The Researcher As Occupational Traveller:

From Strategic Essentialism to Creative Understanding

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Abstract

This paper records the author's reflections on a five-month study leave involving interviews with occupational Travellers and their teachers in five countries between February and July 1999. The focus is on ways in which elements of the researcher's subjectivity were mediated and negotiated through interactions with the interviewees and others, processes that both clarified and contested those elements for the researcher. The argument is advanced that, like occupational Travellers when interacting with non-itinerants, the author simultaneously engaged in 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak with Rooney, 1997) and strove for anti-essentialism in the form of 'outsidedness' from, and 'creative understanding' with, others (Bakhtin, 1986). This suggests that the interplay between essentialism and anti-essentialism is complex and fluid for both educational researchers and occupational Travellers.

Introduction

I am typing the draft text of this section of this paper ten days before my fortieth birthday (an anniversary that I celebrated travelling from Heerlen in the Netherlands to Leuven in Belgium), in the Dutch city of Amersfoort. For the past week I have conducted interviews with travelling bargee and circus people, and with teachers of bargee and fairground people. Next week I am to spend some time at the Dutch Open University, before continuing my travels into Belgium.

As I sit in my bedroom in the 17th century boarding house, my thoughts take disparate forms. I think of the Travellers and teachers I have met and still hope to meet before the expiry of my study leave. I think of my late father, wondering whether his

hitchhiking round Europe in the mid 1950s included a visit to Amersfoort. I think of my mother in Australia, coping heroically with the latest inexplicable interruption in access to my electronic savings account. I think of contrasting attitudes to time in countries I have visited, and hope that my own obsession with punctuality will be somewhat leavened when I return home.

These disparate thoughts encapsulate for me the 'personal' dimension of this period of study leave. This dimension reminds me that I am as much an 'occupational Traveller' as the groups with whom I am researching, a fact that accords with my interest in the ethical and political concerns confronting educational researchers (Danaher, 1998a). It also emphasises that my own 'state of being' (how well/happy/empathetic/perceptive/compassionate I feel) has a profound influence on the conduct and outcomes of the semi-structured interviews that are my principal research technique.

What prevents these disparate thoughts of interviewees, family and money matters (not to mention the weather forecast, train timetables and my aversion to the whistling outside my window) from being entirely solipsistic is that they relate to broader issues of representations of research participants. In particular, I am interested in how my own subjectivity, mediated and negotiated in the course of my occupational travels, reveals a complex interaction between essentialism and anti-essentialism. By this I mean that the focus of the discussion is on ways in which elements of my subjectivity both reinforce and move beyond the essentialism with which they are associated. This analysis has important implications for both conducting educational research and understanding the lives of occupational Travellers.

From strategic essentialism to creative understanding in theory

Recently I communicated ny concern (Danaher, 1998b) that past and present theorising in Traveller education, including that of my colleagues and myself, revealed a potential to essentialise the itinerancy of occupational Travellers and thereby to perpetuate the marginalising consequences of that itinerancy. I argued that drawing attention to other elements of Travellers' identities, apart from their mobility, is important in representing the full range of diverse attributes among Travellers.

I recognise, however, that moving from essentialism to anti-essentialism in the conduct of educational research and the representations of occupational Travellers is not a simple process. On the contrary, the effects of essentialism are lingering and pervasive, attesting to the enduring links between signifiers such as age, ethnicity and gender and the means by which our subjectivities are constructed and framed. For example, it is a truism that contemporary society is constructed around a series of paired categories, including 'male–female', 'white–black', 'rich–poor' and 'young–old'. The pairs in these categories are differentially valued, and the more highly valued element derives its meaning from being what the other is not. These paired categories also tend to constitute a dichotomy that is simultaneously essentialised and naturalised. That is, the differences between 'male' and 'female' or between 'white' and 'black', for example, are represented as being both based on fixed essences and part of the 'normal' order of things (and therefore to be accepted and obeyed).

The same processes of being essentialised and naturalised can be discerned in the paired category 'fixed resident–itinerant'. According to this category, people who live permanently in a community belong and contribute to that community, through their provision and consumption of goods and services and their continued association with a single place. By contrast, itinerant people have no financial or emotional stake in the communities through which they pass; 'here today, gone tomorrow', they constitute a

departure from the pattern of fixed residence. This construction assumes that itinerants are always mobile, and that they lack homes of their own. Moreover, this construction presupposes that the pattern of fixed residence is 'normal', and that people who live otherwise are 'deviants' from that pattern.

