

CHRISTINE BELL

13. VISIBLE WOMEN

Tales of Age, Gender and In/visibility ... Poetic Representation Reveals

the process of self-construction reveals
the reflexive basis of self-knowledge
the inconsistencies and contradictions
of a life spoken of as a meaningful whole ...
(Richardson, 1997, p. 143)

WHAT IS POETIC INQUIRY?

Monica Prendergast (2009) has produced a list ... *29 Ways of Looking at Poetry as Qualitative Research*, rather like a narrative poem. No. XV says it is “most commonly seen as poetic transcription and representation of participant data.” My favourite is:

XIX: Poetic inquiry is a way of knowing through poetic language and devices; metaphor, lyric, rhythm, imagery, emotion, attention, wide-awakeness, opening to the world, self-revelation.

After spending 18 months gathering women’s stories for my doctoral dissertation (Bell, 2010), I could not think of a more appropriate way to allow their voices to come across, to convey the openness and honesty my collaborators had shown me. My ‘participant data’ was all in the form of an exchange of letters via email, mostly individually, between me and the seven women who had enthusiastically accepted my invitation to collaborate in what I called “*an ongoing conversation*”—an exploration of ourselves and our lives through remembering where we have been alongside our current experiences of becoming older. Drawing strongly on feminist and poststructuralist ideas around research conversations rather than interviews (see Speedy, 2007), my methodology (if it could be called that) involved prompting or reflective questions, offering what I hoped were appropriate and relevant stories about myself and generally initiating a two-way narrative dialogue with each woman, including inviting them to ask questions back.

This all resulted in a very large folder of letters—a wealth of stories, questions and (sometimes) answers, musings, ideas, family histories. I was in love with my research, enjoying hugely both the writing and receiving of letters. But as the folder grew and the time came to bring our correspondence to an end, I felt both excitement and also a sense of being slightly overwhelmed. How could I possibly

no-one taking any notice of me
I could slither away

It is usually
my family of origin
that causes me problems
about being grown up
which is normal I guess

IN SEARCH OF THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

There are many anecdotal stories about older women becoming invisible—sometimes based on the experiences of well-known and apparently very visible women. I am not happy with the idea of quietly disappearing as I move from the world of relatively visible, self-employed paid work into a way of living that is very different but potentially at least as interesting—if considerably poorer financially.

“We study things that trouble or intrigue us, beginning from our own subjective standpoints” (Hertz, 1997, p. xvii). My doctoral inquiry was initially motivated by personal indignation at the apparent acceptance that we older women have become ‘The Invisibles.’ Nobody sees us any more—or so we are told. My own experience, and that of other older women I know, does not support this hypothesis and I decided to try and find out what was going on.

FIRST LETTER FROM PAT

I feel older—and don’t feel older!
Don’t feel any different
most of the time
from when I was younger
it seems irrelevant

Never thought
about being ‘visible’
or ‘invisible’
in relation to myself
I’m not given to analyzing myself

I don’t need
a lot of positive feedback
in order to function

It’s my opinion that is important to me
Perhaps being an only child
has made me self reliant

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I like to be in control

Happy to be anonymous
when I choose

which is why I like living in a city

This point in my life
working only the hours I want
my brain still functioning
enough good friends
a satisfying social life
and a strong relationship
with S [partner] and A [older son]

I can only say

I don't feel invisible in any way

but realise
I'm in a fortunate position
being financially independent
and hope I don't end up
like one in five female pensioners
living below the poverty line

Asked friends of a similar age
if they felt invisible
their first reaction was 'yes'
but when we talked about it
they were missing
the admiring male glances

Perhaps it's a question of self-esteem?

I feel in control of my life
and able to do what I like
when I like

I always have a new project

We lead such privileged lives
in the western world

Don't find the idea of death distressing
but so many of my family died
without doing most of the things
they really wanted to
that I made a list of things to do

before dying
*I've done them all
and have a sense of completion*

Now fascinated and curious
about where mankind came from
and where it is heading
More chance to use my brain
than when younger and busy with 'life'

No problem now saying 'no'

The Egyptology course
just completed
was pure delight

I think my next career move
will be to become a practising Hedonist!
I've worked all my life
and can now be selfish and indulge myself
without feeling guilty
as long as I'm not a burden to anyone

*I feel really fortunate
to still be alive and healthy*

Searching through the literature, I did not initially discover much in the way of theory or academic texts about the mythical 'Invisible Woman.' Once started on my inquiry, however, I began to pick up references almost every day in newspapers, journals, on radio and television, in films and books, on the internet—almost all containing the words 'old(er)' and 'invisible women.'

