

**“From her side of the gossamer wall(s)”:  
Reflexivity and relational knowing**

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Andrea Doucet

**Abstract:**

Drawing on a provocative metaphor from an award-winning novel, this article argues that reflexivity can be conceived as three *gossamer walls* through which researchers construct knowledge from within three sets of relationships, including relations with: oneself (and the ghosts that haunt us); with research participants; and with one’s readers, audiences, and epistemological communities. On the other side of a *first* gossamer wall are relations with our many selves as well as with ‘ghosts’, deeply buried across time and space, that may come back to haunt us when we are physically and emotionally invested in our research. Behind a *second* gossamer wall are the multi-layered relations between researchers and research respondents, relationships that can involve oral, audible, physical, emotional, textual, embodied, as well as shifting theoretical and epistemological dimensions. Finally, a *third* gossamer wall lies between ourselves and our readers and audiences as well as the epistemological or epistemic communities wherein our work is located, read, reviewed, and received. Rooted in an ethnography of Canadian primary caregiving fathers, the article contributes to current discussions of reflexivity in qualitative research practice by expanding dominant understandings of reflexivity as a self-centered exercise towards a consideration of *other* critical relationships that are part of how we come to know and write about others. The metaphor of gossamer walls, combining the sheerness of gossamer and the solidity of walls, provides for creative ways of conceptualizing reflexivity in temporal and spatial terms as well as to consider the constantly shifting degrees of transparency and obscurity, connection and separation that recur in the multiple relations that constitute reflexive research and knowing.

**Key words:**

Reflexivity, epistemological communities, epistemic communities, epistemology of reception, ghosts, gossamer, fathering.

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**“FROM HER SIDE OF THE GOSSAMER WALL(S)”:  
REFLEXIVITY AND RELATIONAL KNOWING**

**Introduction**

*Gossamer (adj): Sheer, light, delicate, or tenuous.*

*“Awake at night, I’d hear her breathing or singing next to me in the dark, half comforted, half terrified that my ear was pressed against the wall between the living and the dead, that the vibrating membrane between them was so fragile. I felt her presence everywhere, in daylight, in rooms I knew weren’t empty ... Watching with curiosity and sympathy from her side of the gossamer wall”*  
(Michaels 1996. p. 31)

I begin this article with an evocative image of gossamer wall(s) from Anne Michaels’ award-winning *Fugitive Pieces*. This novel centers on the plight of a young Jewish-Polish boy who, at the age of seven, is subject to a series of tragic events which include the murder of his parents and the apparent abduction of his older sister Bella by the Nazis. The book is framed by the haunting relationship between Jakob and the ghost of his sister Bella who is always present and painfully absent throughout the days of Jakob’s life. This sense of separation and connection is beautifully captured in the image of a *gossamer wall* as a metaphor for the delicate space between Jakob and his lost sister. With only a “vibrating membrane between them (that) was so fragile”, Jakob is never quite sure which thoughts and experiences are his and which are Bella’s.

Ghosts also appear sparsely, but powerfully, in social science work. Avery Gordon, for example, pays particular attention to ghosts and how they can haunt us as researchers. Gordon contends that when we are haunted by a memory or a figure from our past, the sudden presence of these ghosts can have an impact on the stories we tell. In her words, this occurs “when we admit the ghost – that special instance of the merging of the visible and invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present – into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world” (Gordon 1996, p. 24). In a similar manner, Martha McMahan reflects on how ghosts from her childhood, especially her Irish aunts, came to haunt her and to dramatically influence her interpretation of her interviews with Canadian mothers. McMahan confesses that “shadow others are present in our stories”, they “can include characters from the researcher’s past”, and they “draw us into the research in unforeseen and disturbing ways” (McMahan 1996, pp. 320-321; see also McMahan 1995).

These illusive images of ‘ghosts’ or ‘shadow others’ may also help to widen out current discussions of reflexivity within social research. Influenced by feminist postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial sensibilities, the concept of reflexivity has become a burgeoning field within the theory and practice of research (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Hertz 1997; Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). This article begins with a wide and ‘robust’ conception of reflexivity (Harding 1993) that includes reflecting upon the personal, political, intellectual, and theoretical

autobiographies of ourselves as researchers throughout all stages of research; it also seeks to widen dominant understandings of reflexivity from a self-centered exercise to consider *other* critical relationships that can matter in how we come to know and write about others. Specifically, I argue that Anne Michael's metaphor of *gossamer wall(s)* is a useful one for theorizing the diverse sets of reflexive relationships that occur throughout the process of conducting, writing, and reflecting back on one's research. These three gossamer walls, which illustrate the thin and tenuous lines that exist in research relationships include relations between: researcher and self (including the ghosts that haunt us), researcher and respondents, and researchers and their readers/audiences. Each of these is discussed below through a discussion of my role as a reflexive researcher working through these three gossamer walls in an ethnography of fathering conducted between 2000-2004 with over 100 Canadian primary caregiving fathers.