On the other hand, a crucial consequence of this lingering presence of essentialism is the importance of recognising how we can make essentialism work for us in our interactions with others, particularly with strangers. This point derives from my appropriation of the term 'strategic essentialism' elaborated by the feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak (Spivak with Rooney, 1997). Nicholson's (1997) summary of this term is useful here:

> This phrase seems to suggest an essentialism that did not contribute any essence to womanhood in a real or ontological sense, but which employed positive ideas about being a 'woman' for the sake of political action. (p. 318)

This suggests that we can with intentionality engage strategically in acts that essentialise certain elements of our subjectivities, especially with people whom we have just met. This process might involve, for example, deciding to leave attitudes to national identity or religious faith at a generalised level rather than exploring the multiple signifiers of meaning within those generic categories. As Spivak (Spivak with Rooney, 1997, p. 358) emphasised, the term 'strategy' implies 'matching the trick to the situation', and 'A strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory'. That is, strategic essentialsm does not involve forsaking critique of essentialism, but rather a situated calculation not to engage explicitly in such critique in a particular circumstance.

From some viewpoints, these acts might appear devious or even dishonest; certainly they might be considered to confirm rather than contest the essentialised dichotomies underpinning modern social life. From another perspective, however, these acts might constitute the forerunners to productive dialogues in which distinctive elements of the participants' subjectivities are mediated and negotiated. In other words, strategic essentialism might, paradoxically, be able to lead individuals towards anti-essentialist understandings and representations of phenomena.

The ideas of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin provide a vital ally in this move from essentialism to anti-essentialism. That is, Bakhtin's notions of 'outsidedness' and 'creative understanding' provide the conceptual tools to move the analysis onto a broader and more agential plane. Specifically, the anti-essentialism to which strategic essentialism might be considered a prelude takes the form of creative understanding derived from participants' outsidedness.

Bakhtin's philosophy of language contrasted 'dialogical' and 'monological' utterances, distinguished according to whether communication occurs in multiple or single directions with multiple or single voices being heard. A crucial insight was his emphasis on

the outsidedness required to hear another's voice – that is, the capacity and willingness to recognise difference before seeking to find some kind of 'common ground'. Morson and Emerson (1990), Bakhtin's first biographers, explained 'outsidedness' in this way: 'When one person faces another, his [*sic passim*] experience is conditioned by his "outsidedness." Even in the physical sense, one always sees something in the other that one does not see in oneself. I can see the world behind your back...' (p. 53). Although the bases of 'outsidedness' could vary considerably, including 'personal, spatial, temporal, national, or any other' (p. 56), 'outsidedness creates the possibility of dialogue, and dialogue helps to understand a culture in a profound way' (p. 55).

Clearly outsidedness has some parallels with strategic essentialism. In particular, the fact that outsidedness is based on a recognition of difference creates a potential for that difference to be focussed on potentially essentialised signifiers of subjectivity. Yet outsidedness also encompasses attention being accorded to other kinds of difference, including those that relate to the specialised components of an individual personality. In addition, the exercise of outsidedness is predicated on a preparedness to respect and celebrate markers of difference, rather than to use those markers in ways that diminish or marginalise the person concerned.

For Bakhtin, the purpose of outsidedness was as a pre-requisite for the exercise of creative understanding. From this perspective, recognising difference is a means of furthering the end of promoting multivocal dialogue among participants in a social encounter. This kind of dialogue is the manifestation of creative understanding, that leap of comprehension that occurs when we learn and that enables us to move from our current state of knowledge to what is hopefully a more comprehensive awareness of the people with whom we interact.

Used in combination, the concepts outlined above provide a potentially fruitful way of moving beyond the essentialising tendencies of naturalised dichotomies such as 'male–

female' and 'white–black'. That is, I might begin my encounter with a stranger by engaging in strategic essentialism, by referring to some element of my subjectivity pertaining to my gender or my ethnicity. Having established a point of contact with my addressee, I might then draw attention to a point of difference between us, thereby highlighting our outsidedness in relation to each other. I might follow this with a discussion designed to identify dimensions of both similarity and difference between us, with a view to exercising creative understanding of each other and of oneself. This last step would constitute an important contribution to promoting anti-essentialism in my dealings with others.

