so much a problem but rather what always lies between us. To try to understand the difference then, may be a way to understand the world.

Something to do with the difference between Amber and I influenced the ways I was able to listen to her, had an effect on what I was willing to hear. She comes across in conversation, at least to me, as very knowing, and I felt that she positioned me, though I am older, more educated and not completely inexperienced, as naive and innocent as to the

way the world really works. I think I resented this and may have allowed it to work itself out through my questioning the credibility of what she had told me, that possibly I tried to reassert myself, my authority by simply not believing her. Not that I questioned everything she said but rather there were certain elements of her story I considered exaggerated or embellished for effect. When I realized what I was doing, a question I had to ask myself was, what do I require from something in order to consider it to be true? This is an important question for which I do not have a ready answer. I do know however, that the accounts that women, particularly poor women, give of their lives are often disbelieved and it was unexpected, for whatever reasons, to find myself among the doubters.

Whenever I listen or read I am also deciding, whether I am aware of it or not, if what I am hearing or reading is believable. When something strikes me as not true it is claiming my attention as being something other than what I thought it was. So those moments when we disbelieve are also those moments when we become aware of both our presumptions and the absolute alterity of the text, that it stands there in its otherness and has something to say. So as someone trying to understand what Amber has to say about the experience of being a low income mother, I have had to allow her story to tell me something, I have had to remember that the story Amber has told me is one which represents to her a true telling of her life. This has to do, I think, with being open to the possible, with being willing to say, "it could be."

The story Amber told me was charged with drama, dense with eventfulness. It was an interesting story told artfully. It was a story she had told before, to people just like myself, people who "come in and do a survey and I sit and open my gut up and just spill my life out" (Amber: T1). Aspects of the life that Amber spills out dismay me - violence, drugs, trading sex for companionship, safety, money - harsh realities, though as she would be quick to remind me, not only of street life. But of course, there is more to her story than this. There is also resiliency, imagination, striving to create a home and a future, trying to be a good mother. That these survive in the context of very difficult circumstances speaks I think, to Amber's determination to live well and to think well of herself, a challenge sometimes because of how she feels the stigma of being poor: "sometimes I just swear to god it's like there's something invisible tattooed on my head that says 'poor' because

there's no way to get ahead, and it's like once you're poor, once you kind of been on the dark side so to speak, it's like people know it about you and it's hard to get ahead" (Amber: T1).

The trap of poverty is frustrating and seeing that you are caught is different than understanding how it has happened or knowing what to do about it. Amber has wondered if it is something wrong with her or with her world: "I figure either one of two things... either socially I've found myself in a circle that I can't get out of... because I don't have the money to make the money... or something's wrong with me personally, my personality and my intelligence level and my own dysfunctions or whatever, that doesn't make me acceptable to society in ways that causes me to gain a lot friends or money or whatever else. I've never found a golden key that allows other people to do the things they do..." (Amber: T1). These words, I think, suggest a struggle to satisfy needs and desires that is both routine and routinely thwarted. Hardship that is persistent and intractable may cease to make sense, and in the context of such inexplicability, change becomes something elusive, out of reach, a dream. And even if your dreams are very ordinary, like Amber's - a home, a car, a garden - if you lack the golden key, they become practically impossible. And what do you do, how do you carry on, when your dreams seem impossible? Perhaps feeling powerless has something to do with this, with being unable to discern a cause for your pain, and being so bewildered, you are unable to see how to have an effect in your life.

I am caught by Amber's yearning for an ordinary life and by the ways she is at a loss as to how to make this happen. Though she transgresses and even defies some societal expectations, she seems also to want nothing more than what "everybody" has - a home, a family. When Amber was fifteen, her boyfriend started to talk to her about having a baby. He would stay home and look after the child while she went out to work. That he was living in a parkade at the time and she was staying in "the system" couldn't pierce their fantasy, and as she says, she was dazzled. But it didn't take long after she became pregnant for her to begin to question her decision: "... as I moved further in my pregnancy, I started thinking more and more thinking 'oh no what have I done' you know, now I'm going to bring a baby into the world and I've got nothing for it..." (Amber: T1). There seems a certain inevitability in what has happened here, that this young, lonely woman would yearn

for a life of warmth and family and relationship, and that this yearning would somehow prove more powerful, more alluring, more real than the harshness of her everyday life. There is nothing here that is not understandable. But instead of understanding will we shake our heads and talk about the irresponsibility of teen mothers, or about the thoughtlessness of mothers who have children they can't afford? Will we allow these everyday explanations to stand and fail to see other meaning in what has happened?

When Amber's son was born her life was transformed. On the one hand, here was her son, completely dependent on her and on the other, her complete lack of experience in caring for a child. And through all this her awareness that things are not as they are "supposed" to be: "... so it was very hard for me 'cause I'm still taking on all this guilt and regret 'cause I can see how things should be, but I can't seem to get it there, you know..." (Amber: T1). There is a sense in Amber's words that she stands on one side of a great gulf, that the other side is visible but she has no way to cross over. I imagine her out and about, seeing other mothers and children, seeing every day what separates her from how things "should" be. I see her trying to live up to some ideal of what being a mother is like, what having a child is like, but with none of the resources necessary to support this. Living in a dingy, cockroach ridden apartment, with a boyfriend whose behavior is bizarre and violent, Amber has no money, she's scrounging for food, and she's sixteen years old - how could she possibly make things the way they "should" be? Yet she still feels bad because she can't do it and there is a wearing down of spirit as her best efforts come to nothing.

There has been nothing very easy, nothing simple about Amber's experience of motherhood, and though she has never wished her son out of her life, she has sometimes lost him. Not long after her son was born, Amber was left without even the minimal support of her son's father, she and the baby were on their own. With no back up and no support, a serious but not unusual illness became a crisis: "...my temperature must have zipped up to 105 and just stayed there for like two weeks and the baby was sick and I couldn't get up, I couldn't get up.... I couldn't feed him, I couldn't play with him, he lay cried and cried and cried..." (Amber: T1). Finally, she called social services, telling them: "... you better come and take my kid because I can't even feed him..." (Amber: T1). Amber's only safety net is social services and accessing them meant that she lost her son

for six months. I wonder if other kinds of options might have been more helpful.

After this experience, Amber created a living situation that she saw as more stable, one where she would be supported, where she would not be all alone. It was also a situation that could, and eventually did, raise questions about her fitness as a mother. Amber moved in with an ex-boyfriend, a drug dealer. She lived with him and an extended street family for the next three years. I asked Amber she how felt about living with her son in this setting i.e., with the drug dealing and related activities. She acknowledged my question as valid, recognizing the tension between her lifestyle and what "society" might consider an appropriate place to raise a child but she also defends her choice: "Oh for sure yeah, I mean I didn't... I mean other than the fact we were using what society calls illegal drugs and selling them, nobody laid a finger on my son, he was never sexually or emotionally or verbally abused, he ate, he grew big and fat and healthy... despite what was going on in his life I provided a stable environment for him and I felt I did what I needed to to make sure he was all right..." (Amber: T1). In this living situation, as outside of what is usual as it is, Amber has material support, "family" support, emotional support - all things that may help make good parenting possible.

This living situation ended when the police became involved with people in the house. Amber's son was taken from her for a night and returned only on the condition that she find other living arrangements. Though she doesn't believe there was anything much wrong with the way she was living, she didn't fight them: "what could I say, gee you just found a ton of illegal drugs in my home, no please don't call me an unsafe, unfit parent and take my child away..." (Amber: T1). The reality is that Amber is very aware of what "society" expects from her as a mother and in many ways has tried to fulfill these expectations, though not necessarily entirely uncoerced: "you do everything and say everything, anything, like all the extras, I mean I went to parenting classes for four years.... I found them useful for myself and for me it was also something that I could say listen, I am trying to be a good parent, I go to classes every week..." (Amber: T1). At the same time she is doing all of these things, she is living with her son in an environment that is in so many ways, questionable.

Amber is a young, single mother, living with poverty. Her lifestyle and values,

through both choice and circumstances, could be described as somewhat unconventional. Do we and can we ask, is she a good mother? That there were a number of places in our conversation that I thought about this question suggests to me that, on some level, I must believe it is possible to say what a good mother is, even as I remain uncertain about who it is asking the question and who will get to answer it. I know that when Amber shared with me some of her thinking about mothering, I felt uneasy and I wondered. I wondered because though she says her son is central in her life, she also believes that her own needs are important, and that these are not always the same as her son's: "I've learned that unless I'm somewhat well balanced, happy in my own lifestyle and my own pursuits, unless I take a fair amount of time to dedicate to my self, that I will resent him and that's not fair..." (Amber: T1). She says she distances herself from her son because she wants him to be independent: "I would rather spend less time and allow him to be less emotionally attached to me and still have my own life..." (Amber: T1).

I begin by hearing in these words a justification for being selfish, for tending to her own needs rather than her son's, and I wonder, what kind of mother is she? She does not place her son at the centre of her world. Her whole life does not revolve around his. I am surprised by my reaction. If I start with the belief, as I do, that a woman is not and should not be defined by motherhood, why, when Amber asserts herself as herself, do I immediately start to wonder if she is a good mother and worry about her son? There is something here, I think, about the insidiousness of the cultural ideal of mother as self-less, as a being without needs or desires of her own. Even as I consciously reject it, it remains part of my thinking, part of me. So at the same time as I wonder if Amber is a good mother, I can see that this wondering must also always be a conversation about who gets to say, that is, whose idea of good mothering will stand as authoritative. It seems possible though, that even if there is such a thing as a good mother, our ideas of what this is and who this is have become confused or intermingled with who gets to say. So if we were to recognize this whole area as being questionable, if we were to understand mothering as a question, what difference might this make in how we think about mothers? It seems that when we don't do this, and when we only look to mothers for evidence of good mothering, we forget to notice that there are conditions which help to make good mothering

possible.

<u>Jane</u>

One of the first things Jane told me was that she was a lesbian and that this has made a difference, has had something to say about her life circumstances. However, it is not so much the "fact" of her lesbianism that has made this difference but rather how this fact has been read in the world, what it means or how it is meaningful, and what has followed from all of this. Being a lesbian positions Jane differently in this society where many ordinary, taken for granted social arrangements privilege or even reward heterosexuality. Difference it seems, is not necessarily experienced in large, earth shattering ways but rather in the routine, often unremarkable details of everyday life. This has to do, I think, with how we go about our lives, with how we pay attention to what matters, and with the ways everyday existence is invested with meaning.