The majority of the stories from women, whether well-known names or not, were negative ones. The more I read and watched and listened, the more I heard an underlying story about the importance of appearance and being 'noticed' (or not) by men. One online journalist seemed to sum this up, citing an address at a women's conference as "my introduction to the concept of 'the invisible woman,' the failure of the ageing woman to so easily capture the attention of men" (Stensrude, 1995, p. 1). The lack of a certain kind of interest from men seemed to be very painful for many women—however unpleasant and intrusive this attention can often be for many younger women. And where, I wondered, were the visible/invisible stories from women who are not—and often never have been—interested in sexual attention from men?

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FIRST LETTER FROM JANE

Just coming up to my 60th birthday
and life is great
Better than it's ever been
A clear sense of 'this is who I am'

N and I got 'married' last September
One is not meant to use that term
but for me that's what we did
and I refer to N as my wife

Our lives revolve
around friends in the UK and US
all people who accept us as a partnership

HUGE differences in my life now
Since retiring 12 years ago
creativity has been an important aspect
I opened to another part of me
my right brain
which had been rather under-used
Now a fabric artist
Fabric and colour really excite me
an enormous change from my career
in nursing and midwifery

I loved the job I had
AND it was the most demanding ever
Retiring early
felt like the end of the world
at the time

The stress was a contributory factor
to my intractable back condition
Experienced a lot of anger
about how this was dealt with
Physical pain was part of my life
until having major reconstructive surgery
after retiring

Also gifted myself with retreat time
looking at making changes
to conditioning from a childhood background
of emotional and physical abuse
Witness to extreme parental violence

Always aware of feeling more comfortable
with women
but did not come to terms with my sexuality
until I was 50 years old

Now feel freer than I ever have

FINDING MY COLLABORATORS

For my own research, I decided to initiate an ongoing correspondence with some 'older women' who were interested in exploring their experiences and reflections around becoming older, including the issues of visibility/invisibility. Bearing in mind Arthur Bochner's thoughts on criteria being "ultimately and inextricably tied to our values and our subjectivities" (2000, p. 266), I wrote myself some helpful hints in my research journal about how to choose my collaborators. My 'list' included: known to me but not to each other; over 50 (at least); a range of experiences and backgrounds, including having lived through personal and other difficulties; an ability to reflect on and willingness to write about themselves; preferably different enough from me, in thinking and telling, to make it interesting and challenging for us. I also intended to be one of my own respondents; to actively take part in the journey of exploration, using and sharing my own experience alongside theirs, whilst both asking and inviting questions.

FIRST LETTER FROM ALISON

I found your questions helpful
and welcome the opportunity
to reflect on my life now
and where it might be going

How did I get to be 64?
I don't feel it
though how is one supposed to feel?

Can't see myself living here
as a 'really old' woman
Struggle to feel at ease
in an often noisy
litter-strewn community
where I sometimes feel invisible

Just finished writing a book
and wondering what to do next
Not yet ready to give up paid work

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Three words come to mind
transitional ... uncertain ... unclear

Going to India
on a Buddhist pilgrimage
with an open mind
to see what comes up
Maybe this will be a transition?

Transition seems to have been
a constant in the last few years

A brain haemorrhage
followed by a second one
where I was close to death
survived knowing my life had to change

Couldn't go on being work ... work ... work

Not comfortable
living with the feeling
life is constantly changing

Impermanence is central to Buddhism

*Family are important
but in a 'difficult' way*

My sister took her own life
My parents died
My brother recently had a stroke
left his wife
and is very dependent on me

Strong bonds with close friends
some known for over 50 years
with a shared past
Despite different values
when we meet
there is much laughter and joy

Jamyang Buddhist Centre
singing in a choir
walking seriously
resting—reading—lounging in bed

an annual visit to Cortijo Romero
All important things in my life

My home and garden
a refuge and sanctuary
offering peace and silence
I find noise difficult now

Try to be compassionate
towards my mind
when it doesn't work as well
as it used to
less at the mercy of my feelings

Currently struggle
with what clothes to wear
and perhaps how visible or not
I want to be

Proud of my new book
but wary of looking for glory
not very Buddhist!

I contacted around a dozen women, in and outside the UK—known over the years through work, educational programmes, campaigning activities and other contacts—who fitted my personal criteria. They were all fascinated by the idea of this exploration, though nearly half were unable to take on a commitment to a long-term correspondence.