### **Gossamer wall between researcher and 'shadow others'/ghosts**

Most researchers turn inwards to their self/selves when they engage in reflexive thinking. Yet, as Amanda Coffey has argued (1999, p. 133), "(t)he boundaries between self indulgence and reflexivity are fragile and blurred" so that there "will always be the question of how much of ourselves to reveal". There are indeed many 'confessional tales' (Van Maanen 1988) that a researcher could proffer when they think about why and how they take on particular research projects. Within the potentially large webs of complex personal, political, theoretical and institutional rationales for particular research agendas, perhaps the most important consideration, when we consider the relationship between our projects and our *selves*, is to reflect on and dissect the personal or political *motivations* that matter in how we come to our research topics. Moreover, it is important to be open to hidden motives that may emerge unexpectedly while we are in the process of undertaking particular qualitative or ethnographic research projects.

When I began a study of primary caregiving fathers in 2000, the motivation for undertaking this research seemed clear to me. My interest was explicit and often articulated since many of the fathers that I interviewed asked me how it was that I – as a woman, as a mother – came to be interested in studying men's lives. I told a simple story. The initial impulse came out of my own first experiences of parenting and my observations of my husband as he took on the primary care of our eldest daughter at varied points in her early years. His recounting of the excruciatingly painful details of sitting sidelined in a 'moms and tots' group in Cambridge England over several cold winter months awakened my curiosity in the lives of fathers who challenge conventional gender norms. As my research progressed, however, I became increasingly aware of the many autobiographical 'ghosts' on the other side of this first *gossamer wall* between my researcher self and my other selves.

Throughout the process of interviewing over 100 fathers and especially while deep into the process of analyzing those narratives, I entered the stage of physical and emotional exhaustion that most qualitative researchers come to know well (see Coffey 1999; Kleinman and Copp 1995). It was here that the words of fathers filled my waking and sleeping hours and rolled through my conscious and unconscious mind. Their faces

and their fathering stories mixed inextricably with the ghosts of fathers I had known throughout my life, particularly in the seventeen years when I was growing up in a small town on the eastern coast of Canada. After months of in-depth analysis, I awoke one night from a dream and suddenly remembered a long-forgotten memory. I remembered my childhood home, a large wooden house on the Baie de Chaleur, a small bay that empties into the Atlantic Ocean. It was also the house in which both my grandfather and father grew up. It sat on Main Street in the working-class, Catholic side of town, just down the street from the pulp and paper mill where my father worked long shifts as a labourer for most of his working life. As a child, I would often look out from the verandah of my house, and constantly observe what my mother called ‘the comings and goings’ of an up and down duplex across the street that belonged to Ozzie Aubie, a lobster fisherman<sup>1</sup>. In the upstairs apartment of that duplex was a family led by my mother’s second cousin, Penny Melanson, and her five daughters. The story was that her husband had just packed up and left one day, leaving Penny to scrape together a living for her daughters. The people in the town talked. More specifically, my grandmother, my mother, and my aunts talked. Penny was pitied for not having a man to provide a family wage. Yet, as they sat on our front verandah drinking coffee, smoking Du Maurier cigarettes, and looking across the street to Penny’s house, they did acknowledge that Penny was a good mother. Her children were lacking nothing.

Meanwhile, in the downstairs apartment of this duplex was a family of four – Ozzie Aubie and his three sons, Billy, Johnny, and Harry. Other than the infamous story of Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau taking on custody of his three sons, we had never seen a family living in a house without a mother. Again, my grandmother, my mother, and my aunts talked. “Where was their mother? How could she leave? Those poor Aubie boys. How would they ever turn out without a mother to raise them?” Indeed, everything that went wrong with Billy, who was in my grade at school, was blamed on the stain of being a mother-less boy. In Grade Two when he called me names, in Grade Three when he chased me home from school lifting up my skirt, in Grade Four when he threw my newly knitted winter hat so high into our maple tree that it could never be recovered – each of these incidents was met with the same lamenting sigh and response from my mother and my aunts. “Well, what do you expect? He has no mother”.