Sometimes knowledge of the ways we are positioned in our worlds comes to us as we compare ourselves to others and as we try to understand the differences we find. Jane compares herself to her siblings: "something I still haven't quite resolved yet, is that you know, they got married so they got... gifts, they got toasters and all that stuff and I had to buy that all myself because I didn't get married.... and you know, my parents paid for their weddings" (Jane: Transcript 1). Social approval for heterosexual coupling, for creating this particular kind of family, is played out in customs which celebrate these unions as well as provide couples with actual material support. This seems to matter to Jane in ways that are not simply about toasters and vacuum cleaners but rather about how these things are visible evidence of the support that is withheld from her: "I went through sort of a... crisis, not a crisis but just sort of an emotional turmoil to try and understand why, and they don't understand, they don't get it... they said if I had married Sharon that they would have done the same thing for me... and that's easy for them to say because I could never have married Sharon..." (Jane: T1). By refusing to acknowledge the difference of her situation, Jane's family participates in social practices which exclude her. They do this even as they offer support they may safely assume they will never be called upon to provide.

Sharon was Jane's partner of ten years. Even though they separated three years ago, they share custody of their eight year old daughter. Jane is the biological mother of

Beth who was conceived through artificial insemination. When you are a lesbian, becoming a mother may present some challenges: "I think all my life I wanted to have a baby but when you don't get married you don't really think... you just want one, you don't know about how to get one, kind of thing..." (Jane: T1). Though being lesbian may make a difference in how one goes about becoming pregnant, Jane's reasons for wanting to be a mother seem really very ordinary, part of how we take up what gets handed down to us: "I just always liked kids. I babysat a lot when I was younger and you know, my parents always and people always, were telling me how good I was with kids and that I'd be a good mom some day and you know, how you sort of get all those messages..." (Jane: T1).

These messages changed when Jane became a mother. What seemed to matter more to her family than her desire and capacity to mother was her lesbianism, as if the woman she was had nothing to do with the girl she had been, the girl who had been encouraged and told that she would be a "good mom some day." Perhaps her parents' difficulty in understanding her wish to become a mother was not about why Jane, their daughter, wanted a child but rather about why a lesbian would want to have a child, as if Jane's sexual identity changed her in some inexplicably mysterious way. Jane is a lesbian and others read this in particular, sometimes oppressive ways, forgetting that the lived meaning of being lesbian cannot be assumed. One thing that seems clear though, is that for Jane, being lesbian does not mean she cannot also be a mother.

A difficulty arises sometimes, when others, particularly those who may hold some authority for us, believe that what they see is what we are, that their version of us is what is true. Reading only off the surface creates a situation where a person may come to be known only through what is easily seen, a partial knowing which depends on assuming the whole from the part, which requires categorizing and cataloging and which fails to comprehend the complexities of our existences. This seems to have something to do with our need to say, clearly and distinctly, once and for all, what something is, to pin it down, to wipe away ambiguity and uncertainty - this is not that, a lesbian is not a mother. It is not that there is always something wrong with a desire to keep things simple except of course, when it matters that others see us in all our complexity. For Jane it matters that her family be able to see her as a mother, or to see that being lesbian does not mean that her desire to

mother is inconceivable. But it is hard to move people from surfaces, and as Jane finds when she tries to help her parents see her more fully, our language is sometimes inadequate: "just two loving parents and Sharon would be like the father, you know, in their eyes and I would be the mother..." (Jane: T1).

Jane became poor when her relationship with Sharon broke down. Together their combined income had allowed them to live comfortably but on her own with a child to provide for and a student loan to pay back, Jane found she could not meet her financial obligations. She made the difficult decision to declare bankruptcy: "I always tell people, I mean, coming out to my parents and telling them that I had to claim bankruptcy were two of the hardest things I've ever had to do" (Jane: T1). The experience shamed Jane. She felt like she failed, like she walked away from responsibility. But she also believes that she didn't have a choice or rather given her situation, this was the choice she had to make. This choice has had consequences. Not only was her financial life exposed to strangers, her spending subject to scrutiny and her credit rating lost but she has had to become accustomed to seeing herself differently: "you have such a pride in being independent and I guess I just couldn't be" (Jane: T1).

Jane's parents loaned her money after her break up with Sharon to help her reestablish herself, to get an apartment, to buy her some time until she was earning a regular salary. Though her parents are relatively affluent, this money was a loan, not a gift: "I owe them some money and they're not just going to give it to me, they'll make me pay it back so that I learn... I don't really need to learn anymore..." (Jane: T1). Though it is not entirely clear what the lesson is for Jane, it seems possible that her parents see her as needing to learn something about the value of money and how to manage it, how to budget perhaps or shop more economically, how to do more with less. They perhaps want her to learn to be more financially "responsible" so she won't need assistance again, assuming of course that Jane's troubles are entirely her own. And if it was too easy for Jane, there's a risk she might become dependent on them and keep coming back for more.

I speculate of course, about the motives of Jane's parents but there is something which seems very familiar in all of this. Our world is one in which affluence and ease co-exists unabashedly with poverty and want, and though sometimes questioned, this situation

does not change. What is it that we think about ourselves and others, and about our world and about what matters, that allows us to continue to live in this way? Or are there ways that we have arranged things so that we don't have to think about this at all?

Jane believes part of her parents' unwillingness to simply give her the money is related to their idea of fairness. This is an idea of fairness that seems to be experienced as unfairness, what Jane calls being treated "maybe too fairly" (Jane: T1). Being treated too fairly means being treated exactly the same as her siblings, exceptions are never made although it is not always entirely clear what the rules are or if the rules are known, they do not always make sense i.e., Jane would be given money if she were getting married but she can't be given money because she is poor. Treating people as if we were all the same does not account for the reality of our differences so why would we want to do this, that is, why would we want to overlook difference? What does this make possible? What does it exclude?

The situation in Jane's family is not dissimilar to the inequity that paradoxically arises in society when treating people equally comes to mean simply treating everyone as if they were the same. The concept "equal but different" seems either very difficult for us to comprehend or perhaps too much work. Proceeding as if we were all the same, particularly when what we are all the same as is not especially clear, allows us, I think, to rely too much on general "rules" and it liberates us from thoughtfulness because if one thing is the same as another, thinking only complicates matters. In these terms, treating people fairly, whatever else it means, does not mean treating them with some knowledge of themselves. It does mean ignoring and obscuring the particularity and particular circumstances of others and proceeding in such a way that we do not have to know them.

At the end of this writing here I find I have not *really* said what it is like to be a woman mothering in poverty, and if I can not say *this* is what it is like, is there some other point? I find myself in a position of having caught life at its game of taking flight and now, having caught a glimpse of what it looks like, being able to say only, from here, it looks like this AND this AND this.... I have been reading life, particular lives, from the "inside out." What happens when we try to read from the "outside in?"

V. Women Mothering In Poverty - From The Outside In

<u>The Multiplicity We Find</u>

To know a situation, one needs to sense what lurks in it.

James Hillman, *Puer Papers*

The experience of being a woman, a mother and living with poverty is clearly multiple, complex, dense and ambiguous, and understanding and writing it in this way takes us past, beyond the idea that we will find one truth, hear one voice. It *is* Terri making impossible choices. It *is* Maria feeling trapped and hopeless. It *is* Ann gathering her courage to leave a violent partner. It *is* Amber wondering if there is something wrong with her. It *is* Jane living on the edge. It is also these women feeling proud of their children, taking time for themselves and making decisions about what matters. There is no Truth hidden here, behind all of this, waiting to be found, uncovered, discovered if only we look hard enough. So we can forego arguing about what this experience *really* is, and I will not worry about whether or not I've got it "right". Rather, I concern myself with the truths that are here, in these women's words and in mine, and with offering interpretations of these that keep open the possibility that the next story, the next woman's life will make a difference to how and what we understand about what it is like to be a woman, a mother and to be living with poverty. This is an openness in interpretation that is generative, a willingness to accept that none of this is once and for all and that instead, we will always be called to understand anew (Jardine, 1998).

However, this is not to say that the multiplicity we find is simply a matter of perspectives, that each woman has her own perspective, just as I have mine, all equally valid so we are left in an impossible situation, an aporia, isolated egos, alone and no further ahead than when we began and with nowhere to go. The multiplicity we find is not at all a question of a "mere subjective variety of conceptions" (Gadamer, 1989, p.118), increasing numerically with each new version, one on top of the other. Rather, multiplicity is part of the being of the thing itself, part of the being of the experience of being a woman, a mother and living with poverty - this experience is its versions (Gadamer, p.120-121). As Gadamer writes, "what the world is is not different from the views in which it presents

itself" (p.477). Each version that presents itself, including my interpretation, increases the being of this experience (Gadamer, p.140), each adds itself to what this experience can now be understood to be (Jardine, 1998). As we listen to women's words, the experience of being a woman, a mother and living with poverty constantly becomes more than what we thought it was, holding more possibilities than we thought possible. And because we cannot say what this has all meant, we reveal not a hidden Truth but the "plenitude and complexity of this world" (Hyde, 1998, p.289).

This is perhaps, where hermeneutics begins, with a world that is multiple, ambiguous and indeterminate, a world that is fertile ground for interpretation, a world that calls out to be read, a world that most of all is just already there. The hermeneutic situation, the world with its profusion of possibilities, will not distort or hinder our understanding but rather will provide its grounds. That is, the indeterminacy of things is the possibility of interpretation, the possibility of understanding (Gadamer, 1989, p.472). Gadamer suggests that understanding is an event, something not that we do or undertake but which happens. Understanding happens when something that was previously closed opens, and when, in the event of opening, we see that it was once closed. Only when we realize that something is not as we thought do we even understand that we once thought of it as something. And it is not that what we once thought is necessarily wrong but rather this disruption is how we become aware that we are thinking at all. This is why understanding always proceeds substantively, it is always about understanding something in terms of what is there, and it is why we risk our preconceptions for the sake of understanding.

