

The Lacemakers

Remembering Women's Lives

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Certificate of Originality

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



Phoenix de Carteret

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This thesis is lovingly dedicated to Misty, my companion of thirteen years,
and to all women who, like me, have also strained against the lead.



Abstract

In this thesis I explored stories women told about their own lives and identified themes related to dominant discourses that were threaded in the stories. I looked at the linked sites of social reproduction, the family and social class, as analytical frameworks of gender construction, through the lens of feminist poststructural theory. Data was obtained using collective biography and a storytelling method was also used to present findings. Taking the view that the researcher is inextricably embedded in the research I have included autobiographical stories about experiences that impacted on this work, motivated my approach or were responses to the participants' experiences and stories. This autobiographical material is found in journal, story, poetry and theoretical writing.

Two series of Lifestory Workshops were central to the data collection for the research that sought to reveal how women's lives are shaped by dominant discourses of class and gender, and to consider the relationship between women's untold stories and the maintenance of the status quo. Personal experiences and the retelling in stories were found to be shaped by longstanding patriarchal myths that elide women's subordination by social and economic structures and inhibit affirmative connections between women by dissociating women from each other and from the exploration of woman-defined Selves. Central to this patriarchal mythmaking is the resilience of affective ties that women struggle to reconcile with personal fulfilment and also with responsibility for the care of others that is often linked with a presumed predisposition to nurture on account of their sex.

This thesis demonstrates that storytelling has the capacity to reveal the work of ideology in shaping personal experience. Stories reproduced in the thesis demonstrate engagement with class and gender through multiple and complex discourses that intersect with personal storylines and are embodied, effectively structuring the self in relation to social hierarchies. Collective biography was found to be a useful strategy to facilitate reflexivity, suggesting its potential beyond the more common use as a collaborative research method. Challenging the listening hierarchy, by giving value to fragments of memory and body knowing, revealed life story work as a valuable feminist tool.



Morgan:

The men were the most important when I was born in 1952. You grew up knowing they deserved the choicest portions of the meal, and they were served first. You just accepted that women went without if there wasn't enough to go round. You didn't feel cheated or resentful because that's just how it was. It was all you knew. You stopped what you were doing if it wasn't convenient for the men, and you always made sure they didn't have to wait, not for meals, not for anything. That's how it was. You learnt acceptance and you never questioned the men. Then when boyfriends became men and the girl became a woman, you knew how to be. No one had to tell you your place. You just knew the men were the most important.