I recognise that the processes outlined above reveal enormous difficulties and complexities. I realise also that such ideas need to be analysed in the contexts of specific empirical sites. The next section of this paper applies these concepts to the empirical site of my occupational travels (in which I analyse the mediation and negotiation of selected elements of my subjectivity), while the third and final section considers the implications of that application for conducting research and for understanding the lives of occupational Travellers.

From strategic essentialism to creative understanding in practice for me

For five months, between February and July 1999, I travelled to five countries (Scotland, England, Venezuela, the Netherlands and Belgium) as part of a period of study leave from my Australian university. My purpose was to interview a large number of occupational Travellers and their teachers, with a view to building an archive of comparative data with the research that my colleagues and I had previously collected about Australian occupational Travellers.

As the name suggests, occupational Travellers consist of several groups of people whose employment requires them to be itinerant for varying amounts of time. These groups

include people living on barges and boats, circus people, fairground or show people, and seasonal fruitpickers. In addition, there are the people variously called Gypsies and Roma, and also people known as New Age or New Travellers, who bring additional ethnic and spiritual or lifestyle dimensions to itinerancy.

Throughout my study leave, I too was an occupational Traveller, obliged by my work and research agenda to travel from place to place as I interacted with different groups of Travellers and educators. Like them, I was often in a position where I was unable to supply an address for 'this time next week', as my arrangements tended to be made only a couple of days in advance. Also like the occupational Travellers, I found that being temporarily 'of no fixed abode' sometimes occasioned wariness on the part of potential providers of accommodation.

In addition, I was like the occupational Travellers in the ways in which elements of my subjectivity were mediated, and to some extent negotiated, through my interactions with others. People who are habitually itinerant are routinely required to steer their course through encounters with strangers in order to conduct their businesses and thereby secure their incomes. Those encounters often exhibit a complex combination of elements as the Travellers and the people whom they meet engage with, and sometimes disrupt, the disabling stereotypes separating itinerants from non-itinerants. Here the mediation occurs through the medium of the interaction, while the negotiation takes place if the mediation reveals an initial 'lack of fit' between participants' perceptions of themselves and others.

This section of the paper is concerned with analysing my encounters with Travellers, teachers and selected others as the site of the mediation and negotiation of elements of my subjectivity. The intention of the analysis is to contribute to recognising the researcher as a complicit component of the research project, rather than as a detached, objective observer. A related desire is to assist in understanding that research can potentially change the lives of researchers as much as those of 'the researched'. Accepting that this potential change is a two-way phenomenon is part of the process outlined above, of moving beyond essentialism via strategic essentialism and outsidedness towards an anti-essentialised creative understanding among participants in a research project.

'I've met you before'

Clearly my choice of the five countries in which to travel was not random. It was based on the network of contacts in the Traveller education community that I had already cultivated, on the assumption that the network would grow as people I already knew would introduce me to others. In most cases, however, I had met these initial contacts only once previously, when I presented at a congress organised by the European Federation for the Education of the

Children of the Occupational Travellers in Blankenberge in Belgium in November 1996. Although we had subsequently been in regular correspondence by electronic mail, it was important to re-establish points of contact with these intermediaries or 'gatekeepers'.

The contribution of these people to enabling the research project to occur was indispensable. In the early part of the research, I relied absolutely on them to identify and contact potential interviewees, to arrange meeting times and places, to introduce me and to communicate their understandings of the purposes and outcomes of my research agenda. In only one place did I initiate contact with potential participants myself during this period: my arrival in Heerlen, in the southern Netherlands, coincided with the setting up of the fairground, so I approached a fairground operator and he suggested that I return on a quiet day to conduct interviews. In Venezuela and the Netherlands, moreover, I relied on some intermediaries as translators between English and Spanish or Dutch, thereby requiring of them a more detailed knowledge of the purposes and contexts of my questions. (These translators all had professional backgrounds, but in Venezuela they were not educators and in the Netherlands they were people whom I subsequently interviewed for the project.) More generally, this point underscored that the research project inevitably became 'theirs' as much as 'mine', in that the project's aims were progressively mediated and negotiated as more and more people contributed their understandings of, and their responses to, what those aims were.

Naturally I was aware that these intermediaries had 'prepared the ground' for me, but that I needed to work hard to ensure that some kind of personal understanding could be sown on that ground. That is, I needed to change people's status from potential to actual interviewees, by convincing them of my *bona fides*.