So understanding is not something I do all by myself, nor something that I can do in advance, because understanding happens in the world, a world that already has other people in it. My engagement with this world is the process of understanding (Gadamer, 1989). Understanding happens as we are addressed, encountered, entangled, and as Smith (1991) observes when, "we are challenged to ask what makes it possible for us to speak, think and act in the ways we do" (p.188). That nothing is settled, that there is always more to say and do and think, may sometimes leave us at a loss about what to do next, our sense of certainty, our sense that we know what is going on, disturbed, disrupted. This may be, in part, why conversation is both possible and so very necessary, because though we are

uncertain we still must do something, we must proceed despite our uncertainty, and if we want to proceed with understanding, we can't do this all by ourselves. Our difficulty here shows us not that we should do nothing but rather underlines, brings to our consciousness, the difficulty of doing anything at all (Caputo, 1993). As we struggle now, with the question of what we should do, how we should proceed, it seems that how we understand even more than what we understand will be important in terms of what happens next.

The women I talked with are themselves but they are also a threshold - a place to enter what Gadamer (1989) would call the conversation that we are, a conversation that includes what we say and do, what we read and write, what we hear and what we don't hear. Though interpretive work requires us to have a "living connection" to our topic, this living connection, or these particular women, are not identical to the topic of our conversation (Jardine, 1998, p.44). We enter a realm of meaning "that is intelligible in itself," that exists beyond the subjectivity of those who brought us here (Gadamer, p.292), and as such, our conversation will not always be about these particular women though they do embody the substance of which we speak (Gadamer, p.117). And though we proceed substantively, concerned with what it is like to be a woman, a mother and living with poverty, this is not the extent of our concern. We want also to consider the event of understanding, of opening, of awakening which Hyde (1998) suggests is often also the point: "if there is false belief among us, we need to become conscious of how belief is created" (p.296). So a conversation we can have, now, is about what it is/was we thought we knew.

Traps of Ideology

I've had to stay in some places so long, my body formed into that small space and when I finally could leave I had to force myself out and let my body unfold itself in its own time.

Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life*

Realizing what we are thinking can be surprising and I often confound myself trying to sort out the curious mishmash of ideas, assumptions, beliefs, values that make up my mind, my thinking about things. Sometimes this can be painful, particularly when I find myself thinking something that appalls me, that frankly makes me feel ashamed of

myself. And when in my shame I find that "I am not the person I thought I was or hoped I might be" (Spelman, 1997, p.108), I realize that I have not made myself all by myself, none of us have. Fragments, traces of the world in which we live permeate us, constituting us as we constitute the world. Shaping, shifting, influencing who we are and how we are in the world. It is impossible not to be influenced but it is possible to be conscious or rather to be conscious of the need for consciousness. Part of how this happens is through experience, particularly through the experience of having our prejudices provoked. The more experiences we have, the more our sense of knowing is disrupted, the more open we can be to experience, and the more accustomed we can become to considering what we think about in terms of contingency, partiality - we learn to hold our ideas lightly (Hyde, 1998, p.140).

But when we become conscious that we are thinking something, something we didn't know we thought, what is happening with us? What is it that we are thinking when we think we already know? Many words are used to talk about these occurrences - frequently we speak of prevalent and predominant ideologies or social narratives. Less often but perhaps more evocatively we talk of stories, myths, fables, group enchantments. Common to all of these though is the power such tales hold to shape our thinking about things. Silently, insidiously, the stories, describing, inscribing "the way things are", creep into our minds. From the day we are born, they are "just there", constant and pervasive, producing for us "the articulated world, the cosmos, the cultural weave of this society, a fiction that begins to seem real as soon as everyone forgets that human beings made it" (Hyde, 1998, p.232). There is a difference though, between stories or myths told to tell us something or teach us something about ourselves and our world, and those stories which began as stories and now deny or have forgotten their fictiveness, which claim they are the Truth.

As Griffin (1992) describes it, we live in a "lattice of myths" (p.189). The stories that give meaning to our lives, particularly those which operate silently, also define for us the boundaries of our existences (Griffin, p.189). We are shaped, protected, made secure by the stories but we are also enclosed, confined, imprisoned. The stories become "invisible enclosures" (Griffin, p.284), barely perceptible yet profoundly shaping our

possibilities. And yet these stories we live out so unthinkingly, these larger stories "about women or about race or a snake in the garden" (Hyde, 1998, p.170), are hollow at the centre, they are empty of actuality and their authority for us relies on this absence, the absence of the particular. At the centre of stories about women for instance, is a being who is hypothetical rather than real, one who exerts enormous authority precisely because she does not exist. The authority of an ideology, a social narrative, a story, requires a certain distance from experience, from reality, a distance which allows it to be unaffected by what happens and by what is there. An ideology organizes experience according to itself and holds the promise, the illusion that one may "control reality with the mind" (Griffin, 1982, p.278).

Ideologies, stories, myths hold their power through our silence and forgetting, and hermeneutics is always partly a remembering, a remembering that is a refusal of group enchantment, a remembering through which the "old story loses its charm" (Hyde, 1998, p.214). As Burch (1986) writes, "contrary to the 'sense' of common sense, things are not really the way they seem" (p.4).

Nietzsche once wrote that "truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten they are illusions" (cited in Hyde, 1998, p.77). Illusions are deceptions, slippery, sometimes hard to grasp, illusive, both there and not there, true but not true. Though the truth of an illusion is only in its appearance, appearances can be very compelling, very easy to believe in. But like the magician who spoils the trick by revealing how it is done, we may want to question the "truth" of what we see, we may want to see if there are "tricks" in the stories we live by. It is risky, not everyone wants to know, and we need to remember that it is in the nature of illusions that they be illusive. Since we rarely know as much as we think we know but often forget this, it is perhaps best to proceed quite tentatively. We want to avoid, if we can, the trap of simply trading one illusion for another.

Social narratives and ideologies can be very slippery, sometimes difficult to pin down and question because they don't seem to exist in particular, only in general and though they may shape us in general, we can easily deny them in particular. So if I were to say that a dominant story about women in our world is that the most important thing about a woman is her biology, her body, and that this is important chiefly in terms of how she

differs from a man, someone will say, "no it's not, that's not my experience." And if I say a woman's difference from a man is mostly interpreted as defectiveness, as weakness and vulnerability, someone will be there to say, "that's not true, I know a woman who is a weight lifter or a fire fighter or the president of a company." And this will be true because the general story rarely holds up when held against the particular, but just because it doesn't hold up doesn't mean it isn't there, perversely more powerful when unacknowledged. General narratives are all around us, and we know this because we know them.

There are many narrative threads with which we need to concern ourselves here. These are familiar stories, common "knowledge", part of the very air we breathe. Though we might not consciously believe in them, we know them, they are in us. There is the story about the weakness of women mentioned above. I can add to this the "truth" that women are unreliable, flighty, ruled by their hormones. And then there are the stories told about mothers, chief among these is the "truth" that women mother and that this is biologically self explanatory (Chodorow, 1978). Women, this story says, mother naturally, instinctively, it is just what women do. And because of this, another story tells us mothering is not really work, or if it is labour at all, it is a labour of love. And for all women, whether we are mothers or not, there is the long shadow cast by the idealized version of the Good Mother with which we must contend (Ruddick, 1989), a story that begins with the idea that all women must be mothers and then proceeds to delineate how this mothering must occur. A good mother is one who is selfless, loves unconditionally, has no needs or desires of her own, is an object for the demands of her child. The stories told of women and of mothers are not terribly different from one another and they are not unrelated - both rely on patriarchal ideology to create the illusion that these socially constructed relations are natural and therefore inevitable and unchanging.

A certain sense of inevitability is also at the heart of social narratives about poverty. We live in a long tradition of belief that the poor will always be with us, a tradition sometimes couched in religion, sometimes economics, but one that never adequately explains why this is the case. Ideas of individualism and autonomy allow us to hold poor people responsible for their poverty, to say that it is not "us", it is not how we have

arranged things but "them", they are not trying hard enough. And because they must not be trying hard enough, "those" people must be lazy, apathetic, indifferent. And there will always be the example to bolster the claim, the American dream fulfilled, a rags to riches tale of success and ingenuity. If we are each responsible for our own life, if we each create our own reality, people who create a reality that is about poverty, must somehow be naturally, inherently impoverished, deficient, flawed in some way or another.

So where does this leave poor women who are mothers, living as they do in the midst of this mongrel assemblage of stories about women, about mothers and about poverty? What is said about them and how does this stand up in terms of what is there?

Slipping the Trap

The advent of speech takes many courses.

At times an old story must peel away so that a new telling can begin.

Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones*

It is probably important to remember at the outset the ways in which dominant ideologies of motherhood and of womanhood are tied up with ideologies which define and support gender, race and class hierarchies and which construct some women as good mothers, worthy of support and other women as inadequate (Glenn, 1994). It is probably also important to remember that just because there are stories defining what a good mother is does not necessarily mean that any woman at all will see herself in this way, no matter how well she fits the profile. The myth of the good mother is an idealized version of a mother, of a woman, and rather than presenting a possibility for women, the impossibility of its demands ties even the most advantageously positioned women in knots (Lazarre, 1997). But for impoverished women the impact can be devastating, they are judged and judge themselves according to its tenets even though or perhaps because the assumptions on which it relies remain invisible.

The ideology of the good mother assumes that financial security exists for women and their children (Collins, 1994), and further assumes that this security will be provided within the family. Here it intersects with values of self-sufficiency, with the ethic of self-reliance and autonomy. That women mothering full time at home require financial support is acceptable as long as that support is provided within the family, or as Axinn and Hirsch

(1993) observe, a woman's dependence on a man is good, her dependence on the state is bad. So we have a woman like Maria, mothering full time at home, not considered worthy of support and in fact having to continually justify and defend her need for social assistance. Maria's struggle is to be thought worthy, to be noticed and valued in a world which would rather not see her at all. Her need for social assistance is read as deficiency, her need for support some kind of affront to a work ethic which does not recognize, value or take into account her work of mothering. Or we have Terri, also mothering full time at home, making her children the centre of her world but needing to protect herself by remaining unnoticed despite her very real need for support. Terri knows that she could look for a job to supplement their meager family income but who would care for her children, her home? This woman, like many others, knows the reality of the double work day and she refuses it - so she and her family go without. This is not about going without "luxuries" but necessities: groceries, a phone, furniture. Paradoxically, her inability to provide these for her children, because she is at home caring for them, is what would raise questions about her mothering. But there is even more than this going on here. The paradox that Terri finds herself in also has to do with other assumptions, perhaps ones she holds herself, that have to do with thinking about mothering as an exclusively relational activity, with the belief that "men work and women take care of families" (Collins, p.46). When mothering is understood as something specific and limited, something that signifies in only a particular way, the range of activities that can create and sustain relationships between mothers and children shrinks to almost nothing, sometimes to only an emotional bond that though central and vital is perhaps not, in itself, enough. Or maybe it is not only that we sometimes think about mothering in a limited and limiting way, but that we often forget to mention what makes our thinking possible, that is, that relationships between mothers and children require sustenance, a support available to some mothers and not to other mothers. So for Maria and Terri, though they in many ways strive to embody the good mother, to be good mothers, and in fact, are good mothers, mothering in poverty means that they get caught by and in the official story of how good mothering happens and what good mothering is. They have the value of what they do and the adequacy of their mothering questioned in part because they lack what this idealized version of motherhood

implicitly rests on - adequate economic resources and financial self-sufficiency.