I grew up with the mystery of Billy’s missing mother and the wonder of how it was that the town judged the motherless family of Ozzie Aubie that lived downstairs, yet embraced Penny Melanson’s fatherless family living upstairs. From my nighttime dream of Ozzie Aubie and his three sons, I realized that these ghosts had likely always been there, harboring in me a deep personal and academic curiosity about the relation between a primary caregiving father and the community within which he lives and is judged.

Four key points emerge from this discussion of ghostly memories. First, we may not always fully know what motivates our research; hidden motives can emerge on the backs of haunting ghosts as our research progresses and through the flow of being emotionally and physically invested in our fieldwork. I became particularly moved and emotionally drained by the stories of fathers who had reluctantly or sadly divorced from their wives, had a child with physical or developmental difficulties, or had experienced a

child's death. Being moved by these stories brought me back to earlier moments and memories of empathy for fathers and specifically to the shores of my childhood town and to the ghost of Ozzie Aubie and his three sons. Remembering them formed part of the "complex contexts and locationally variable aspects of cognitive practice" which are usually "excluded from epistemological analysis" (Code 1993, p. 20; see also Arendell 1997).

Second, this first gossamer wall is between the differing versions of ourselves, evolving through time, and the possible ghosts or 'shadow others' that may come to visit us. It may be that in researching topics which are part of our taken-for-granted realities – such as the study of families or intimate relations – we more readily experience some version of haunting because latent or lost memories can enter in through this gossamer wall. This works against logically or quickly trying to name or appreciate our reflexive positioning in a particular project. As Daphne Patai has astutely cautioned (1991, p. 149), this implies moving beyond a commonly employed reflexive practice where our social locations are "deployed as badges". Coffey reminds us (1993, p. 27) "(e)thnography is an act of memory" while Gordon notes that being haunted constitutes an entirely different kind of knowing. She writes (1996, p. 8): "Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition."

A third point about this gossamer wall is that these ghosts awakened in me a sympathetic openness to the lives of fathers who, by choice or fate, found themselves as primary caregivers of children. As Gordon maintains, being haunted by others means coming to terms with one's involvement in a buried or forgotten history and the necessity of being led 'somewhere or elsewhere' (1986, p. 205) and how "when it appears to you, the ghost will inaugurate the necessity of doing something about it" (1986, p. 206). I did begin my research wanting to do 'something about it' through being a generous narrator of fathers' stories. Nevertheless, as discussed in the last section of this article, this disposition gradually changed to one of political and strategic caution through my awareness of a critical relationship with my readers/audiences.

Finally, in recognizing how my current research interest in fathering is deeply rooted in my past experiences, it is also important to recognize that over time, different memories, alternate ghosts, and differing versions of our selves can emerge to ultimately alter the stories we tell and the knowledges we create. In this vein, reflexivity must incorporate the passage of time, which will continually mediate our relationship to a particular research topic. As detailed in Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p. 425):

"No matter how aware and reflexive we try to be, as Grosz (1995, p. 13) points out, 'the author's intentions, emotions, psyche, and interiority are not only inaccessible to readers, they are likely to be inaccessible to the author herself'. There may be limits to reflexivity, and to the extent to which we can be aware of the influences on our research both at the time of conducting it and in the years that follow. It may be more useful to think in terms of 'degrees of reflexivity', with some influences being easier to identify and articulate at the time of our work while others may take time, distance and detachment from the research".

## Gossamer wall between researcher and researched

A second thin gossamer wall exists between a researcher and their research subjects. Much like the image invoked by Anne Michaels in *Fugitive Pieces*, the research respondent, like the ghost of Bella, can be viewed as “watching with curiosity (perhaps sympathy) from her side of the gossamer wall”. This image of research respondents looking back through a gossamer wall at the researcher is a powerful one that has been called up by several researchers who remind us of the “respondents’ integrity” and how “a researcher should imagine that she will be sitting beside her respondents as they read what is written about them” (Andrews 1991, p. 49).

In my research with fathers, this process took place through a lengthy and multi-faceted process of transcript analysis. This began with my research assistants carrying out in-depth readings of verbatim interview transcripts on their own and then in conjunction with me, utilizing an in-depth approach to transcript analysis called the Listening Guide (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Gilligan et al. 2005; Mauthner and Doucet 1998, 2003)<sup>2</sup>. At the core of the Listening Guide are the interchangeable words of *listening* and *reading* so that one reads interview transcripts as though they were still listening to the person in the interview setting. Further, it employs multiple and successive ‘readings’ of interview transcripts “each time listening in a different way” (Brown 1998, p. 33). While I utilized four readings in my work on fathers, I focus here only on the first reading, which is a reading for the central story line, as narrated by a research subject or the story’s central character or protagonist, combined with a reader-response reflexive strategy<sup>3</sup>.