With the seven who became my collaborators (two living in the USA), we agreed an open-ended, ongoing one-to-one email correspondence based loosely on their experiences of being/becoming 'older women' (whatever that might mean to them), with occasional 'group' email contact. Any one of them could withdraw at any stage, for whatever reason (though none of them did)—and all could, of course, say when they had gone as far as they wished in either detail or length of correspondence.

FIRST LETTER FROM SARA

It feels great to be this age
So much more free than I've ever been
Can really come and go as I please

Always set my own goals
With R at sea so much
had to make my own decisions

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about everything

One thing that is weird ...
sometimes a person
usually younger
will walk towards me
*and look right through me
as if I'm not there!*

Nice to have lots of family
in one's life
but sometimes also nice
not to be responsible for them all

I really like being a great-grandmother
Involves holding and admiring babies
Being pleased with lop-sided cup cakes
and scribbly drawings
No work involved ... lovely!

Feel like escaping sometimes
away from all responsibilities
but ... there are only so many days
in a lifetime
and I don't want to waste any of them
Too many things I want to do yet

I like doing Renaissance Festivals
such an interesting group of people
artizans and entertainers
choosing to live 'under the radar'

Enjoy being 'mother hen'
to some of the very young women
living on their own
A shoulder to lean on
or a bit of comforting
People were quick to say
I was much too young to marry at 17
After 50 years
guess I knew what I was doing!

When I first came to America
was pretty lost and scared
and had to work things out for myself

Being pregnant put a stop to getting a job
and didn't have many qualifications

I've always sewed
Nanna had been a dressmaker
and taught me when I was 5
Made all my own clothes
then clothes for the children
and toys as they grew up

The local historical society
asked me to make period costume dolls
Started selling them at craft shows
and ventured out more and more
as the kids needed me less
and R retired

It was good to branch out a bit
I felt smothered much of the time
as Mother became ill
and very dependent on me

I'm happy making dolls
very rewarding
inventing and creating new ones
and running my little shops
with some of the family involved

Really fun to be enjoying
a grown-up relationship with the children
there's companionship
not conflict
in how we work together

NOT BEING OBJECTIVE

The criteria in my research proposal included “allowing subjectivity and self-indulgence; i.e. giving weight to my own and other women’s individual experiences through telling our stories.” I am particularly interested in how our own stories are constructed through the multitude of subjective ways in which we all ‘know’ and shape our knowledge. Rosi Braidotti, writing about ‘non-unitary subjectivity,’ says that for her it means “a nomadic, dispersed, fragmented vision, which is nonetheless functional, coherent and accountable, mostly because it is embedded and embodied” (2006, p. 4).

CHRISTINE BELL

Language is how social organization and power
are defined and contested
and the place where our sense of self
our subjectivity, is constructed.
(Richardson, 1997, p. 89)

It seems to me that claiming subjectivity—rather than pretending to be objective—could be seen as an essential to good research. It is simply making visible what is actually going on. And if including oneself can become overly self-indulgent, then it must be seen as part of the writerly task not to let this happen – to remember Laurel Richardson’s strictures that “writing matters” (1997, p. 87) and we must not be boring if we want to be read. In musing on her role as a woman in a male academic world, she states simply: “I am a woman writing” and goes on to tell how she learned to construct a way of writing differently: “contextualizing and personalizing ... re-visioning my life and work (1997, pp. 3-4).

FIRST LETTER FROM CINDY

Excited about being
in the old lady category!
Permission to be snippy

It’s funny being grey
Don’t feel old very often
though folks sometimes ask
Are these your grandchildren?

Always told I look young for my age
Maybe it’s not true any more
Mentally don’t feel any different
except perhaps a bit wiser
Physically there are a few clues

Still like to play and be silly
Often enjoy M’s [partner] family
more than mine
Her mom’s 90th birthday
celebrated with all the family and friends
They sure know how to throw a party!

Not sure the girls get the idea
of extended family

Moved in with Nonna
so she won’t be lonely
Watching M reconnect

with childhood neighbourhood
Can't imagine those kind of roots

We moved so often
when I was a child
The oldest of five
and feel the responsibility at times
My parents are musicians
We seem to get along fine
as long as I'm 3000 miles away
Very Southern
polite
Conservative
racist
religious
Always wanted to be a parent
Had a complete hysterectomy
aged thirty

Have enjoyed young people
for as long as I can remember
an ability to connect
in a way many other adults cannot
believe it is my love of life

Come from a line of fisher people
Grandmother would take me deep sea fishing
Guess you could say
I'm a beach bum
M and I plan to spend
our golden years
looking for world's most perfect beach

Looking forward to our 18th anniversary
We make a good team
and cherish each other
It's the safest place I've ever found

After my dad died
and my mom remarried
the rules kept changing
my step dad
would not let us do anything
other than go to church on Sundays

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How did you grow your back bone?

This confident loud person
is the opposite of what the
southern young lady
is supposed to be

This idea of women as visible
My feminist heart starts beating faster
just thinking about
how objectified women are
every day

THE LIVING, BREATHING, SPEAKING BEING

In her work on feminist methodology and narrative interpretation, Leslie Bloom engages with “theories of the speaking subject whose individuality and self-awareness or subjectivity is multiple, conflicted, complex, fragmented and in constant flux” (1998, p. 2).

Julia Kristeva talks of the way language changes when it is spoken by what she calls the “living, breathing, speaking being” (in McAfee, 2004, p. 6). She suggests that it is possible to transform the structure of literary representation: “... a revolution in poetic language is analogous to a political revolution” (in Oliver, 2002, p. 24).

Feminist researchers, says Jane Speedy,

openly promote an interest in giving ‘voice’ to a range of women’s experiences ... not just in terms of ... storytelling, but also in terms of making the personal (or private) political” (2007, p. 122).

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Poetic inquiry is called by a multiplicity of names in social science but is always interested in expressing human experience, whether that of Self or Other or both.

(Prendergast, 2009)

FIRST LETTER FROM MARIE

Resident in Georgian almshouses
close to the city of Bath
with twenty five ladies
from 60 to 88

Visible behaviour
is not actively encouraged

We are viewed as an entity
Expectations are not greatly different

from inception over 150 years ago

Our chaplain is 83
He and the handyman
are the only male presence
entitled to regular visits
and unquestioned access to our homes
We are the 'Partis ladies'
we get invited in groups
to local events

*Most of the time
I feel institutionalised*

Our only constant link
is that we are no longer
or never have been
married
paradoxically a key concept
in the loss of perceived individuality

As a single woman
the proximity of family
was appealing
in my decision to move
*offering a semblance of family unity
and freedom in retirement*

The past year
was not a time for complacency
S my daughter-in-law
diagnosed with advanced lung cancer
*Within hours
the ground had shifted*

S talks of her hopes and fears
for her children
and answers their questions
as best she can
They are laying down memories
and building blocks

I understand the role
she wants me to play
should I outlive her

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Approaching 70
I am not sure if I am capable

Sometimes ashamed
of the despair I feel
thinking of the impact
of the loss on her young children

Where it matters
I am visible
My presence makes a difference
to these four lives

I no longer turn heads
but on a good day
feel I have a voice
the most enduring quality of all

We have tales to tell that may well include loss of various kinds as we get older, but are about much more than that. Gathering these stories, triggering memories, sharing our experiences, became a personal, philosophical and political journey in different ways for all of us.

Julia Kristeva speaks of the “need to find a discourse that can answer the question: ‘who are you?’” and the “memory that underlies narrative” (2001, pp. 15, 17). Whilst believing that our correspondence did not bear much resemblance to old patterns of sociological interviewing, I was aware that there were, of course, power imbalances implicit in the fact that the ‘conversations’ were initiated by me and the focus of the work was ultimately my dissertation, written and/or put together by me.

In using poetic representation, I hoped to go some way towards mitigating this power imbalance through allowing other women’s voices to be heard and their stories told in their own words rather than through my analysis and interpretation. And to end on what seems an appropriately self-indulgent note, it became a labour of love (as well as sometimes quite painful) to ‘create’ these poems from the stories given me so generously. Something mysterious and transformational can happen when we take the poetic path—how the words look on the page, the pattern created, the way in which the words sing in our ear—understanding something differently.

When I begin to write,
it always starts from something unexplained,
mysterious and concrete ...
It begins to search in me.
And this question should be philosophical;
but for me, right away it takes the poetic path.

That is to say
 that it goes through scenes, moments, illustrations
 lived by myself or by others,
 and like all that belongs to the current of life,
 it crosses very many zones of our histories.
 I seize these moments still trembling,
 moist, creased, disfigured, stammering.
 (Cixous, in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 43)

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