The ideology of motherhood also relies on a romanticization of motherhood, a view of mothers as sequestered in a private space unaffected by public doings, as not labouring but loving. Romanticization obscures the context of mothering and deems issues of power irrelevant (Glenn, 1994). But unequal relations of power shape the lives of all mothers, not only impoverished mothers, because mothering takes place in the social world which has few if any truly private spaces, and which is ordered by relations of power and dominance between and among genders, classes, races. As Glenn (1994) notes, "mothering cannot escape being an arena of political struggle" (p.17), and though different women will experience this struggle differently, they will experience it. Jane experienced it when her right, as a lesbian, to mother at all was questioned. Terri experienced it as she tried to make good decisions about her pregnancies, decisions having as much to do with economic exigencies as with motherhood. Ann experienced it as she endured years of abuse before she found a way to leave. Maria experienced it through her endless battles to create a home for her children. And Amber experienced it when she moved in with a man because she and her son needed to live somewhere. These are political struggles, about access to resources, about social support withheld or given, about conditions which provide women the opportunity to be "good" mothers, to live well, and conditions which frustrate and undermine their efforts.

There is a story, a deplorable social narrative, which suggests that poor women are inadequate mothers. This story must be understood in relation to these two assumptions, the assumption of financial security immanent in the ideology of the good mother and the deemed irrelevance of relations of power or of context to mothering. This story about low income mothers is also fed by the narratives about poverty suggesting poor people are by nature deficient, inherently flawed - this is the "flawed character" view of poverty (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995). In this story, this story without ground, poor women become mothers through promiscuity, a moral deficiency, and poor reproductive decision making, a cognitive shortcoming (Withorn, 1996). That these women have children at all is considered all the evidence required to "prove" the story true because this story is part of yet other stories, one of which says we should not have children we can't afford, and

another of which says only some people should be encouraged to breed.

But like all such stories, this story about the inadequacy of poor mothers is empty, hollow at the centre. It can't hold a real woman's life because it depends on her absence for its authority, on her silence and on ours for its coherence. It can't stand up when faced with what is there, with the lives of actual women because lives are always more complicated than such thinking allows. Each woman involved in this research came to motherhood differently, each has made decisions, some more than once, some more thoughtful than others, about becoming a mother, or not. Decisions always made in the context of life, in the realm of what was possible.

To understand such decisions, one would have to know something about what having a child, being a mother might mean to a particular woman, to hear about what her child is to her and how she came to have her. Terri describes the first time she saw her daughter as "instantly falling in love" (Terri: T1). Maria says her life, hard as it is, would be nothing without her children. And for Amber, who came to motherhood through a wishful, wistful desire for a different life, her son is the reason she now makes good decisions, caring for him is what keeps her stable. To see having a child as irresponsible is to assume that for a poor woman, her child is only a burden and it is to assume that these mothers and children are the causes of each other's suffering (Rich, 1986). In an otherwise insightful account of mothering, Rich (1986) makes this very assumption: "for a poor woman... the birth of an infant can imply another kind of death - a new liability in the struggle to merely survive" (p.166). And while there are ways this might be true i.e., there are costs associated with having children, it is also not true - a glimpse of what is going on is allowed to stand in for what is truly going on. Poor women's lives are burdensome not so much because of the presence of children but rather because of their poverty, poverty caused not by their children but by structural features of the social landscape.

Yet the myths persist. The story that begins with the irresponsibility of poor women in having children at all grows larger and suggests that low income mothers are incapable of making good decisions for themselves or their children, that they do not have the same concern for their children that other women do, that they do not care for their children as they "should" (Axinn & Hirsch, 1993; Bas, 1996; Withom, 1996). This is the story that

allowed me to make judgments about Terri based on how she appeared to me, judgments about her as a woman, a mother, judgments that were about indifference, neglect, judgments that fell to pieces the moment that Terri became Terri for me, a particular woman with a complex, not easily readable life. This story is what supported me in questioning, doubting the veracity of Amber's story and helped me to wonder whether or not she was a "good" mother. This is the story that, like Jane's family, allows "us" to do things to "them" for their own good.

Again we must ask, how does the story fit when read against what we know of actual women's lives? My experience of these women, of Terri, Maria, Ann, Amber and Jane, is not so much that they make either good or bad decisions, particularly as I am not even entirely certain what this means, but that they make the decisions that are possible in their circumstances. And the decisions that they are called on to make, even those that have to do with the mundane details of daily life, often require great deliberation, thoughtfulness, care. Maria for instance sometimes buys groceries with a credit card even though she knows she will have no more money when it comes time to pay the bill than she has at the moment. I could say she is acting irresponsibly, running up debts she has no hope of paying, and she could say she must feed her family somehow - who would be right? And certainly Amber's decision to move in with a drug dealer leaves her ability to make "good" decisions open to question, yet can this questioning be considered fair given what we now know of the circumstances surrounding this choice? Are there not ways in which Amber made a good decision? And what are we to make of the complexity of Ann's decisions - first staying in a violent situation and then leaving it and plunging, with her children, into poverty.

It is part of the context of these women's lives that they make decisions about what matters in terms of their reality, the one they live day to day. By reality here I mean something real, something that correspond to an external world that is there, that must be contended with. And though it is true that we all contend with a world, some people's worlds are harsher and more unyielding than others, and because of this perhaps, these worlds become more noticeable, their presence somehow more intrusive, in some ways felt more keenly. These worlds are not simple backdrops for experience but rather are

"participants" in it. Terri was thinking of keeping her son rather than surrendering him for adoption until "reality kicked in" (Terri: T1). Ann's reality was staying with an abusive husband until being safe became a possibility she could attempt to make real. Maria's reality is that the work she has spent her life doing, caring for children, is not valued, not thought worthy of support. Amber says there were times she would have made "bad" decisions if she hadn't needed to be "in reality" to care for her son (Amber: T1). And Jane's reality is that being poor means she lives a conditional existence, living constantly with the fear of something happening, a something that could be anything at all that might upset the precariousness of her situation. So decisions get made in these realities, in the midst of things as they really are, the ordinary everyday world which requires being taken care of, somehow. That there is a world that must be taken care of, somehow, suggests that the difficulties faced by these women lie not so much inside them, difficulties which they then project outward so that we can say that they create their own realities, but rather, the external world plays its part through projecting its harshness into their lives. There are "indignities imposed on them by the world" (Hillman, 1982, p.76).

If this is the case, if as Abram (1996) writes, "my life and the world's life are deeply intertwined" (p. 33), our ideas about choice, decision making, "free" will, about how these exist in the world, must become more complicated. Consider too the difficulty, even the impossibility of determining how and why something has happened. We often struggle to identify, to locate the origins of our troubles but rarely, if ever, do we have access to first causes. We must begin always where we are, in the midst of things that started long before we arrived. Despite all of this, it remains a very powerful social value, this idea that we are responsible for the lives we have, that we create our own realities, a belief that seems at best a comforting illusion, a way perhaps to invest our lives with meaning and to hold at bay the dark, ambiguous, chaotic, unpredictable nature of events. We fear, I think, knowing that much of what happens may be beyond our understanding, and that there may be more going on than we could ever imagine. It is unsettling perhaps to realize that what can be said of something can never be exhausted, that we have no access to the whole so our knowing is necessarily partial, unfinished. As Jardine (1994) writes, knowledge about what happens is never given to us but is always on the way: "the whole

of one's life... is never given but always coming, so very often we will find that we are precisely mistaken about our experience and its place" (p. xxi). We rarely know as much as we think we know.

At its worst, the belief that we create our own realities locates what happens in each person rather than in the world, and in fact seems to suggest that the world does not exist except as background for what happens. The point here is not so much to suggest that a person has no effect, no choice, no responsibility but rather to emphasize that all of this happens somewhere, in a world, a world often a mystery to us comprised as it is of yet to be determined possibilities. So as the decisions we make happen somewhere, so too our choices must be understood in the context of a world. Terri for example sees herself as having made decisions which shaped her life, she chose to stay with a particular man, chose to have two children. But she also understands that there is more going on than this when she attributes her current situation to a run of bad luck, things are happening beyond her wanting and doing (Gadamer, 1989, p.xxviii). And Maria, though she chose many years ago to come to Canada with her husband, she also didn't choose this. Yet this "decision", influenced as it was by both larger political events and by a particular relation between husband and wife, has profoundly shaped her life. If she had known then what she knows now, would she have decided otherwise? And though Amber would also say she made choices, she chose to leave home at thirteen, she chose to have a child at sixteen, she also sees much of what has happened to her as not "personal" (Amber: T1). The world in which she lives is harsh, it imposes itself, its conditions hold potential for violence and hurt and so this happens. This world, life on and then just barely off, the streets, has its ways, and if you are in it, no matter how you came to be there and no matter what you do, it will do things to you. And if you are beaten down often and enough, you start to realize that maybe this is not about you, not personal, but about, as Amber says, a larger dysfunctional world - there is something else going on. Refusing to blame herself, though in some ways a matter of survival, is also a recognition that she is not necessarily in control of what happens. We must deal with the world as well as our desires.