My first reading of fathers’ interview transcripts began with a reading for plot or narrative. Combining “the ‘basic grounded theory question’ which is ‘what is happening here?’” (Charmaz 2006, p.168; see also Glaser 1978) with elements from narrative analysis (Reismann 1993; Elliott 2005), I read carefully through a selection of 25 interview transcripts using a coloured pencil to highlight recurring words, themes, events, protagonists, the central plot, subplots, and key characters. As a woman working with men’s stories, I was quite concerned to reflect on my responses to the narratives. Thus, even more compelling than the reading for the story line was the ‘reader-response’ element in that I read myself in the text, watching for how I was responding to being back in the research relationship with fathers and how this was occurring, initially at a biographical and emotional level, and then through the tracing of my theoretical responses. As well described by Susan Krieger (1985, 320), this was a process of “reengag(ing) with my data at the same time as ‘separating out’ a sense of myself”.

Providing a way of maintaining a continuing relationship with research subjects as well as a concrete way of ‘doing reflexivity’, the Listening Guide suggests the utilization of a ‘worksheet’ technique for this reading wherein the respondent’s words are laid out in one column and the researcher’s reactions and interpretations are laid out in an adjacent column (Gilligan et al. 1990; Brown and Gilligan 1992; see also Norum 2000). This allows the researcher to examine how and where some of her own assumptions and views - whether personal, political or theoretical - might affect her interpretation of the

respondent's words, or how she later writes about the person. This serves as one strategy for dealing with the "great danger" of "see(ing) others as we know ourselves" (Krieger 1985, p. 320).

I conducted this and all of the readings of transcripts both alone as well as in small groups. Working with other colleagues highlighted the fact 'that people have more than one way to tell a story and see a situation through different lenses and in different lights' (Gilligan et. al.1990, p. 95). In attempting to understand and interpret the narratives of the fathers that I interviewed, it became clear that several biographical factors seemed to matter in how I maintained relationships with the fathers who participated in my study. Specifically, I drew on my reflexive positioning as a white middle class woman who was raised in a working class family, my memories of growing up in a household with three brothers, and my more recent parenting knowledge. Moreover, I felt myself drawn into understanding and theorizing the narratives of fathers from difficult working class backgrounds. My memories of my own childhood house on Main Street – on the working class, Catholic side of town, near the paper mill and the 'low rental' houses – translated into my identification with narratives from low-income backgrounds or ones from small towns where tolerance for diversity was largely stifled. While I read such narratives with tacit understanding as they brought me back to a place of familiar stories and rhythms, I was also aware that I was located neither as an insider nor as an outsider (see Narayan 1993; Olesen 1998; Stanley 1994; Zavella 1993).

In the case of less familiar stories, I widened my interpretive community and brought colleagues, research assistants, and friends with varied social locations to help me to make sense of areas of experience that I was less familiar with. For example, throughout the process of group-based analysis, colleagues who had a familiarity with alcoholic family backgrounds helped me to interpret the narratives of fathers whose family patterns were rooted in alcoholism or substance abuse. To assist me with interpreting the narratives of gay fathers and fathers of ethnic minorities, I involved several research assistants and colleagues in analysis of transcripts or in conversations, so as to gain understandings of areas of experience and social identities that I was less familiar with. While such strategies assist with helping to see and hear stories with "different lenses" and "different lights", there are always limits to these lenses and lights and to how stories are heard and interpreted.

Throughout this process of in-depth analysis, I also struggled with how to write about the fathers in my study. Krieger's words are again illustrative of this dilemma when she writes (1985, p. 321): "It took a long time – longer than I had expected – to find in myself, a voice by which I could speak back to them". That is, I worried not only about what I would say about fathers, but about how my written words would be heard or read by them, and whether they would see themselves in the accounts that I told.