At the same time, I was conscious of the debt of gratitude and responsibility that I owed to the intermediaries, most of whom were teachers of Travellers. It is inevitably a risk

to one's professional relationship with one's clients and colleagues to ask them to speak with someone whom one does not know very well, and I was determined not to undermine that relationship by behaving unprofessionally. I was also aware that in some cases my presence was a potential boost to the intermediary's cultural capital, in that my travelling from the other side of the world to work with that person demonstrated an international recognition of the person's activities.

My interactions with the intermediaries involved also the mediation and negotiation of elements of my subjectivity as the intermediaries and I confirmed and contested notions of who I am as a person, educator, researcher and so on. For example, my vegetarianism became known to intermediaries who invited me to meals in their homes or in restaurants. In all cases this fact was accommodated; sometimes people asked me how long I have been vegetarian and the reasons for this decision. One person asked me if I objected to her friends' and her consumption of meat in her home, to which I responded negatively. On another occasion, an intermediary informed an interviewee that I was vegetarian; subsequently she prepared an entirely vegetarian meal for herself, her husband, her friend, the intermediary and myself, even though no one else was vegetarian!

My vegetarianism is an example of how a still somewhat unusual practice, but one intimately bound with my view of myself in the world, was mediated and negotiated through my interactions with the intermediaries in my research project. This element of my subjectivity related to 'outsidedness', in that most of my dining companions were not vegetarian, and perhaps it might have promoted some kind of 'creative understanding' if some of those companions subsequently met other vegetarians or became vegetarian themselves. It would have been 'strategic essentialism' if, under different circumstances, I had felt unable to communicate my vegetarianism to my hosts.

'What's your name?'

I intend 'What's your name?' to evoke the kind of individual, personalised elements of one's subjectivity to which I alluded at the beginning of this paper, when I referred to family members and self-perceived attributes such as punctuality. I mean the fact that I often joke that my name, Patrick Danaher, 'is very Irish', which sometimes prompts a question about

my father's family's nationality. I mean the fact that my preferred self-appellation as an author is 'P. A. Danaher', a fact that has bemused a couple of my colleagues.

Another element of my subjectivity relating to naming relates to my mother's maiden name, Radcliffe-Brown, derived from her being the daughter of the elder brother of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, a British social anthropologist. This family link is a source of considerable interest – even 'ancestor worship' – to me, not least because about forty-five years after his death Radcliffe-Brown's name is still well known to students of anthropology. (This interest and pride led me to spend a day locating the cottage in Wales where he had lived after World War Two, and led my mother and me to visit his son-in-law in London.) For example, when chatting to a colleague at one of the universities that I visited during my study leave and finding that her degree was in anthropology, I mentioned where my great-uncle did fieldwork and was pleased when she deduced his name from that information. Whatever my interlocutor might have thought of his theoretical ideas, I engaged in strategic essentialism by linking myself with him by the fact of my birth.

The reason for including this discussion of names relates to my frustration that the textual practices associated with naming research participants can easily work to perpetuate essentialism rather than promote anti-essentialism. In particular, the restrictions on revealing confidential information gathered in qualitative research generally results in my colleagues and my referring to 'the show people', 'the circus people' or 'occupational Travellers'. This is precisely my objection to essentialism: that it 'freeze frames' a single element of people's subjectivity, and in the process elides all the other signifiers of identity that manifest the differences among these groups. My use of my name, and its associated references to my family, was intended as an antidote to this kind of 'freeze framing' in my contacts with Travellers and teachers, by emphasising the unique characteristics that pertain to that name and that family. Again the desire was to highlight the outsidedness of myself and the people with whom I was interacting, with a view to attaining creative understanding of one another as individuals rather than as essentialised cyphers.

<u>'Where do you come from?'</u>

As I indicated above, 'Where do you come from?' is one of the most likely questions to be asked when meeting a stranger. Certainly I asked, and was asked, this question several times as I met potential interviewees. Almost always this began with my responding, 'Australia', then 'Queensland', 'Central Queensland' or 'Rockhampton' if more detailed information were required. Most people in Scotland and England identified my Australian accent, although they detected the influence of my English-born mother in my speech. Some people in Venezuela considered me Italian, probably because most people of their acquaintance with my colouring were Italian, while some people in the Netherlands thought that I was English. The fact of my birth in South Africa, which my parents and I left when I was three months old, was a complication that I did not always mention to people.

Although I have considerable reservation about the lingering effects of nationalism in contemporary society, I unashamedly engaged in 'strategic essentialism' in relation to my nationality. Before I left Australia, I bought a selection of small gifts, all of them depicting Australian symbols. For example, I bought small, gold plated stick pins of kangaroos, koalas and maps of Australia. I gave these gifts to as many interviewees as possible, sometimes when we were introduced, at other times at the end of the interview. These small presents were received politely and in many cases with genuine pleasure, although an elderly Scottish lady was convinced that the pin was actually the microphone and warned her relatives about not getting too close to it.

At one level, the Australian souvenirs were a practical expression of my appreciation for the research participants' assistance. From another perspective, they seemed poor recompense for the very rich qualitative data provided to me by interviewees talking about their experiences and aspirations. Underlying both these feelings was my awareness that a project committed to moving away from essentialism to anti-essentialism in representing the

lives of occupational Travellers and their teachers was being facilitated by the use of essentialised symbols of my national identity. On the other hand, I was also aware that this act of strategic essentialism was intended to provide a starting point for dialogue: the presentation of a souvenir usually evoked some comment about Australia, such as its unique animals, its political structure or its hosting of the 2000 Olympic Games. In this way, I hoped that strategic essentialism could pave the way to outsidedness, by contrasting certain elements of Australia and my hosts' countries, and hence to creative understanding, by considering points of similarity as well as difference among countries. (For example, some fairground people were knowledgeable about, or sought further information about, the state of the fairground industry in Australia.) These processes coincided with, and in some ways were mirrored in, my own ambivalence about my Australian nationality as being simultaneously an outmoded political form and the intersection of the global and the local.

An interesting subset of the responses to the question 'Where do you come from?' was a particular presumption about a key element of my subjectivity. One person in England assumed that it was inevitable that Australia would become a republic and, furthermore, that as an Australian citizen I would favour such a constitutional change. These assumptions appeared to derive from Australian and British media representations of the so-called 'republican debate', which to my mind had simplified and falsified a very complex and politicised issue. A crucial element of my subjectivity, moreover, is my endorsement of constitutional monarchy, and my opposition to republicanism derives partly from my anguish that this endorsement should be constructed by others as lessening my value as an Australian citizen (Danaher, 1996).

When I explained my feelings to the Englishman, he indicated that he understood my position, and expressed his own support for a constitutional monarchy. Similarly, when I outlined The Queen's position in Australia, a young Dutch man asked, 'Why would they

want to change that system?'. At a personal level, this element of my subjectivity had made me attuned to a Scottish woman referring to The Queen and The Queen Mother holidaying at Balmoral, to an English woman referring to 'The Queen' and 'The Princes' in connection with Dartmouth College, and to a Dutch woman teasing her student's pronunciation of a particular vowel as being too formal, 'like The Queen's'.

What I am arguing here is that my position as a constitutional monarchist, a crucial element of my subjectivity, was mediated and negotiated in my interactions with other participants in my research project. I could have chosen to engage in strategic essentialism, by saying no more than that some Australians want an Australian republic. Instead I opted for outsidedness, by emphasising my difference from that position, and for inviting creative understanding whereby others might try to see why I would hold such a position even if they did not agree with it themselves. I chose to make this an aspect of my interactions with the research participants that I was happy to discuss with them if the topic arose; this happened infrequently, and no interviews were refused on the grounds that I was a rabid monarchist. Its significance for the project lies in its giving me the status of an individual personality, rather than an objective and impassive observer, and also in its making me attuned to such empirical data as the number of Dutch barges that are given names connected with the Dutch Royal Family.

<u>'What are you doing here?'</u>

Quite soon in their meetings with local people, strangers to a town are usually asked, 'What are you doing here?'. A variation on this question can be 'What do you want from me?'. The sentiment underlying the question can be expressed in various ways. On my arrival, one of my intermediaries, whom I had met at the Blankenberge congress and with whom I had maintained electronic mail contact, asked me to list the specific outcomes that I hoped to achieve by the end of my time with her. A teacher whom I visited on Monday and who had never heard of me before my telephone call to establish contact on the preceding Friday, greeted me by enquiring politely, 'It might seem rude, but...[what do you want from me?]'.

My response to this question, however it might have been framed, was to refer to my goal of extending the knowledge base of international Traveller education, and thereby

hopefully of contributing to enhanced educational provision for and understanding of occupational Travellers. This goal was evidently accepted by most interlocutors; sometimes people requested more specific information, such as how the interview data would be used and whether publications would result from the project. Occasionally people asked for an indication of precisely how long the interview would last, suggesting that they needed this information to fit it into their already busy schedules.

I was happy – indeed, duty bound – to answer these questions as comprehensively as I could, without overly influencing the responses that participants might make to my questions (although of course such influence was inevitable in a research project of this, and perhaps of any, kind). My explanation was accepted: very few people declined to take part in a formal interview (and those people chatted informally to me about the issues about which I would have asked them in the interview). Many participants opted to record their names and addresses so that I could send a summary of the project to them; others declined this option.

In some ways, my response to the question 'What are you doing here?' was a form of strategic essentialism. That is, my goal was to interview in as much detail as possible as many Travellers and teachers as I could. Consequently I 'played the card' of the academic researcher, for example by explaining that as a teacher educator I was able to acquaint prospective teachers with the distinctive educational experiences and needs of occupational Travellers. In doing so, I failed to communicate my awareness of the indirect nature of benefits arising from research (except in the case of one of my intermediaries, with whom I enjoyed several stimulating discussions about the ethical and political dilemmas of research, and with whom I believed that I passed from outsidedness to creative understanding in identifying those dilemmas). This is not to say that I do not believe that educational research is neither necessary nor beneficial; it is to point out that I chose to emphasise the

essentialised, and therefore rather stereotyped, attributes of research, rather than those that are the subject of ongoing debate within academic circles.

Three incidents, each occurring in England, mentioned here might help to dispel a conviction of my Machiavellian approach to conducting research. The first took place in one of the many 'bed and breakfasts' in which I stayed during my travels in that country. On the second morning of my stay, the landlady was talking to me and an Irish couple in the dining room during breakfast. When she asked me what I was doing in England, and I responded that I was 'researching the education of Travellers', the woman stiffened and became markedly more formal in her manner towards me. She said something to the effect that 'we don't have any more problems with them since the council moved them away', 'them' clearly referring to Gypsy Travellers. This incident occurred early during my travels, and I was able to understand it more fully later in the research when several people had separately told me about feelings of prejudice against Gypsies and other Travellers. My immediate response was to say nothing, while mentally recording this hostile attitude, but the Irish couple – clearly more attuned to the nuances of communication in this situation – politely disagreed and said that Gypsies did not necessarily deserve their bad reputation.

The second incident also occurred in England, a couple of weeks after the earlier one. I was staying in one of a national chain of hotels and walked from my room to the adjoining restaurant for dinner. I was amazed to find a hand written sign on the door barring entrance to 'Travellers'. At first I did not understand the sign's meaning, considering it strange that such a notice would be on the door of an establishment designed to accommodate such people as travelling salespersons. As enlightenment dawned, and I realised that the sign was apparently barring entrance to itinerant people who were the object of prejudice by the permanently resident community from which the sign's author had come, I became irritated and then angry on behalf of occupational Travellers. The element of my subjectivity stimulated by,

mediated through and negotiated in this incident might be called 'commitment to social justice in specific settings, not as an abstract'. Furthermore, I like to think that my emotional response reflected some level of creative understanding of Travellers evoked by a sense of outsidedness from, but also identification with, them.

The third incident occurred towards the end of my time in England, while I was interviewing in quick succession as many different teachers of Travellers as I could contact, most of whom had not met me before my arrival to conduct the interview. Before I conducted an interview with one participant, she told me that she had contacted an earlier interviewee whom I had mentioned when I had made telephone contact to arrange the interview. Curious, I asked her after the interview what the other person had said about me. She laughed and stated, 'She said, "He's okay"', meaning that I could be trusted not to abuse the process of interviewing in ways that would disadvantage the participants. I was pleased that the interviewee had used her professional network to check the credentials of a stranger who wanted to interview her. I felt that our discussion of this incident constituted some form of outsidedness (she as interviewed, I as interviewer) leading to creative understanding of each other's position in the research process.

'I want to go home'

As an occupational Traveller, I was faced with the practical exigencies and frustrations of being continually 'on the road' for five months. This meant that I had continually to seek information and make decisions about accommodation, meals, travel timetables, access to money, different currencies and the locations of laundrettes. In one case I stayed in one place for five weeks; in other cases I was in four different towns in one week. The excitement at being in a place that I had never previously visited often mingled with the boredom of

waiting to board an aircraft or a train and sometimes with concern about what I would do if all the accommodation in my new location were occupied.

From earlier trips I knew that I was prone to 'travel fatigue', when minor irritations assumed major proportions and I simply wanted to 'go home'. (For example, I sincerely hope that I never meet the tourists who observed my anti-social and teeth-grinding silence in a tourist boat on Iguassu Falls in South America, on a day when I had disrupted my routine once too often.) That element of my subjectivity that enjoys being with people, but that also craves silence and separateness, was revealed when the silence and separateness were insufficient. This took the fom, for example, of shouting uselessly at the drivers in Caracas, Venezuela who equally uselessly sounded their car horns during the frequent traffic jams in that enduringly fascinating city. It was also manifested in my yelling abuse at myself as I failed yet again to read the street signs as I drove around Edinburgh looking for a parking place.

I exercised some antidotes to this kind of travel fatigue. I was hypochondriacally aware of my health, being determined not to 'waste time' by contracting a winter cold or some other form of incapacity. I modified my initial travel plans to include using a central location as a base to visit several nearby places, rather than staying in each place in turn. I indulged my addiction to reading English murder mysteries, using the stories of mayhem in country houses and villages to transport me mentally to places where initial disorder gives way to ordered resolution (a fate that I hoped for my own situation, as I moved from town to town and from nation to nation).

These efforts to ward off travel fatigue and deal with the exigencies faced by most occupational Travellers pertain to outsidedness and creative understanding. As a visitor, I am inevitably outside the place that I am visiting, in that I am not a member of its community and I need to ask the way to the tourist information bureau, which someone inside the place

would not need to do. Yet my interactions with local people draw me into the community in multiple and disparate ways. A conversation with a business person dining at an adjoining table, for example, led to my meeting someone whose idea of commuting is to drive up and down the M1 and the M6 motorways in England, and to his meeting an Australian researcher interviewing Travellers and teachers. That chance encounter might be said to constitute creative understanding, depending on the intentions of the participants and their subsequent thoughts and actions.

My actions as an occupational Traveller for five months in five nations, therefore, reveal several elements of my subjectivity, mediated and negotiated through my travels. Those travels also constitute the site of my engagement with strategic essentialism, outsidedness and creative understanding. With regard to the interplay between essentialism and anti-essentialism; I recognise that sometimes strategically focussed essentialism can help in promoting the cause of anti-essentialism, provided that the strategic essentialism is not exercised as an end in itself.

From strategic essentialism to creative understanding in practice for educational researchers and occupational Travellers

The preceding section of this paper revealed such information about myself as I have chosen to communicate in the paper. This information includes the fact that I am a middle-aged, vegetarian constitutional monarchist who was born in South Africa and lives in a regional Australian city. In itself, this information is of no interest or relevance to anyone except me. What gives this information a broader importance is that it encapsulates elements of my subjectivity that are mediated and negotiated during my recent period of study leave, when I was enacting the role of occupational Traveller.

This broader significance lies in the fundamental question that my travels prompt: 'Why is it important to resist (and sometimes to promote strategically) essentialism?'. The preceding discussion suggests that that question can be answered in regard to two groups of people: educational researchers and occupational Travellers. Firstly, in relation to educational researchers, the importance of resisting essentialism in researching and representing learners and teachers was eloquently synthesised by bell hooks (1990):

> I am waiting for them to stop talking about the 'Other', to stop even describing how important it is to be able to speak about difference. It is not just important what we speak about, but how and why we speak. Often this speech about the 'Other' is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences, that space where our words would be if we were there. (p. 343)

In other words, essentialism is characterised by a situation in which it is natural and normal to talk about the 'Other' as though it is a permanent analytical category that is incapable of transformation into one or more multiple manifestations of equally recognised and valued difference. hooks is right to draw our attention to educational researchers' potential complicity in maintaining the 'Other''s essentialised lack of agency and identity defined in its own terms. Such researchers need to resist essentialised representations of their research participants because such representations constitute a fundamental misuse of the power that researchers have in the research relationship.

At the same time, there is value in researchers sometimes engaging in strategic essentialism in their interactions with research participants, in the course of which elements of their subjectivities are manifested. Characteristics presumed to be associated with a particular nationality, for example, can be the subject of humour and/or serious conversation that can then form the basis of progressively less essentialised discussions as researchers and research participants come to know one another as individual personalities rather than as

cyphers. My argument is that strategic essentialism can promote outsidedness and creative understanding in interactions between researchers and research participants only when the 'strategic' element is emphasised (Spivak with Rooney, 1997, p. 359): that is, a conscious acknowledgment that the essentialism is taking place in order to move towards anti-essentialism.

The second area of significance of my occupational travels lies in answering the question about the importance of resisting and sometimes strategically promoting essentialism in relation to occupational Travellers. A recurrent theme in this paper has been the need to value agency and difference – non-essentialism – in individuals and groups. This need applies as much to occupational Travellers as it does to people researching their lives and education. Thus I was aware that, just as I was struggling with elements of my subjectivity as I interacted with the Travellers, so too they were deciding how they wished to represent themselves to me. An important difference was that they were making these self-representations in the context of a formal research project involving audiotaped interviews, whereas my self-representations were largely informal and incidental (although my questions, and my responses to their answers to my questions, were also audiotaped). Another crucial difference was that they were entrusting their self-representations to me for subsequent re-representations in various textual arenas, whereas their re-representations of my self-representations were confined to their conversations with their fellow Travellers.

A key element of these processes of self-representation and re-representation is the fact that occupational Travellers routinely engage in processes of strategic essentialism, outsidedness and creative understanding, processes that for most non-itinerant people occur less frequently. Carmeli (1988) explained how circus people, for example, deliberately draw attention to and emphasise their difference before the circus comes to town, in order to maximise attendances at performances. Similarly, 'A Gypsy Traveller woman, calling to the

doors to sell lucky charms or tell fortunes, may dress and speak in a way that consciously exaggerates the stereotype she knows that others have in order to attract customers' (Kiddle, 1999, p. 127). These are examples of strategic essentialism, whereby the circus people and Gypsy Travellers consciously exploit that element of their separate subjectivities that they share: their itinerant lifestyle, and their status as 'strangers' in relation to local people.

Yet that is the beginning, not the end, of the story. Carmeli (1988) noted that circus performances function as sites for primordial identification between performers and spectators, in the form of stories with ageold themes being told and heard. For example, good clown acts are presumed to use humour to communicate fundamental truths about the human condition. This suggests that the circus people are able to carry their audiences with them on a journey from their mutual outsidedness to a shared form of creative understanding. The same intention presumably underlay the decision of the various occupational Travellers whom I interviewed in five countries to participate in those interviews: a desire to assist me in moving from our outsidedness as researcher and research participants to a creative understanding of each other's situation.

Conclusion

My argument in this paper, therefore, is that, in the cases of both educational researchers and occupational Travellers, people have diverse elements of their subjectivities mediated and negotiated through their interactions with others. In doing so, they enter multiple points along the continuum from essentialism to anti-essentialism. I have analysed these points as encompassing strategic essentialism (Spivak with Rooney, 1997) towards the essentialist pole, and outsidedness and creative understanding (Bakhtin, 1986) towards the anti-essentialist pole.

The fact that both educational researchers and occupational Travellers engage in these practices suggests two further implications of my argument. Firstly, these two groups, analytically opposed according to the essentialist criterion of residence, actually have a great deal in common, which reinforces the value and necessity of emphasising anti-essentialist difference. Secondly, the ongoing need of these two groups to shift from essentialism to anti-essentialism and back again vividly illustrates the enduring and pervasive influence of essentialist thinking and practices on our daily lives.

Nicholson (1997) synthesised these two implications when she outlined the intended outcomes of eschewing essentialism in representations of women:

> Thus, as we reject essentialist notions of 'woman,' so must we also reject essentialist notions of nation, culture, etc. This leads us not to a place where we have nothing to say, but to a multitude of places where we have much to say. It is only by recognizing the specificity of the places from which we speak and by creating the means through which we all are able to speak that we can begin to engage in true dialogue with each other. (p. 321)

For me, 'the means through which we all are able to speak', and in the process to 'reject essentialist notions' of all social constructs, lie in productive and well-intentioned interactions among strategic essentialism, outsidedness and creative understanding. This is as true for educational researchers such as myself as it is for occupational Travellers, one kind of which I became during my study leave. This is also the wider significance of my reflections on my interviewees, family and money matters in the Dutch city of Amersfoort ten days before my fortieth birthday with which I began this paper: these are elements of my subjectivity mediated and negotiated through my efforts to travel from strategic essentialism to creative understanding.

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