This kind of knowledge, a knowledge perhaps from experience, is a knowing about how things happen, is knowing that choice is never purely choice but choice in

circumstances - contextual, contingent, unpredictable. Terri, Maria, Ann, Amber and Jane each hold this kind of knowledge, contained in a shrug of the shoulders acknowledging the mystery of how and why things happen, contained in the refusal to blame themselves for things clearly out of their hands. I suspect that most of us know this as well but that it has become somehow easier, more palatable for us to hold each other accountable for our lives, to create a distance that allows us to believe that other people suffer because of who they are and what they do, that what happens, really, has nothing to do with us.

Telling Lies About Women's Lives

Opposition is not enough. In that vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become - to make oneself anew.

bell hooks, *Yearning*

The writing I am doing here is, for me, a kind of engagement, a struggle to try to see what makes it possible for me, for us, to speak and think and act in the ways that we do (Smith, 1991), to try to understand what is going on and then to try to understand what *else* is going on. I thought it important to consider the social narratives that swirl around the lives of low income mothers because I think they have much to do with making it possible for us to speak, think and act in particular ways. The ways these women are known to us, that is through the stories told about them, are also the ways, the means of allowing us to ensure they remain, in real terms, unknown to us. So the stories do more than tell us lies about women's lives, they also prevent us from seeing listening to a woman as something worth doing. In some ways this may explain the virulence of these stories. Stories about low income mothers seem to hold an anger that has always surprised me, seeming both out of proportion and unnecessary, particularly given the relative powerlessness of these women in the established order of things. Yet, perhaps these women have a power I do not yet understand, perhaps knowing them, knowing something about their lives, speaks to us of ourselves in ways we do not wish to hear. Maybe it's this that creates the anger.

I have been brought to this place in part because I have found the stories about low income mothers, about their adequacy as women and as mothers, rather easy to refute, to question and to see as questionable. One need only really listen to a woman to see that

inadequacy lies not in her but in the stories about her, which fail always to capture the complexities of her life. So a question I find myself continually returning to is why, with all the blaring, blatant inconsistencies of these stories, do they continue to stand, to shape or rather to distort our understanding, to place limits on our relationships with each other before they even begin? I have begun to wonder if the content of the stories themselves is unimportant, insignificant except for the ways in which it distorts our understanding and shapes our interactions with one another, which of course is not so insignificant. But still, it is perhaps what the stories make possible, what they do, that they exist at all, that should concern us, that in some ways, their function is far more worrisome than their content, though the two are not unrelated. I think about what the stories do because I know that I could contradict and question these stories one by one and it wouldn't really matter, wouldn't make a difference because as one was laid low, another would spring up to take its place. These stories serve us in some way.

Some of what these stories do I think is obvious. They allow us to maintain our distance, to withhold support, to see these women as very different from ourselves. And there is a shaming function here too, particularly in the stories around mothering, that works to keep women quiet, under control, afraid perhaps to ask for help because needing assistance calls one's very self into question. But I think our need for the stories goes deeper than this, and it is perhaps in the very questionableness of the narratives, in their contested and contestable nature, that we can find a clue as to why they are told, why we hold onto them so tenaciously. Imagine if there were no real justification for the hardship of women, for our indifference to their suffering, for their want in the midst of such abundance. Then, if we wanted to keep things the way they are, if we wanted to maintain the status quo, we would probably need to create some kind of justification for the way things are, something that would help us all to believe that this is the way things are supposed to be, something that explained women's poverty, that made the hardship of these mothers palatable, easy to live with. The stories about low income mothers do this for us because they are delivered as, and stand in for, the cause of their hardship; the way women "are" in the stories is the reason they suffer, the cause of our response to them. In the stories told about low income mothers, the moral reality of poverty is turned upside

down - as we confer responsibility on "them", we absolve ourselves (Scarry, 1985).

Yet still, we can see that they are suffering, or can we? Sometimes I think that the fact of their suffering, their hardship, is somehow made invisible to us, that it is easy to live with precisely because in some ways, it doesn't exist for us. If how we talk about these women shapes our perceptions of them, in advance of our knowing them and sometimes even despite our knowing them, then what actually is and is there loses its significance, its meaning. Or it doesn't "mean" the way that it should because our vision is clouded, coloured by our preconceptions. We don't perhaps recognize what we see, we are blinded even, to what is there. And then, if we talk about low income mothers in terms of a reality that we have created, a reality we can believe in because it seems to work for us, a reality that is about autonomy and self-reliance perhaps, then the reality that they live in, the one that includes luck, chance, overwhelming circumstances, remains invisible to us, unreal for us. Being unable to see, being unwilling to see, explains in some respects why it is possible to do nothing, why our indifference does not alarm us, why their hardship doesn't seem to make us very angry. To accept the reality of low income mothers as real would require from us that we do something, something that might begin perhaps with shelving our comforting, comfortable assumptions that we are in charge of our lives, that what we have, we deserve, that we are each free, autonomous, and have no need of one another.

The Claim of the Other

I felt suddenly implicated by her words, as if she spoke about something in which I was somehow already involved and which I somehow already understood...

David Jardine, *To Dwell With A Boundless Heart*

The ways low income mothers are known to us and the ways in which they remain unknown mediates our responses to their hardships, and this is interpretive activity, about how we choose to interpret our worlds and the implications of these choices. Seeing, understanding is not passive, we are not simply presented with a world unmediated but rather are always ourselves caught up and invested in what happens (Caputo, 1993). We make what we see meaningful, we create meaning as we go. Seeing is not passive, "things themselves" do not simply appear to us unmediated by our values, our emotions, our sense

of what matters, what is noticeable. What we attend to, what we see, is not passive "but an activity of selection and interpretation" (Jaggar, 1989, p.138) informed by our culture, our experience, shaped by the worlds in which we live. We constantly, consciously and unconsciously, engage in processes of evaluation, deliberation. We are always making sense of things, making the world intelligible-for-us, interpreting. We are choosing, though we do not always know this, what to see, who to listen to and what we will make of all of this.

Now I have chosen, though I do not completely understand it, to try to see with an awareness of how my seeing is constituted by the world, and in doing this, to try to see with some truthfulness what is it like to be a woman, a mother and living with poverty. I have wanted, without necessarily knowing why, to take these women's lives seriously, to consider, to deliberate on, to try to understand. All I have really known for sure through all of this is that I am caught by these women, caught by their suffering which I read as unnecessary but even more, caught by their attempts to live well in an unsupportive, sometimes hostile world. I am taken by this without, as I say, knowing why. It may be simply as Caputo (1993) observes, that there is just something about suffering that stops us in our tracks.

I understand my being caught as a being claimed, a perceiving that the world, including other people, calls forth, provokes my response, and that I can learn to notice this (Hillman, 1982). Learning to notice this and to respond to it requires that I somehow also learn to move beyond my subjectivity, my sense of my self as self-sustaining and autonomous. That I may be claimed, that I find myself claimed raises questions about the idea of self as isolated ego. Our claimedness is as Caputo (1993) suggests, a scandal to the "I", a challenge to the very idea of our autonomy. We can find ourselves, in the midst of things and beyond our wanting and doing (Gadamer, 1989), called to respond to something other than ourselves: "we do not belong to ourselves... we are always already held fast in the grip of something I know not what" (Caputo, p.83). Or not. It is really, a matter of interpretation. Certainly there are those who interpret otherwise, who act with the belief that they require nothing except themselves to exist, who believe they stand alone, unaided, and who hold this belief closely no matter how contradictory it may be to

ordinary, everyday experience in the world. But if instead of alone we choose to understand ourselves as claimed, a certain openness to the other becomes our lot, an openness that "involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one forces me to do so" (Gadamer, p.361).

Interpreting ourselves as obligated, as always already held fast by the claim of an other is one way to respond to a question that Griffin (1992) asks, "is one ever really free of the fate of others?" (p.116). Certainly we have many ways to answer this question in the affirmative, but these ways seem to require us to stand "outside ourselves in ignorance" (Griffin, p.158), to live closed lives, to know the world in only very limited, limiting ways. We can position ourselves so as to not hear or to heed the claim of the other, just as we can rely on stories, myths, ideologies for understanding and count on principles, laws and generalities to tell us what to do. We can ask all of these to provide for us a ground, a foundation, a standpoint outside ourselves that will tell us how to proceed with certainty, just as we can forget the ways our ground is always shifting, our foundations never sure, our standpoints themselves caught up in who we are and in what we desire. This too, may be a matter for interpretation but for me I can find no ground which is certain, which allows me to proceed with certainty, that tells me what I should do - there is none or at least none that I know of (Caputo, 1993). In life it seems, we are "challenged to do the right thing in the face of not being divine" (Gadamer, 1989, p.362), and for some of us, in the face of not even being divinely inspired.

More than all of this though, I can find in myself no really good reason to refuse the pleasure of being open to others, to the world, not even the possibility of wounding this openness entails. I cannot find it in myself to count myself apart from and unrelated to what happens. I also don't know why this is so. I do know though, or at least I think I can say, or perhaps just will say, with some confidence, that my sense of being claimed, of being obligated to an other, is not dictated to me from above, it does not derive from laws or principles, it is not something I have created within myself. My sense of being claimed is local, particular, earthbound. I know my obligations because I have met them face to face (Caputo, 1993), I know their names. They are Terri, Maria, Ann, Amber and Jane.

So I do not find myself obligated so much in general, to a category for instance

called "low income mothers" but in particular, to particular women named Terri, Maria, Ann, Amber and Jane. And again, I don't know why this is, it just is. Or perhaps it just is because I have interpreted their lives, my own, and the world's in a particular way, a way that suggests I think, that we are diminished, in our understanding, in our experience, by the loss, the suppression of what is particular, what is singular, a way that suggests this suppression is always an act of violence, not only against a particular other, but against ourselves. We blind ourselves as we create faceless, anonymous others, our loss unimaginable to us because we never come to know what else was possible. So I find I can no longer allow, indeed, I no longer want to allow my eyes to slide past the differences among them, to think about these women or any other woman, in generalities. At the very least I know now that there are differences there and that these matter, which should not be understood as saying these women share nothing common. But proceeding now as if I didn't know something of these women in their particularity would be difficult, uncomfortable and frankly, I can't think why I would want to do this.