In addition to these dilemmas over how to speak about research respondents, the relationship between myself as a researcher and the fathers I interviewed was gradually and radically transformed through a critical epistemological shift that occurred mid-way through analyzing my interviews. While I began my project fully aware of longstanding

debates on the need to historicize and contextualize experience and subjectivities (see de Laurentis 1994; Scott 1992; Weedon 1987), I nevertheless clung to the view that there was some “relationship between people’s ambiguous representations and their experiences” (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p. 3). That is, I believed that there was a ‘knowing subject’ (Code 1995; Smith 1996; Stanley 1994) that I could partially know within the accounts or stories being told. Yet as I analyzed my interviews with fathers and as I struggled to understand fathers as subjects, it gradually dawned on me that many of the subjects behind and within these stories were largely inaccessible to me. This was due to several factors.

The first factor was men’s difficulties in disclosing vulnerability (see also Daly 1993, Presser 2004). While some men did reflect openly on the challenges they faced in parenting, there was still a dominant sense that fathers were sometimes presenting an overly positive and competent face to their fathering. In my analysis of my interview data, I named and coded these as ‘heroic narratives’. One example is from Dennis, an ethnic minority and low-income single father of a ten-year-old girl. In his interview with me, he told a story of a father facing considerable strain and difficulty as he balanced a heavy debt load, long hours working as a cook in a fast food restaurant, a highly conflictive relationship with the mother of his daughter who lived two thousand miles away, and living in a small apartment that he and his daughter shared with two male boarders. Sitting with me in his kitchen with a basket of perfectly folded laundry beside him, a constant theme in his interview was how he said he wanted to be on the Oprah Winfrey show and how people kept telling him: “‘I can’t believe your daughter is so good. I’ve never seen a kid this good’”. These exuberant statements of believed, or hopeful, heroism were out of sync with much of his narrative as well as with my sense of this father as gleaned from the interview setting and from the detailed field notes that my research assistant and I took after the interview.

A second example of a ‘heroic narrative’ can be illustrated through the case of Mick, a 45-year-old transport truck driver and the sole-custody father of a 16-year-old daughter. Mick was jolted into becoming a primary caregiving father thirteen years ago when Mary Kate’s mother left. He told the story of how he learned of this state of affairs when he was on the road and received a distressed phone call from his father who lived with Mick’s family. Mick then drove his transport truck over five hundred miles back to his home to find his pre-kindergarten daughter standing on the street wearing “her little summer dress with the flowers”. In his words:

“Mary Kate came home from school. She was in pre-kindergarten and her mother was not home. She was supposed to be there. My father called me. So I went to Windsor, I dropped the truck’s trailer, and I came from Windsor with no trailer, just my own truck. I came as fast as I could. When I came down the street she was in her little summer dress with the flowers. And she was standing there holding on to the street sign on our lawn. And my Dad was on the verandah, sitting there watching. I promised Mary Kate that never would I let this happen again. I parked my truck and ended up selling my truck. I never went back on the road again. I promised her that I would do that. That’s when it started”.



Mick's narrative was filled with heroic statements about how he “had to do it” and how he was “going to stick with my commitment, my damn commitment”:

“There is no way that I would have said – ‘go to Children’s Aid or something like that’. Her mother is not going to do it. Well damn, I am going to do it. I’m not going to let someone else do it. It is my job. It was a choice that I had to make. I knew that I had to do it. It was never a question. I was there and I had to do it. There were days when I used to sit there and cry when Mary Kate was sleeping and wonder. It wasn't a case of- ‘Am I doing it right or wrong’? It was – ‘I *had* to do it. I am going to get through it’. [...] It is my responsibility. I took a commitment and I am going to stick with my commitment, my damn commitment”.

It was the seemingly scripted ‘heroic narratives’ such as those of Mick, Dennis, and several other fathers, which propelled my thinking on the issues of research *subjects* onto new terrain. Analyzing these narratives along with those of stay-at-home fathers worrying about appearing masculine as they gave up their identities as family breadwinners, I gave up any illusions of accessing subjectivities, and even the possibility of attaining a “reflexively constituted subject” (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). I began to realize that certain projects and certain sites of research do not lend themselves to knowing *subjects*, but rather to knowing only their *narratives*. I thus made an epistemological and methodological move, in my analysis and writing, from *subjects to narratives* or *narrated subjectivities* (see also Benhabib 1999, McNay 2002, Somers 1994). Referring back to the gossamer wall metaphor, I came to the realization that *I could not know these ‘others’* because the walls between us were more solid than I had anticipated; I could only *hear and know something about their stories* as I listened on the other side of this second gossamer wall.

### **Gossamer wall between researcher and readers/audiences**

In conceiving reflexivity as sets of relationships that occur through gossamer walls, a third critical set are those between researchers and their readers and audiences. Another way of conceptualizing readers and audiences is to recognize the theoretical and epistemological, or epistemic, communities that influence our work in subtle and explicit ways.

As researchers, we locate our research in particular loci of theoretical claims that we seek to confirm or dismantle. Rather than working from the ground up or ‘discovering theory’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990), my work on fathering involved an “*extension of theory*” (Burawoy 2000). That is, “(r)ather than being ‘induced’ from the data, discovered ‘de novo’ from the ground, existing theory is extended to accommodate observed lacuna or anomalies” (Burawoy 2000; see also Hammersley 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). The narratives of fathers were thus heard and then retold through theoretical lenses that I brought to my work. Moreover, communities of scholars, some whom I had met and some whom I hoped to meet by engaging with their work, both enabled and constrained my work. The metaphor of gossamer walls is again useful in that “I felt (their) presence everywhere” (Michaels 1996, p. 31) as I constantly engaged in both real and hypothetical conversations and, at times, thought

carefully about how I would speak back to them. In specific terms, my work was informed by, and spoke back to, several bodies of theoretical work including: feminist understandings of families; masculinities; embodiment; theoretical understandings of mothering and fathering; gender equality and gender differences; and intersectionality (Doucet 2006).

My research on fathering was also framed within epistemic or epistemological communities. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of *episteme*, the term 'epistemic community' was first coined by the international relations scholar John Ruggie who employed it "to refer to dominant ways of looking at a social reality, a set of shared symbols and references, mutual expectations..." (Ruggie 1975, p. 558). Philosopher Catherine Elgin is also a useful guide to understanding this concept as she describes the 'rules' and 'criteria' that govern epistemic communities. She writes: "... the investigations we undertake, the cognitive opportunities available to us, the methods we are permitted to employ, and the evaluations that our efforts and results are subject to are all constituted by a cognitive game whose rules and criteria the epistemic community generates and enforces" (Elgin 1996, p. 72; see also Sosa 1991). For Lorraine Code, the epistemic communities within which we work and for whom we write, exert subtle pressures on our knowing processes so that "producing knowledge is less a matter of face to face confrontation with data than of negotiation within an epistemic community..." (Code 1995, p. 28-29).

A similar concept is that of 'epistemological communities' which has become most well known through the work of feminist empiricists, Helen Longino (1990, 1993, 2002) and Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1993). Nelson, for example, uses "epistemological community" to describe a way of viewing evidence that "construes evidence as communal," that "accepts coherence (and with it explanatory power) as a measure of reasonableness," and that "holds that communities, not individuals, are the primary loci of knowledge" (Nelson 1993, p. 131). Moreover, she claims that there is recognition of the partiality of any knowledge claim alongside an equal recognition that "beliefs and knowledge claims have consequences" (Nelson 1993, p. 51).

That fact that "knowledge claims have consequences" points to the political and ideological effects of such claims and the need for clarity in our work as to where we are located theoretically and epistemologically. In my work, challenges from a particular epistemological community pushed me towards being clearer about my own research aims as well as to take an 'authorial voice' (Seale 1999) that was stronger than I had initially intended. Specifically, I was challenged, and troubled, on how my work would be received and read. Rooted in a decade-long research program on issues of gender equalities and gender differences, my research on fathering began with an encouragement of active fatherhood and openness to the political and personal potential of men taking on a greater share of the responsibility for children. As my research proceeded, however, I came to the realization that there were unexpected tensions in taking such an approach.

One such tension arose when I received probing and antagonistic e-mails from members of fathers' rights groups, asking me about the aims of my work and about my

relationship to feminist groups. Further tensions loomed when I was invited to give a public lecture about my work and to do some media-related interviews around this event. Unaccustomed to speaking outside of the safe and resonant spaces of academic conferences, where one often finds shared understandings of theories and issues, I found myself slightly uneasy speaking about my work (see also Mandell, 2002). The source of this discomfort was confirmed when I realized that there were a few fathers' rights advocates in the audience who loudly applauded my work on encouraging active fathering. Several of my feminist colleagues looked at me with stony stares, clearly wondering how I could allow my work to be usurped by groups who are often anti-feminist or, more generally, anti-women. Days later I was shocked to find that a fathers' rights group as far away as Australia had made a link to a newspaper article about my public lecture and were framing my work as being supportive not only of active fathering but of divorced fathers claims against their ex-wives.

This unexpected turn of events, and the way in which a positive light shed on fathers could be used to justify a completely different, indeed conflicting, set of claims is an example of the importance of recognizing "the epistemology of reception". As Tim May (1998, p. 23) points out, this "epistemology of reception" raises critical questions about "how and under what circumstances social scientific knowledge is received, evaluated, and acted upon and under what circumstances" (see also Bordo 1997; Haggerty 2003; Grosz 1995). The epistemology of reception that awaits any positive work on fathering is that some fathers' rights groups, particularly the most militant and anti-feminist ones, may use this information to make their case that fathers are better parents than mothers. Moreover, support for men's involvement in family life, can unwittingly turn into a completely different set of arguments; these can include, for example, arguments about essential differences between women and men or how fathers should be involved with their children, no matter what the cost to women (for an overview, see Coltrane 2004; Flood 2004).

This series of events and realizations moved me to curb the sympathetic openness, which had guided my research in the early stages of my project, particularly while collecting and analyzing fathers' narratives. That is, other fathers unexpectedly came into my work and tempered the haunting ghost of Ozzie Aubie and his sons. The barrage of letters and queries that I received from fathers' rights groups moved me to be clear on my research aims and to publicly articulate these in my writing and in media-related work around fathers. Moreover, while I did preserve some of my initial intention to give space to fathers' narratives and "to make themselves heard, to carry their experience over from the private to the public sphere" (Bourdieu *et al.* 1993, 615), this was altered by taking a stronger authorial voice in my presentation of fathering narratives (see Doucet 2006).

The preceding discussion detailed a set of relationships that matter in how we construct knowledge. Metaphorically speaking, there are powerful political and community voices on the other side of gossamer walls – influencing, guiding and moving us towards particular ways of seeing and writing. Such relationships receive little attention in discussions of reflexivity so that there seems to be a continuing division between the "context of discovery" and "the context of justification" in discussions of

reflexivity in research (see Longino 1990, 1993). My argument is that much greater attention should be given to being reflexive about justifying and validating one's knowledge claims. This can occur through the recognition that part of what we do as researchers is to build and maintain relationships with the readers and users of our research and the theoretical and epistemic communities within which our research is conceived, carried out, and reviewed.

## Conclusions

*"All the years I felt Bella entreating me, filled with her loneliness, I was mistaken. I have misunderstood her signals. Like other ghosts, she whispers; not for me to join her, but so that, when I'm close enough, she can push me back into the world"* (Michaels 1996, p. 170).

At the end of Ann Michaels' novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob realizes that it was not his lost sister Bella on the other side of the gossamer wall; rather it was her "whispers", and "her signals". Moreover, Jakob "misunderstood her signals" and misinterpreted "her loneliness" for *his* own feelings of longing and grief. In the end, he recognizes that what Bella was trying to tell him, was an amalgamation of his own thoughts, dreams, and memories – and those of Bella and his memory of her. As researchers grappling with the challenges of knowing others, we also work through gossamer walls; these are sheer and tenuous, constantly shifting barriers between the multiple research relationships that constitute our reflexive knowledge construction processes.

This article has explored the ghosts and significant relationships that lie behind three gossamer walls. On the other side of a *first gossamer wall* are 'shadow others' or ghosts that may be deeply buried across time and space and may only come back to haunt us through the physical and emotional investment in our research. Drawing on the work of Gordon and McMahon, I have argued that these ghostly haunts and shadow others can matter in the motives that we bring to our research and in the claims that we make from our work. As Gordon notes, "this merging of the visible and invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present" can matter in "the making of our accounts of the world" (Gordon 1996, p. 24; see also McMahon 1996).

Behind a *second gossamer wall* are the relations between researchers and research respondents. These relationships are multi-layered ones that can involve oral, audible, physical, emotional, textual, and embodied dimensions (see Coffey 1993; Wacquant 2004; Bourdieu et al. 1993). Yet, most of these dimensions are compromised or absent when we come to analyze our interview transcripts so that our research respondents can be reduced to textual subjects. In this vein, I have briefly explored ways of maintaining these research relationships, including group-based analysis and reflexive reading strategies such as those provided by the Listening Guide, an 'emergent method' within the literature on qualitative methods (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). In spite of attempting to maintain relationships with fathers as research subjects, I also described how I made a critical epistemological shift in my research from subjects to narratives so

that I did not attempt to *know* fathers but, rather, I attempted to *know something about their narratives or narrated subjectivities*.

Finally, a *third gossamer wall* lies between ourselves and our readers/audiences; I have drawn attention to the theoretical and epistemological communities wherein our work is located and how other epistemological communities may take up our work and use it to promote differing knowledge claims and ultimately competing political goals. This realization in my work forced me to be clear about the aims of my work and to take a strong authorial voice in my writing.

The methodological and epistemological implications of my arguments are four-fold. First, the provocative metaphor of thin gossamer walls calls attention to issues of *transparency* in knowledge production. According to Loraine Code, such transparency can lead to the creation of “responsible knowledge” (Code 1988, pp. 187-88) while Clive Seale has linked it to the laying down of an “audit trail” (Seale 1999, p. 105) of our underlying epistemological assumptions and our methodological procedures. This audit trail can be long and wide and can include many relevant relationship that matter in our knowledge construction processes. Furthermore, while we can attempt to achieve such transparency or a ‘trail’ for our readers, it is also important to be cautious about how much we can know about what influences us in research. It may only be part way through our research projects, or indeed many years later that our reflexive processes come into full bloom. In this vein, I would agree with recent arguments that there is temporal (‘before, during and after’) quality of reflexivity in research (Roberts and Sanders 2005) or ‘degrees of reflexivity’ that become apparent only with the passage of time (Mauthner and Doucet 2003).

Second, I have argued that rather than claiming access to knowing subjects, all we can know is their narratives or their narrated subjectivities. Indeed, I have come to the view that this may be, as it were, *as good as it gets* for researchers striving to make bold knowledge claims about the messy, illusive and complex stories that emerge from people’s everyday lives (see Doucet and Mauthner 2008).

A third implication emerges from my reflections on ghosts and ‘shadow others’ and their connection with current discussions of reflexivity and the researcher self. Ghosts are both ‘shadow others’ and *they are part of us*. Just as, in *Fugitive Pieces*, where Jakob did not know where his own self ended and that of the ghost of Bella began, it is difficult to know where the wall is between ourselves as researchers and the ghosts that can emerge while we are in the process of fieldwork and analysis. I would argue that when a ghost is “invisible or in the shadows” (Gordon 1996, p. 15), they are not part of our selves but exist on the other side of gossamer walls. Yet “when it appears to you” or “is announcing itself”, or when “we admit the ghost” (Gordon 1996, pp. 15, 206), it moves through the gossamer wall to become part of our researcher self. As Coffey has made clear (1999, p. 115), “the ethnographer is simultaneously involved in biographical work of their own” so that “(f)ieldwork is a site for identity work for the researcher”. As Karen Norum (2000, p. 320), has pointed out: “It is both sociological good sense and an ethical obligation to disclose our biases”. My argument is that this autobiographical work and the decision

about which ‘biases’ to expose to our readers and audiences is perhaps best focused on what motivates our research and what appears to matter to the research process.

Finally, this article adds to discussions on the spatial quality of reflexivity, which highlights differing sets of close and more distant relations. These are explicated, for example, in Tim May’s (1998) discussion of ‘referential reflexivity’ as the relations between researchers and research respondents and ‘endogenous reflexivity’ as the relation between a researcher and his research community (see also Bourdieu 2000). The metaphor of gossamer walls, which combines the sheerness of gossamer and the solidity of walls, provides for a creative way of thinking about the ambiguous solidity and fluidity of reflexivity. These ‘walls’, which shift constantly depending on who is on the other side, represent varied degrees of transparency and obscurity, connection and separation, proximity and distance, and moments of closure and openness in the relations that constitute research and knowing.

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> While the Listening Guide was first developed over several years by Lyn Brown, Carol Gilligan and other researchers at the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development (Brown et al. 1991; Brown and Gilligan 1992), it has been used, extended and adapted to diverse multi-disciplinary projects (i.e. Balan 2005; Brown 1998; Doucet 2006; Gilligan and Spencer 2003; Gilligan et al. 2005; Jack 1999; Mauthner 2002; Simmons 2002; Taylor et al. 1997; Tolman 2002; Way 1998).

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<sup>3</sup> I employed three other ‘readings’ of interview transcripts to the one detailed in this article. These included a second reading where I traced the ‘I’ or central protagonist within the narrative while a third and fourth readings drew the analysis out from the research subjects and their narratives to their nexus of social relationships and then even further into wider structural relations (see Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, 2003; Doucet and Mauthner 2008; Doucet 2006). It is important to note that these readings are not entirely representative of how other researchers have used the Listening Guide but reflects the assumption that methods are not recipes that can be applied in uniform ways across projects (Law 2004, Charmaz 2006).