Yet it is uncertain territory we enter here, depending on nothing more, but also nothing less, than how we choose to understand. The claim of the particular other is, in many ways, groundless. It is an interpretation that, if pushed too far, shows itself to be without justification (Caputo, 1993). It is protected by nothing except perhaps by our desire to live well with one another, but even this desire is fragile. The claim of the other will not hold up if pushed too far because this claim resides only in her, in what happens to her, it is inscribed only in her face and does not extend beyond her. The best that we can do, and it is what I hope I have done here, is to make her claim "look as strong as possible... and to make indifference look as bad as possible, as bad as it is" (Caputo, p. 38). I find I cannot be indifferent to the hardships and suffering of the women involved in this research, I am a caught by it, caught by them - which for me at least, is as it should be.

VI. Full Circle

<u>"How many times has this all been said before?"</u>

A wish for meaning that might weave oneself and the world together. Not dictated

from above the earth but palpable, embedded and experienced in daily life.

Susan Griffin, *The Eros of Everyday Life*

When I began this research and throughout the "doing" of it, people would sometimes ask me what my topic was. What are you doing your research on, they would ask. And I would answer, in the shorthand way I adopted, that this research was about women mothering in poverty. Mostly, they would then just nod knowingly, no further explanation required or desired and I was left with the sense that these people somehow felt they already knew, from my impossibly brief response, what it was this research was about, that it was easy for them to understand, that it was obvious because everyone already "knows" that these women are a problem, have a problem. I don't recall ever being asked about the ways in which these women were the topic of my research, or what was it about women mothering in poverty I wanted to know more about. It's also true that I didn't often offer this information, neither trusting myself to clearly articulate my grounding nor trusting others to understand. I would say now, that though I began this research with an intuitive sense that it might be important, I also began with a fear that not only might this work be seen as not worth doing, but that there might, in fact, be nothing new to say, and that what there was to say, everybody already knows.

So I began the writing with Audre Lorde's lament, her words about how we fail to learn from the past and to pass on what we have learned and so end up saying the same things over and over: "how many times has this all been said before?" (Lorde, 1984, p.117). Then I think I was covering my bases, ensuring that if everybody already knew what I was going to say, if I had nothing "new" to offer, it would show that I had known this from the start, and that even knowing this, I had started anyway, that I thought this at least, worth doing. This was a way perhaps for me to stay ahead of the critics, pointing out the flaw in my research before I even began. I might say nothing new I suggested, but I would say it differently, in a way that would finally compel listening, and this would be my contribution. Now, though I understand the impulse to cover myself, as it were, I find

Lorde's words remain, to my mind, a fitting way to have started this work, though it is also true I no longer find they "mean" in the same way. This is perhaps a measure of how much I have been changed by the work, something has happened to me, in me, to make these words mean differently. Now, rather than understanding Lorde as pointing to a problem, though I think this is how she would understand what she has written, her words are a reminder to me of the way things are, that we are compelled to repeat and relearn because our understanding of something is never once and for all, is never over and done with. We will always be required to understand anew. Now I read Lorde's words and think not about how many times this has all been said before but rather about how each time this is said, what is required from us is that we listen, again, for the first time.

Before I go on, I think I ought to try to make plain who it is I have been addressing, who the "we" of this research refers to. I know the "we" I use holds presumptions, assumptions, just as I know that I myself have always disliked being addressed in this way, bridling at the presumptiveness of being included in a "we" not of my own making. It can be very annoying to read "we" do this or "we" do that or about what "we" are thinking. I have especially resented this when I counted myself as different, or when I have not wanted to see myself as implicated in what was going on, in practices or ways of thinking that I felt apart from - some people may think or act that way but I don't. Yet there is a "we" of some kind here, I have gravitated naturally, easily to this form of address - it may not *be* right but somehow it *feels* right. It could be that the "we" of this research is anyone who counts themselves as present in it, who has thought or who wishes to think about these things, who understands themselves as participating in this conversation, as wanting to know something of what it is like to be a woman mothering in poverty. It could be just other nurses, or just other women. But I want to say, without worrying too much if I am right, that even those who do not see themselves in what I have written are here to the extent that we are always already implicated in each other's thinking, by each other's lives - whether we want to be or not. This is just how things are and to realize this is to "realize how fully the world is already happening in us and around us, as if by magic" (Hyde, 1998, p.146).

Some will object to this I'm sure, insisting that they are not implicated here, that

what I have been writing about has nothing to do with them, that the lives of these women who struggle with poverty, though they may be sad or difficult, are unrelated to their own. And they could be right, I really can't say for sure. And this uncertainty, my being unable to say for sure, points to the heart of this research which, though about what it is like to be a woman, a mother and living with poverty, has also been about how we will choose to interpret the world and the implications of these choices. I use choice here in the complicated sense, choice that recognizes the ambiguity of our being at once "encumbered and free" (Gadow, 1996, p.38). But however we are situated, positioned, encumbered, and however we are free, the least we should know, have present before us, is the knowledge that what we are doing, our life's most profound activity, is reading, interpreting and that this means something.

How we choose to read our worlds, the awareness with which we take up this task, says something about who we are, about who we want to be. In the beginning I suggested, following Burch (1986), that I was raising the "issue" of women mothering in poverty as a question to be considered rather than a problem to be solved and that our responses to this question would involve who we are, our ways of thinking and being in the world, rather than what we do. And I think this has been the case, that though there are ways in which what we do may speak to who we are or who we would like to be, these things, being and doing, though not dichotomous, are also not identical. I point this out because like many nurses, I tend to want to do things, to take actions in the world, to fix things, "to cure what can be cured" (Spelman, 1997, p.20). So if you had hoped to find here something that would tell you what to do, you will be disappointed, but not, I hope, completely. Here we should remember what Sandelowski (1997) reminds us of, that there are ways that understanding is action, that when we change our understanding of the world, when we change how we see, we change our selves (Griffin, 1995) and in so changing who we are in the world, we, in effect, change the world.

In writing about these women, about Terri, Maria, Ann, Amber and Jane, I wanted to share with others what it was like for me to begin to know them, to begin to see them in their particularity. I was trying to make these five women very present for us, to give some sense of what knowing a woman in her particularity might be like, which is also giving

some sense of what her life might be like. In a way this has also been a showing of who and what has been missing from our conversations, showing how our possibilities for understanding might be broadened and enriched, and doing this in such a way that others could see for themselves that this is something worth doing. At the same time, there are limitations here. Smith (1992) suggests that "the surfacing of meaning in any given context... always involves an act of suppression... something is inevitably 'lost'" (p.252). In the beginning I chose to consider mothering and poverty to elucidate meaning in these women's lives, and throughout the research I made choices about what stood out for me - knowing that there was always more than what I could attend to going on. Also shaping, moving back and forth and in between us were ethnicity, race, education, life experiences, mine and theirs, and much more, many aspects of our selves which make up who we are with others. These all were present always, influencing what happened between us, and in some ways, what has been said here, what has been written about, may be seen as an opening, a threshold, a place to begin to ask questions, to speculate about what has been left out, all that remains unsaid.

Woman: Mother: Poverty : Possibilities for Understanding

And yes, it is very difficult to stand still and to listen to another woman's voice

delineate an agony I do not share, or one to which I have myself contributed.

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

In this research I have been concerned with the "specificities of women's existence" (Probyn, 1990, p.179), with women's lives as they are lived day in and day out. I have wanted us to take everyday life seriously to see what possibilities for understanding are held here, to see the ways in which the dailiness of women's lives is invested with meaning, with significance. I speculated in the beginning that it might be useful to try to understand women's lives through their relationships to and experiences of children and poverty, that these might prove useful in elucidating meaning because they seemed to be so central and present in the lives of many of the women I was meeting. These I thought, that is, children and poverty, were "facts" of women's lives, organizing features, and I think, though there are ways we find what we seek, this speculation has been shown to be the case.

Children and poverty may be useful ways to elucidate meaning in a woman's life because they are so meaningful. Both make claims on her that are difficult to ignore and so she must deal with them, act within the constraints they impose, understand her life in terms of how they give it shape. In some respects, for good or bad, they ground her in a reality, a reality they help to create, a reality to which she must respond. A woman with children, a woman living with poverty must take care of everyday life. The intransigent, often ugly reality of poverty intrudes, imposes itself and the women of this study face it down, deal with it daily, they do not and cannot allow themselves to be defeated by it. Rather, they withstand, they endure, they resist and their children are both the reason they do this and sometimes that which makes their defiance possible at all. Seeing, understanding something of how a woman lives in the midst of this, in the midst of the unrelenting demands of both children and poverty, can tell us much about her, about the generative, creative aspect of her life, about her energy, her ingenuity, her patience, her willingness to persevere. And it can tell us something about the effects of shaming, about constant fatigue and worry, about something that is almost hopelessness but not quite. These are by no means stunning or surprising revelations but they are part of all that we do not know, in the sense of a knowing that matters, that makes a difference in terms of what we do, about women mothering in poverty. Knowing a woman in this way might allow us to be caught by her, to be caught by her desire, her efforts to live well, and this might allow us to care about her, in particular.

Yet still, the lived meanings of our various positions in life cannot be assumed. We must know that while we may assume that children and poverty will be meaningful in a woman's life, the particular meanings these hold for a woman, the singular ways in which they shape her life, the textures they give to her existence, cannot be known in advance. Meeting a woman in her particularity requires that we be cognizant of our own and that we recognize the ways in which our understanding is shaped in advance. Creating conditions where understanding is possible means knowing that we will not get to say by ourselves what something is, that this woman, here, will have something to say, and that we must allow her to do this, to really say something to us (Gadamer, 1989). So while it may be safe to assume that poverty almost always means hardship, we will not know the

particularities of a woman's struggle until we talk with her, and if we do not know these, if we do not know something about what happens with her, about what matters to her, what use are we to her?

Similarly, though we can assume that poverty makes mothering more difficult, we cannot know in advance, we cannot assume the ways in which it will be made more difficult. From the women of this study I have learned that there are ways, because of their circumstances, that low income women may have to think long and hard about becoming mothers. Knowing their lives from the inside, feeling the impositions of the external world, women ask themselves, what is possible here? Sometimes it is can I have *a* child? Sometimes it is can I keep *this* child? Sometimes they will question their decisions to mother but more often their decisions to mother will be questioned, influenced as we all are in our understanding of what and who a "good" mother is by the prevailing ideology of motherhood. Our lack of consciousness of all that underlies this ideology will distort their experience, in our eyes and theirs, will make them look like "bad" mothers, and will blind us to the conditions in which they are mothering. When we are wondering if a woman is a "good" mother, we must remind ourselves to also wonder about our wondering, to try to understand more about what is at work in us to make the ways we are thinking possible.

So while we can say yes, the experience of being woman, the experience of mothering is different because of poverty, an understanding of the meaning of these differences in a particular woman's life is what will have to be worked out between us.

Being Betwixt-and-between

The prophetic trickster points to what is actually happening: the muddiness, the ambiguity, the noise. These are part of the real, not something to be filtered out.

Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*

Hyde (1998) suggests that the minds of those who willingly embrace a "state of being betwixt-and-between" are generative, speculative, capable of seeing new possibilities, proliferating new ideas (p.130). Gadamer (1989) too, points to the in-between as the locus of interpretive possibility, to the creative potential of the tension between what is familiar to us and what is strange, the play between what is known and the unknown. It is knowingly, designedly dwelling in these uncertain places which allows us

to create new possibilities for understanding, to loosen tightly held ideas. We don't however, lose these completely, there is no expectation that we will encounter a situation or person with no ideas or thoughts of our own but rather that we be willing to risk these, to generate meaning somewhere between what we expect and what we find, between what we thought we knew and what is there.

This being betwixt-and-between should not be unfamiliar to us. We live aspects of it, though often unconsciously, in our day to day lives. Rather than something extraordinary, it may be useful, fruitful to think about this as all very ordinary and to reflect on the ways in which our lives actually happen in in-between spaces, that though we tend to speak with certainty, we live in ambiguity. Most of the time what we experience, what we encounter is not clearly one thing or another but something both more indeterminate and more profuse than this. Events hold many possibilities for understanding, and it is among these many possibilities that understanding happens. We live between and amongst these possibilities. And our understanding itself is fluid, responsive, mercurial even - what happens can touch it, change it, if we let it. Acknowledging the uncertainty, the murk and muddiness of where we live, of the places in which we dwell, can help us to see the complexities of life, can remind us of the disservice we do to ourselves and others if we insist on reading life off the surface. Living consciously with uncertainty persuades us to proceed tentatively, to be sensitive and perceptive, to notice things - to see that there is always more going on than we thought.

Being in-between, being not this or that but this and this and this, is also how we understand and experience ourselves even though once again, our talk reflects more certainty, more exactness, more decidedness than this. A woman for instance, never sees herself as only a woman, and though being a woman makes a difference, she is also always a woman doing, being something else. And the other things she is and does, whether she is poor, a mother, a refugee, a lesbian, whether she works as a nurse or a prostitute or receives social assistance, will shape, add texture to what being woman means, just as being woman changes the meaning of all else that she is and does. Though we speak of ourselves and others precisely, linearly, I am / she is this and this and this, we rarely if ever experience ourselves or others in this way, nor do we live in this way. Our

lives, our selves resemble something more like a tangled mess of threads than a straight line going anywhere. So though we talk in straight lines we should know how messy it really is, we know this for ourselves and so too, we should know it for others. Dwelling consciously betwixt-and-between engages us more deeply in how things happen, allows us to become more mindful of our entangled lives.

The women of this study, of which I count myself a part, find themselves caught in a swirl of discourses defining woman, defining mother, defining poverty. They can't help but be caught, nor can we, so we need to talk together about what is going on. The meanings we assign to experiences, to positionalities, both our own and those of others, are created within and without, inside of us and somewhere beyond us. Even our gut reactions, those intuitive instinctive responses to things which we often believe or hope we can trust as unprejudiced and true, are constituted through our cultures, often reflecting not certain truth but rather the truth that we live in the midst of things which shape our understanding (Jaggar, 1989). Interpreting, making meaning, making sense of things is messy and to understand something about these women's lives, we also have to come to some understanding of how this happens, of how we understand and of what is called for from us if we wish to understand. If we want to understand, says Gadamer (1989), "all that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text" (p.268). This openness means not that we forget ourselves but rather that the meanings we bring to a situation stand not alone but in relation to other meanings and that these meanings together represent " a fluid multiplicity of possibilities... the multiplicity of what can be thought" (Gadamer, p.268-69).

In this research, I have looked to create meaning not in one thing or another thing but among the many, and I have tried to do this by consciously dwelling in the in-between spaces, between woman, mother, and poverty. I have tried to see a woman's life in "all its relations," to notice things attentively, mindfully which is the kind of noticing "on which knowledge depends" (Hillman, 1982, p.85). A large part of this work has been about questioning, about opening our understandings to question and about nurturing an openness in ourselves such that we can see these understandings as in fact, questionable. Many of the questions raised in this work have been left open, not only because there may

be no answers but also because I can't answer them alone. The questioning though has served, I think, to make things indeterminate which creates in us the certain knowledge that there are indeed questions here we can consider. To ask questions, we must only want to know and all that means is that we acknowledge now, at this moment, that we do not know (Gadamer, 1989). And it is not that we know nothing but that we never know it all.

Thoughtful Practices

The high gods set guard dogs around their sacred meadows. If there is to be a change, its agent will have to hypnotize those dogs and slip in from the shadows....

Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*

The meanings generated through this research contribute to nursing practice, not so much for themselves, though they are not insignificant, but rather through the questions they raise about who we are and wish to be in our practice, which is also often about what we do and how we do it. This research points, I think, to a need for an openness to the other and to a need for an openness to dialogue and in doing this, in pointing towards openness, the research raises questions both about what makes such openness possible and about what happens in its absence. There are ways, which I think very fundamental, in which nursing can be thought of as an interpretive practice and I think it would be of value, to ourselves and to those for whom we care, to consciously, deliberately think of what we do in this way. Though it can be said that we are all, no matter what our position, interpreters and that we are all always interpreting our worlds, as nurses we have a different relationship to others, a privileged access to other lives, and it is incumbent upon us to think very carefully, to be very mindful about what it is we are doing.

In nursing, whether we are concerned with individuals, families or communities, we often speak of our interpretive activities as assessment or evaluation, words which I think detach us from what we are doing, which conceal for us our investedness in what happens. We tend not to acknowledge that our assessments or our evaluations are also always partially about us, about what we see and deem significant, about who and what we value. And it is not that there is something wrong with this, because this is not about rightness or wrongness, but rather that we miss something central to nursing when we distance ourselves from what we do and forget that we who are assessing, evaluating,

judging, are also filtering what is there through our particular habits of thought. Our assessments, our evaluations reflect not what is there but rather *our* interpretation of what is there and these, we sometimes forget, are not the same thing. We read situations, symptoms, conditions and we make something of them, we read people's lives and they become full of meaning for us. We are always reading and we bring ourselves, our values, beliefs, assumptions, our knowledge, skills and experience, to this activity. This is nothing unusual but given the access we have into the lives of others, we have perhaps a greater responsibility for consciousness than some.

How we interpret, what we make of what confronts us, shapes how we will respond, and what responses we believe are required from us. Underlying this research has been my assumption that though I believe that nurses try to achieve something good through our practice, we could do better and that better might start with choosing to interpret our world differently. I say this hesitantly, not wishing to offend, but I have often wondered why the suffering that confronts us daily, particularly that which we could choose to read as unnecessary, does not seem to make us angry, why we are so willing to care for the wounded but not to stop the wounding. How did we come to believe, to accept that all that is called for from us is to mitigate suffering, to soothe, to offer comfort? This is not nothing, the comfort we offer, but why is it so often that we see and are silent? In nursing we are called on to play many roles not all of which we choose to take up. Some perhaps sit more easily with us, some are more demanding calling on us to be in the world in ways that perhaps we did not expect. Yet we must ask ourselves, are we not compelled through the burden of our particular knowledge to do something more than what feels comfortable, to do what we can to stop the wounding? I struggle for understanding here, and though I do not wish to lay the sorrows of the world on nursing, I think perhaps that something needs to change.

A beginning for us, a way perhaps for us to change our effect in the world, might be as simple and as complex as accepting that what we are doing is, in fact, interpreting and further, recognizing that the ground on which we do this is not particularly secure, not particularly safe. As Caputo (1993) observes, we are rather more on our own than we would like to think. Our assessing, our evaluating, our judgements and interpretations

occur in a working context where we have carefully created structures of thought and practice that provide us as nurses, with a sense of confidence about what we are doing, a sense of knowing our way. And though these offer stability and security, and often enable us to provide good nursing care, they also bring with them a certain blindness (Hyde, 1998). We notice some things but not others, we attend only to familiar voices, we lose our capacity to be surprised by what happens because we always know in advance what is going on. We explain the world and what we do in it with theories or models which rarely account for the complexity of things not because our theories are wrong but because no theory is capable of doing this. As nurses we may choose to believe that we deal in "facts", hard and incontrovertible, that our practices are "evidence-based" and our judgements merely "clinical." We may do this, that is frame what we do in this way, to shield ourselves from the uncomfortable truth that our foundations as not as solid as we would like to believe, that the ground on which we stand tends to shift (Caputo, 1993). We should know though, that it is we who choose to read what we do in this way and that other readings are possible.

To understand nursing as an interpretive practice does not negate all else that nursing is and has been but rather adds new possibilities. Sometimes, it is true, the decisions, the judgements required of us as nurses are uncomplicated, what is required is clear, what we are called on to do is simple. But this rarely happens because the singular significant characteristic of nursing practice is that someone else is there, someone who must be allowed to speak to us, to really tell us something. The ethic of a nursing relationship is such that the presence of this particular other is fundamental rather than incidental to what happens next, to how we will proceed, and so we must somehow be with this other in a way that allows her to have an effect, to matter. Achieving this I think, requires that we nurture within ourselves a different sense of who and what counts for us in understanding, that we open ourselves to other knowledges, that we cultivate an appreciation for the free play of interpretive possibility. In doing this, we can become more ourselves, more than "host bodies for stale gestures... and received ideas" (Hyde, 1998, p.307). Opening ourselves, our understanding to the world may mean we lose our sense of sureness, of certainty, but in losing this we gain a world of possibilities.

We should know, and always act with the knowledge, that we are implicated in and by how we choose to understand the world. To allow ourselves the best opportunity to interpret truthfully, to interpret well, we need to give up the notion of ourselves as the only knowers here, to let go of our sense of already knowing what is going on. Some part of this will be about attending to how power is worked out in our relationships with others, which begins with recognizing that it is there. We may need to accept at times that we are mistaken in our beliefs, that the authority we hold is unwarranted, or that we are contributing to rather than alleviating the suffering of others. Opening ourselves to other knowledges, other interpretations, questioning things we have come to take for granted, though enlivening, is by no means an easy task. It will make our practice more difficult but it will also help us to become more thoughtful nurses. I think we can't help but become more thoughtful when we are given more to think about, when we start to think about what it was we thought we knew and about how we came to think this. When we do this we give ourselves the gift of wide awakeness, of more consciously choosing how we wish to think, how we wish to proceed. The possibilities for thoughtful practice rely, not surprisingly on thinking, on both the ability and willingness to do this. We want I think, to understand, and we desire nothing more than to interpret the world in ways that are open, generous, perceptive but we are less willing, perhaps because it is harder, to accept that we can't do this all by ourselves. There is this world, a world with other people in it, a world which often exceeds our grasp, upon which we must rely, and we must teach ourselves to trust this reliance on others so that we may, here, now, broaden the horizons of our understanding.

Responding to Suffering

In disowning the effects we have on others, we disown ourselves.

Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones*

Of all the questions raised in and by this research, of all the questions I have pondered, questions of how we, as nurses, as a society, choose to respond to the presence and experience of the suffering in our midst are for me, most troubling. Though I have said before that how we respond seems to be a matter of how we choose to interpret our world, why we should interpret our worlds in such a way that we feel compelled to respond to the

suffering of others is less clear. There is no easy answer to this, no absolutely compelling, decisive reason for us to care, to take up as an obligation the task of ending the suffering that surrounds us. If there were such a reason, we would not live so easily amidst the hardships of poverty, lives damaged and hopes lost. As it is, we seem not only able to bear the suffering of others but also are able to find many reasons to excuse our indifference to our obligation beginning with denying that we are obligated at all. These are harsh words I suppose, but are they untrue? The evidence before us, before our eyes, in our cities, on our streets, in this research, suggests not. I should perhaps make plain here, and perhaps this will make more palatable my charges of indifference, that I include myself in the "we" of which I speak, that I understand myself as also implicated in and by the suffering of others.

Nurses, uniquely placed in the world as we are, are called, I believe, not only to ease suffering but also to work to end it. Some might say this is idealistic even moralistic, but I would say it is at least partly selfish. This is because I see the call to activism not only as a professional obligation but also as something we must do for the sake of ourselves. We are unable to say, as perhaps some others might, that we didn't know what was going on. To do so would be to deny what we know, and in doing this we would, in essence, be denying ourselves, we would have to divide ourselves, somehow, from what we know. Scarry (1985) suggests that when we choose not to see the reality of an other's pain, of their suffering, when, through our acts of self-blinding, we negate of the presence of an other who counts for something, we are able to not only bear the presence of suffering but also we participate in bringing this suffering "continually into the present" (p.36), we become part of how it can happen. Through the denial of what we know, we become complicit, we participate in creating, sustaining the suffering we also say we are trying to ease. We work against ourselves.

I believe that we are always in our work judging the suffering of others, struggling with questions of whose pain counts, and what their pain means (Spelman, 1997). If our understanding, our interpretation is such that we judge the hardship and suffering of women mothering in poverty as insignificant, or as having nothing to do with us, then we should know that this interpretation has consequences, not only for these women but for ourselves. There were several points in the process of this research when I experienced

shame, when my privilege relative to these women became both apparent to me and a source of discomfort for me. These moments are not to be dismissed as meaningless or inconsequential but rather understood as a call to consciousness, as moments when my sense of self, the integrity of my place in the world was being called into question, when I was being called to look at who I was in all of this. We can of course, choose not to look, choose to live without this kind of self knowledge but there is a cost for choosing ignorance that has to do with how fully we are able to live in the world and how much the world is available to us. Though what I saw of myself was troubling and unsettling, it was also somehow enlivening. My own life, I find, becomes fuller, somehow more meaningful, more compelling when I know and accept my connectedness to others. As Jardine (1994) writes, "I find myself *in the world* as part of the world's story coalescing just here and nowhere else" (p.7). To respond to the claim of an other, to feel our obligation, we need to see, I think, that this claim, this obligation, has something to do with us, in particular, right here and right now.

Near the End of This Particular Journey

... what tricksters quite regularly do is create lively talk where there has been

silence...

Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*

The question before us now is what difference does all this make? Has this inquiry enabled us to think differently about women mothering in poverty, to think differently about ourselves and our practice? This was its intent, that is, this research was undertaken to create new understandings about the lives of women mothering in poverty through opening up this experience to questioning, to show the ways in which it is questionable. Alongside this, as this particular experience was opened to questioning, the question of what it means to understand anything at all was also considered. This is perhaps a particular strength of a hermeneutic inquiry, that as we try to understand something, how we can understand anything must also be brought into view. We come to understand how these move in tandem - what we understand, how we understand - and so begin to appreciate why consciousness is so very necessary for nurses.

Hermeneutics is very much as Smith (1991) observes, a "practical philosophy"

(p.187), and hermeneutic inquiry is likewise something that one practices, the practice of interpretation. We do not apply techniques, we cannot hand over a method, or list rules to be followed (Jardine, 1998), rather we speak of openness to the other, of noticing, of listening - all activities we tend to think of as very ordinary. It is how we do these things, how we are open, how we notice, how we listen, that creates possibilities for understanding. We deliberately, attentively notice, our listening is "attuned to life's deepest resonances" (Smith, 1992, p.258), is a listening that is thoughtful, and our openness is such that this other here really matters. Any one of us can interpret well, at any time, if this is what we choose to try to do, and this is why a hermeneutic inquiry is so very useful - it shows us that we are each free to take up the interpretive task for ourselves (Smith, 1991). This particular inquiry has in some respects simply shown why we might choose to do so.

Interpretation always involves an opening of some kind, an opening that usually begins, but does not end, with our questioning. What happens, I think, once we experience an openness to the world, once we begin to understand that it is possible, even necessary to raise questions, is that we can't go back, we can no longer bear to be confined by thoughtless presumptions, stale assumptions, by received knowledges. And so our first question breeds still more questions until it seems we have nothing but questions. And this is not necessarily a bad thing, especially if we can take up these questions as part of our life's work. By this I mean we can hold these questions, think about them, respond to them, share them with one another, all with the aim of deepening our understanding of the world that we share (Smith, 1991). Here I have shared a process of thinking with all who have taken up or been caught by the question of the experience of women mothering in poverty, a process of thinking that draws no conclusions, provides no answers but instead simply offers us more to think about. And I am by no means finished with this thinking, with trying to understand the experience of being a woman, a mother and living with poverty, as I know that each time I revisit my work here, each time I meet a new woman, I will be called on to understand this experience anew. As Jardine (1994) writes, "there are always 'new ones in our midst' and therefore the story is still going on" (p.124).

My experience in this inquiry has raised in me, for me some new questions that have to do, perhaps not surprisingly, with who I am, as a nurse, in all of this. It would be

useful, I think, to look more closely at nursing, at nurses, to try to understand better how we understand ourselves, how we understand who we are in what we do. As I considered how our practice with low income mothers might change because of this research, I had to think too about why our practice is as it is. Why is it that, as a profession, as individual nurses, we are not at the forefront of movements for social change? Who better than nurses, charged as we are with the care of others, privileged as we are to have knowledge of their lives, to testify against the inequities of our system, a system that in so many ways creates the damaged lives we try to mend? We see and are silent, I would like to open this up to question.

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Appendix A

CONSENT FORM

Research Project Title: Woman : Mother : Poverty: Lived Meanings, Material Realities

Investigator: Christine Ceci
Masters Student, Faculty of Nursing
University of Calgary

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, you should feel free to ask. Please take time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This study is about increasing understanding of what it is like to be a woman who is a mother and living with poverty. At this point in time, little research has been done from the point of view of low income mothers. This study will provide you with an opportunity to share your perspective and experiences. In order to do this I will meet with you at least twice for approximately one and a half to two hours and ask you to share your thoughts, feeling and experiences in conversation.

Audiotapes of our conversations will be kept confidential. They will be transferred into notes, a copy of which will be kept on my personal computer. These notes will not contain your name. You may see and have copies of any notes that are about our conversations. All audiotapes, notes and disks will be kept in a locked cabinet and the tapes will be erased at the end of the study. Transcripts and research notes will be stored in a lockedfile for three years after completion of the study, then shredded. As I am a student, the information on the tapes will be shared with my supervisory committee. They are bound by the same rules of confidentiality as I am. No one else will have access to the audiotapes, notes and disks.

From the notes I will be writing a thesis. This thesis will become public information and will be available through the University of Calgary library. Prior to this however, I will share with you my interpretation of your experiences. In writing my thesis I will be using my own words to describe our conversations and the ideas you shared. At time I may quote your words directly to give an example of what was important. There will be no names or information included that could identify you. You are welcome to ask questions or express concerns at any time during the writing of this thesis.

In having these conversations with me, we may talk about things you have not thought about before. This may result in new way of thinking and give you ideas about new possibilities. However, sometimes conversations can trigger painful memories and this can be very distressing. Please let me know if this happens. You are not obligated to talk about anything that is uncomfortable to you. If you become distressed about anything that we talk about, arrangements can be made to help connect you with a counsellor.

There are certain things that are not confidential. For example, all situations in which a child is being abused or neglected, must by law be reported to the proper authorities. Sometimes in conversations, this kind of information is discussed. If this were to happen in our conversation, I will let you know what I am obligated by law to do, and

together we can discuss how to address the situation. I do not expect that this will happen but you need to know what the limits of confidentiality are. If you have any questions, please ask me to explain further.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researcher, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. I will inform you of any changes in my intentions and seek new permission on an ongoing basis. If you have further questions, please contact:
Christine Ceci (262-8975)

If you have questions concerning your participation in this project, you may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Sandra Tenove at 220-8069 or the office of the Associate Dean, Research and Graduate Programs, Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary at 220-5839.

Participant: Date:

Investigator/Witness: Date:

A copy of this consent form has been given to you for your records and reference.

(Note: Format for consent form from Hazelwood, E. (1997). Two Solitudes: Single Mothers on Welfare. Dissertation, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary)