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## Soundtracking: Method(ological) Development via Intuitive Feminist Inquiry

Maria P. Rybicki-Newman  
*George Mason University*, [mrybicki@gmu.edu](mailto:mrybicki@gmu.edu)

Earle Reybold  
*George Mason University*, [ereybold@gmu.edu](mailto:ereybold@gmu.edu)

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### Abstract

How does one be different, methodologically, and/or socially without being ignored, invalidated, or even erased? This is a conundrum for qualitative researchers who are tasked with valuing difference within socio-political education systems fixed on ideas of truth, rightness, and validity. To explore these tensions, we provide an authentic and transparent illustration of how intuition, an often-invalidated way of knowing, instigated the development of a novel method(ology), soundtracking. Proceeding from an embodied, engaged feminist perspective, we re-conceptualized reflexive praxis as critical, compassionate, and actionable. We explored method(ological) development via layered reflexivity: self, epistemological witness, and social contexts. Through our inquiry based in trust, we developed the idea of reflexive discernment, a process of relating with and to others in ways that support mutual thriving. This current project contributes to considerations for research agendas aimed at increased connections and well-being, ethical praxis, and expanded narratives.

### Keywords

qualitative research, soundtracking, reflexivity, research epistemology, research methodology, feminist inquiry, trust, compassion, witnessing, difference

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Maria P. Rybicki-Newman and L. Earle Reybold

George Mason University, College of Education and Human Development, Virginia, USA

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How does one be different, methodologically, and/or socially without being ignored, invalidated, or even erased? This is a conundrum for qualitative researchers who are tasked with valuing difference within socio-political education systems fixed on ideas of truth, rightness, and validity. To explore these tensions, we provide an authentic and transparent illustration of how intuition, an often-invalidated way of knowing, instigated the development of a novel method(ology), soundtracking. Proceeding from an embodied, engaged feminist perspective, we re-conceptualized reflexive praxis as critical, compassionate, and actionable. We explored method(ological) development via layered reflexivity: self, epistemological witness, and social contexts. Through our inquiry based in trust, we developed the idea of reflexive discernment, a process of relating with and to others in ways that support mutual thriving. This current project contributes to considerations for research agendas aimed at increased connections and well-being, ethical praxis, and expanded narratives.

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## Introduction

What does it mean to be “different” in qualitative research? What does it mean to exist outside the norms of an inquiry paradigm that, from its very inception, defined itself as different from positivist methods and as explicitly inclusive of diverse and in-flux truths, epistemologies, and methodologies (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Oakley, 1999)? Many, if not most, qualitative researchers are familiar with the twists and turns in this evolution of qualitative inquiry and have explored and critiqued its various methodologies (Crotty, 2015, Willis, 2007).

Schwandt (2013), in his testimony of Egon Guba, noted “the best professors are characteristically open to revising what they profess and even abandoning once strongly held positions in light of new knowledge” gained through engagement in life with others (p. 15). Qualitative research seems to applaud and honor difference. But even the most pivotal works set methodological approaches as altogether different paradigms, thus fueling “intra-paradigm wars,” a phrase we borrow from Oakley (1999). Asked to “account for the difference” in her methods, Oakley responded emphatically that such accounting “is the co-option of individual methodological positions by prevailing paradigm arguments” and, rather, the focus ought to be on “why social scientists (and others) conceive of different research methods as opposed in the first place” (p. 252).

Oakley was attending to the labeling of her work as qualitative or quantitative, but what happens when a qualitative researcher thinks, feels, believes, lives, looks, and acts outside of qualitative research norms? To exclude due to difference runs counter to our credo (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Yet, the discipline of qualitative inquiry exists within socio-political systems that

tout diversity while remaining entrenched in fixed agendas and notions of rightness. For example, Denzin and Giardina (2015), referring to the politics of tenure and promotion, institutional control of research benefits, and the bent toward (post)positivist knowledge, highlight their concerns “in terms of struggles over the commodification of knowledge” where “the conduct of research becomes policed by an array of forces that impinge upon and (re)direct the practice of scholarly inquiry” (p. 15). We argue the same is true for qualitative researchers in a field that acknowledges methodologically politicized scholarship while ignoring profound othering within the discipline.

For us, the issue is rooted in feeling different in terms of what we study, how we do so, and how the field of qualitative research understands each of us as scholars. First author, Maria P. Rybicki-Newman, defines herself as a queer feminist who loves to create and explore method(ologies) via story and lived experiences; Second author, L. Earle Reybold, defines herself as a critical constructivist who loves to explore methods—and their epistemologies—through dialogic inquiry. Recognition of our differences at the outset contributed to our decision to focus on the tensions between storytelling and methods; between traditional and novel methods, including how they are defined in qualitative research; and finally, on the relationship between mentor and mentee.

### **Setting the Stage**

We begin with Maria’s positionality of thriving despite childhood sexual abuse and in feeling punished and socially stigmatized because of victimization, including in qualitative research circles. She developed the method of “soundtracking” to explore her lived experiences and then to connect to the lived experiences of others. Through a set of soundtracking pilot studies, Maria understood the potential of song to open participants to sharing their lived experiences. These inquiries also surfaced Maria’s realization of a lack in her own skills, as well as available scholarly training and structures, to support such openings. Earle, as her mentor and advisor, suggested a writing/analysis technique she used in a previous study (Reybold & Konopasky, 2015). Earle posed this dialogic structure - whereby one scholar, as protagonist, shares lived experiences, while the other acts as witness to the protagonist - to both model and extrapolate the need to support such openings within research praxis.

#### ***Maria P. Rybicki-Newman***

Within the context of becoming a qualitative methodologist, I, a Ph.D. candidate, wondered about how and why some difference is acceptable, even lauded; while other difference is deemed inferior, unacceptable, or even taboo. Much can be learned from explorations into the latter, as the following current project will illustrate. I began to develop the novel method of soundtracking by engaging with intuition and in self-reflexive praxis. Simultaneously, the relationship between myself and Earle, a professor of qualitative methodology, deepened in trust and complexity, expanding from that of student-teacher to Ph.D. candidate-advisor, mentee-mentor, co-researchers, co-authors, and friends. We shared our lived experiences related to research and becoming researchers and placed trust in one another; we were vulnerable as researchers and writers.

#### ***L. Earle Reybold***

My goal was to voice dialectical tensions in thinking based on a mentoring method I used in a previous co-authored paper (Reybold & Konopasky, 2015). Our exchanges, contextualized in trust, promoted an expanded dialog via the incorporation of a variety of

perspectives and opposing stances (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2012). We became comfortable engaging in this “contradictory process of meaning-making” (Baxter & Scharp, 2016, p. 2). The tensions that surfaced throughout our exchanges shaped our thinking about soundtracking development, this manuscript, and the acceptance of difference in qualitative research.

### ***Together***

Qualitative researchers receive explicit messages about expectations to “proceed in a different way, a way that offers insights into human behavior and works on behalf of social justice” (Pelias, 2016, p. 273). Yet those within the field of qualitative inquiry whose identities are different, those who could offer insight into difference via their own lived experiences, are often stigmatized and isolated (Johnson-Baily & Cervero, 2008; Reybold & Konopasky, 2015). Given this conundrum, we developed the following research questions: (i) how might qualitative scholars remain true to themselves and their epistemological commitments along all stages of the research process, (ii) how does one speak to difference without being ignored, invalidated, or even erased, and (iii) how do non-privileged ways of knowing gain equitable footing in what is considered legitimate social science?

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we provide a personal illustration of how the method(ology) of soundtracking developed. In doing so, we address our second goal of highlighting origins in intuitive knowing. Importantly, we assert value for intuition, a way of knowing that is often considered different, non-science, or non-sense (Salleh, 2017). Third, we expand and define reflexivity as integral to this project, the process of soundtracking itself, and qualitative inquiry in general.

### **Interlude**

While the focus of this paper is to illustrate the process of methodological development rooted in intuitive knowing and shaped via reflexive dialog, we understand the need to orient our audience to an unfamiliar method. In the following section, Maria describes how she piloted soundtracking as a qualitative research method. In doing so, she shares lessons learned from a set of pilot inquiries and explains how those explorations circled back to this current project.

### ***Soundtracking as Opening***

To take up Butler’s (2014) call to reimagine vulnerability as something other than weakness and as an inherently feminist undertaking, I designed a pilot study about vulnerability contextualized within learning about qualitative methods. That project was designed as a critical case study around the teaching praxis of an exemplar scholar, someone I observed being publicly vulnerable at an international research conference. In that initial use of soundtracking, participants—current and former advanced qualitative research students of that professor—were asked to provide me with a song that either reminded them of vulnerability, made them feel vulnerable, or helped them through a vulnerable time. The interviews opened with shared listening of participants’ songs, followed by discussion of how participants constructed their understanding of vulnerability around the song, and then how those concepts linked to their experiences as students of a professor the professor in my pilot study who models vulnerability.

Ethical issues, practical tensions, and exciting possibilities quickly surfaced. A focus on vulnerability felt both gratuitous and overwhelming as participants shared deeply personal and emotionally evocative stories. At the time, I had not fully let go of my positivist training and did not yet have the capacity to trust in qualitative research’s emergent nature to

sufficiently honor their stories. I informed my participants of this awareness and put the transcripts aside. Shared listening to a song for several minutes was awkward and cutting off a song midway was jarring. At the same time, soundtracking provided an invitation for outpouring of human experience.

### ***Soundtracking as Anchoring***

As a result of the ethical and practical considerations from the above pilot study, I added a group component as part two of the pilot. Reconceptualized as a collaborative inquiry of four advanced methods Ph.D. students (myself included), each researcher was also a participant. I redefined vulnerability as part of an authentic self and wondered how researchers might reveal their authentic selves within the structures of academia. In this case, the four, pilot study participant-researchers chose a topic of discussion and then considered songs in which to anchor our individual reflections and subsequent discussions.

For example, one conversation during part two of the pilot study led to collective thinking about unconditional love, something we agreed to understand our authentic selves. Each participant then independently identified a song that represented unconditional love to them and reflected in writing on their song and on the other participants' songs. In subsequent discussions, the collective unpacked these reflections, provided feedback and impressions, and generated new understandings that led to other conversations. In this second pilot example, soundtracking was a way to anchor dialog, move the collective and individual in an iterative fashion, and allow time for deeper considerations.

Despite a plethora of what might be considered good data generated from this two-part pilot study, I was dissatisfied. I knew I could present the soundtracking method as a polished protocol (Reybold et al., 2012). Yet, without context for how the idea took root in, and developed along with, often difficult and sometimes painful lived experiences in relationships, my inquiry felt inauthentic and disconnected. Instead, I followed my intuition.

## **Perspective and Frameworks**

Intuition, an immediate, unexpected gut feeling, is part of human nature and has been an important source of knowledge for humans across time (Sadler-Smith, 2008). Intuitive knowing is a way of knowing without use of traditionally defined scientific processes and is intrinsically accessible to all (Schulz, 1998). "I just know" is not typically an acceptable answer in the classroom, let alone in the scientific community. As we will illustrate, although intuitive knowing may come about in an incomprehensible way to some, it is rooted in embodiment, context, meaning making, and emergence. We are not suggesting intuitive knowing replace other ways of knowing, rather such sources of knowledge ought to be considered within the complex and diverse process of human inquiry and learning.

The potential of intuitive knowing sits in tension with the lack of scholarly attention to such sources. The latter creates an issue for us in how to adequately convey our understandings of intuitive knowing as an impetus and force in the soundtracking method(ology) and in qualitative inquiry in general. To remedy this issue, we believe it useful to provide two sets of intersecting frameworks from which to proceed: descriptive and process. Descriptive frames include literature that depict the human researcher in context of our experiences in intuitive knowing. We posit process frames as both the conceptual basis for our methods as well as interpersonal agreements and expectations in trust between us researchers.

## Descriptive Frames

We adopt Sinclair's (2019) view of feminism as "always embodied" because of the way such framing describes much of the intuitive human experience: "opportunistic, emergent, sometimes inconvenient, neither comprehensive nor respectable, but frequently bringing agency, invigoration and surprising pleasures" (p. 144). Existing along with this positionality is an ever-present consideration of the researcher's ability to affect others – both in the moment and in scholarly representations at-large – as well as a willingness to acknowledge ways in which researchers are also affected by participants and the process (Harding, 1995). Researchers are inextricable from their own nature as thinking, sensing, and emoting beings and from the social contingencies into which they are born. Thus, considerations of the researcher as human in process, call for making known all aspects of human as being, including "the explicit inclusion of affectivity into accounts of human reflexivity" (Konzelmann Ziv, 2011, p. 2).

We know from experience that acknowledging emotions, vulnerabilities, and their impacts within the context of research can feel uncomfortable, unsettling, and risky. Reybold et al. (2012), reveal tensions in reflexive praxis between "reflexivity as the gold standard of quality for qualitative researchers *en masse*" and at its core, an ever-present awareness of our assured mistakes and their consequences. Ross and Call-Cummings (2018) characterize mistakes in research as failures to uphold our epistemological commitments. Thus, when we wonder how to be true to ourselves and our epistemological commitments, we must understand why we fail in the first place.

To understand these failures, we needed to be willing to, as Earle says, "dwell." Dwelling is the act of meditative rumination and implies movement toward deep understanding; the first-person perspective is not static, nor can it be defined by a single, temporal event. Dwelling is akin to diachronic agency, meaning analysis of identity and agency over time and as impacted by the outside world (Mackenzie, 2014). Although dwelling is a solitary pursuit, we reported our findings back to one another in weekly meetings. As our discussions deepened, we began to surface and share our personal experiences with reflexivity. We also began to process reflexively with one another, engage in dialectical discussions, and find mutual understanding amidst chaos. One particularly awkward discussion seemed to be a turning point in our relationship and our understanding of reflexivity. Maria blurted out, "I need you to know my heart is in my work!" Earle understood. There is no shame in being vulnerable. Our method became an agreement in trust.

## Process Frames

Process frames were born from conscious exploration of dialectical tensions between us. The ideas and experiences woven throughout this project construct our definition of reflexive practice as critical, compassionate, connected, impactful, and always resulting in change of action. Compassion and action are two additions to reflexivity not found in most definitions (e.g., Ritzer & Ryan, 2011). Compassion, "a cultivated aspiration to benefit other beings," is necessary because criticality without compassion amounts to judgement (Curtin, 2014, p. 40). Action is necessary because thought without action is merely reflection. Reflection as thought, without manifested change, runs the risk of reverting to pre-constructed normative frames of othering, binaries, and the like (Braidotti, 2013; Butler, 2004, 2009).

To illustrate the need for both compassion and other action as requisite for reflexive praxis in this current project, we recall Maria's introductory illustration of root tensions between being a childhood sexual abuse survivor who experiences both personal thriving and punishing social isolation. Set within the context of qualitative inquiry, these tensions take on

additional layers. Qualitative researchers hold multiple truths as plausible and lived experiences as valuable, yet the response to personal trauma is often silence. Silence is not automatically quiet support. While the silencing of an oppressive majority might create spaces for minoritized individuals' voices, silence might also be fodder for the replication of pre-constructed normative frames. In this case, we reference silence and harm related to the shame and taboo surrounding childhood sexual abuse. Jolly's (2011) notion of witnessing embodiment speaks to how harm is replicated in academia when there isn't an assumption that students and colleagues are humans who may have experienced traumas from racism, homophobia, domestic violence, and the like. Without assumptions rooted in the full potential of lived experience, narratives offered up in the name of social justice overlook and render invisible human students and colleagues who can speak to often-neglected aspects of such experiences (Jolly, 2011).

Thus, it is no surprise that, within the context of academia, Maria felt awkward and cautious sharing her personally rooted scholarship with Earle. It was a necessary risk to move this project forward and one that we met with care and consideration. We set our reflexive process in motion as iterative layers of witnessing: self, other, and collective. We provide further grounding for these process frames in the following literature review related to reflexivity and witnessing within qualitative research.

### ***Reflexivity***

Reflexivity is not prescriptive. While the internalized, cognitive nature of self-analysis (Finlay, 2002) and lack of bounding make reflexive praxis difficult to teach and therefore learn; expanded ways of reflexive engagement add to ethicality by embracing what is often neglected, repressed, ignored, or otherwise hidden from view. For example, Pillow's (2003) offering of a reflexivity of discomfort invites researchers to grapple with that which is often easily cast aside, especially for those who hold privilege. Esping's (2018) and Ronai's (1992) personal scholarship explore the pain and purpose in lived experiences, making scholarly meaning and connections via personal histories. Baily (2018) creates a reflexive framework around the communal act of sharing sustenance to investigate and rectify the exclusion of translator in research as a viable, legitimate, impactful, and valued inquiry partner. These are just a few examples that erode surface layers of defense guarding ideas of abstraction, disconnection, and limitation. The examples also imply a tension between critique and compassion; varying degrees of implication and understanding working in tandem toward a common good. In this paper, we use reflexive engagement as an explicit, necessary, and iterative process of bearing witness to self and being witnessed by another within the socio-political peer-reviewed discipline at-large.

### ***Witnessing: Action Ignited***

Scholarship related to researcher as witness provided us with an orientation from which to proceed. Qualitative scholars conceptualize and define witnessing in a variety of ways. For example, Bell et al. (2017) posits "engaged witnessing" within the context of post-structural research with humans and more than human actors. Engaged witnessing is an embodied practice of attuning to surroundings and sensations and acting in ways that create generative engagement, such as moving with non-human animals. Dewsbury's (2003) theoretical post-structural work frames witnessing as a function of moving "thought by permanently unfixing and altering the perspective, denying any one figuration or representation of the way the world is" (p. 1920). Ropers-Huilman (1999) utilizes both critical and post-structural perspectives to suggest researcher witnessing as a metaphorical framework for meeting ethical obligations for

inquiry toward social justice. In her estimation, researchers act as witnesses to us and others within activities of discourse, meaning making and sharing understanding.

Cruz (2011) offers a critical definition of “faithful witnessing,” the act of attending to the deconstruction of deficit narratives in favor of foregrounding resistance. Witnessing faithfully is a “recognition and a rejection of...radical othering that often happens in social science research” (p. 549). From these conceptualizations, we form a definition of the witnessing researcher as being acutely aware and personally connected while holding the incompleteness and multiplicity of human experience and shifting between and accounting for intimate moments and cultural impacts.

### **Mode of Inquiry**

In line with Hunter’s (2018) assertion that authentic inclusive research requires reflexivity at the methodological, personal, and political levels, we framed our inquiry around layered reflexive practice, which attends to multi-vocal, open, iterative work contextualized within self-with-self, self-with-others, and self within collective relationships (Nicholls, 2009). Within each section, we reflexively addressed how discrete elements originated in the personal, were witnessed in the intra-personal, and situated within the political.

#### **Self with Self**

“Concepts...are props for the act of witnessing. They may be badly drawn, painful to think, costly in the exchange of certainty, but they assure creativity, transform the dead tissue of thought, and allow openness” (Dewsbury, 2003, p. 1912). Maria reviewed and contemplated researcher journal entries, observation field notes, and recordings and transcripts from two phases of a pilot project a set of initial pilot projects using soundtracking. She also listened to playlists, some of which were the result of using soundtracking in inquiry. This initial self-reflexive analysis was a consideration of the paradoxes and frictions between ideals (unmanifested concepts) and actions. The result was a series of protagonist anecdotes considering the impact of, and on, self via research using soundtracking.

#### **Self with Other**

We next adopted a mode of inquiry to explore and articulate how this method(ology) was conceptualized and shaped through reflexive dialog between protagonist and witness (Reybold & Konopasky, 2015). Our process here was akin to what Ellis and Rawicki (2013) posit as “collaborative witnessing.” The approach of collaborative witnessing is based on friendship as method and value in autoethnography, allows for perspective taking, and accounts for self. Here, Maria acted as protagonist, while Earle acted as witness. Maria offered personal-scholar self-reflexive anecdotes navigated via song to mark the journey of method(ological) development. Earle acted as an epistemological witness to Maria’s relationships and how she came to understand, react to, and act on that reality within the context of her lived experiences and as a developing qualitative researcher (Reybold, 2002). Earle also provided intra-active consideration and support by critiquing and commenting on each anecdote, resulting in a narrative of change in Maria’s researcher positionality.

#### **Self within Collective**

The ensuing dialog between authors resulted in additional data, which is included in our discussion and involves considerations for the research community at-large. Each phase of

soundtracking development was set in four acts and includes a scene description and excerpts from internal and external reflexive dialog. These acts were named for their corresponding album on Maria's first soundtracking playlist, music selected to reflect the tone and quality of experiences. Acts were positioned as an unfurling of self as method(ology) evolved: from most intimate toward more public, from strange and particular to familiar and generalized. This section concludes with an epilogue; understandings Maria gleaned from dwelling on the process of soundtracked and witnessed layered reflexivity.

### Act I: Déjà vu

*Scene: Dimly lit bedroom; protagonist alone in bed, contemplating life over the past several years.*

**Protagonist:** (thinking) Mary's death, coming out, exploding familial and societal norms. Abandoned and abandoning in the process. What next? Moved by intuition, Déjà vu plays as warrior poses are held. I knew, I just knew I was preparing. Hold the warrior's stance, you will need it. Corpse pose. Calling upon my ancestral mothers, I summoned the self-destructive pull and released it. Could it be this easy?

*Scene: College classroom, a text notification flashes on protagonist's phone.*

**Protagonist:** (looking at phone) Harley's friend...worried...suicidal. Are you alone, safe? Hospitalization is an option...I know, I am not opposed. "If I had ever been here before I would probably know just what to do, don't you?" (Crosby, 1970). Cutting. Déjà vu. Pain turned inward. Déjà vu. I knew this was an opportunity for different. Life prepared me. It was intuition, made actionable via music among other things.

**Witness:** Maria seems trapped in her own way of knowing the world. Death and dying become a cathartic dialectic between warrior and corpse pose. She does not note the irony of these poses, but she does realize they are signaling her to embrace intuition and music actively to change her way of thinking about... and acting on... the prospect of death. Although these memories are focused on deeply personal experiences—and her own body (Sinclair, 2019), Maria is alluding to the future impact this would have on her life as a scholar and her desire to explore soundtracking as a qualitative method to explore intuition (Harding, 1995). She does not mention reflexivity early on in her story, but this process of thinking back and forward at the same time reveals her own sense of what it means to be reflexive, particularly in her own discomfort (Pillow, 2003), critical reflection in action.

### Act II: Graceland

*Scene: Weeks later, same classroom; chapter presentation night.*

**Protagonist:** (thinking) Theory goes out the window in matters of life and death. And here's the thing, we are all living and dying. The process of going through a Ph.D. program has shifted my focus toward an integrated approach of thinking and doing and being and emoting. "I know

what I know, I'll sing what I said; we come, and we go, that's a thing that I keep in the back of my head" (Simon, 1986).

**Protagonist:** (presenting to the class) How might you engage in and with the material? (cut to slide with graph about LGBTQ teen suicide rate comparison) How do you react to this data; how does it impact you? (cut to slide of with photo of teen's face) Here is a teen (pause) who is trans (pause) and is suicidal (pause) and is my child (pause). How do you react to this data; how does it impact you?

**Witness:** Maria chooses to engage personal and academic epistemologies as dialectics related to death/life, my data/your interpretation, my child/a teen, your reaction/impact. In this narrative, dialectics identify conflicting personal and assumed social epistemologies, set up plausible comparisons for reflexive dialog, and hint toward methods choices that will satisfy both the narrator and the audience. Maria's tone is agonistic (Kvale, 2006), forcing the audience to attend to the dialectic, to engage her questions as personally as she does. At this point in the narrative, Maria is striving to win a debate, corralling the audience to accept her claims and acknowledge she is correct. She has encountered her own story reflexively, and she has embraced the notion for her future research, but how to communicate reflexively across epistemologies (Harding, 1995)?

### Act III: Legacy

*Scene: Office, desk, two opposing chairs; phase one of soundtracking pilot study; individual interviews with advanced qualitative research students.*

**Protagonist:** I was overwhelmed by the stories the participants shared. I asked them to bring songs that related to vulnerability and heard stories (related to songs) about surviving war, domestic violence, homophobia, and tender family relationships. These anecdotes were conveyed with emotion, and I wondered about the ethical implications of using song in research, especially when my first participant told the next, "Enjoy your therapy session." Ugh! What was I doing? Was I in over my head? "Ch-ch-changes, Turn and face the strange" (Bowie, 1971).

**Witness:** "I was overwhelmed." "I asked." "I wondered." Maria is accepting the dialectic as reflexivity, particularly in relation to her inquiry (Freeman, 2000; Sinclair, 2019). She is no longer seeking or demanding answers, she is asking questions and altering her ongoing choices in response (Harding, 1995; Pillow, 2003). Still, the participants are represented mostly in passive voice—is that a vestige of academic training, or is she still signaling distance across those epistemological tensions?

### Act IV: In My Tribe

*Scene: Classroom; phase two of soundtracking pilot; collaborative inquiry with three advanced qualitative research students.*

**Protagonist** “If I’m the only witness to your madness offer me some words to balance out what I see and what I hear” (Buck & Merchant, 1987). We set out to discuss vulnerability in academia and ended up discussing ideas about self-liberation, identity, and unconditional love. Song anchored our discussions and served as focus for reflection; levels of dialog in tensions and agreements all moving in concert. Shared inquiry and not the same for any of us; we filled in one another’s life pictures by expanding perspectives and sharing stories.

**Witness:** What a journey! Maria met the tensions of “trying to be” reflexive, moved through a process of figuring out how to “be” reflexive, and is now developing a research agenda that honors and even highlights dialectical epistemologies: “Shared... and not the same for any of us.” Maria grew into her goal of reflexivity as compassion and action (Curtin, 2014) and authentic inclusion (Hunter, 2018). We will continue our dialog as co-authors, dissertation partners, and critical friends. As Maria noted in one communication to me: “Our peers in the field of qualitative inquiry will serve as the collective and active audience with whom we will engage in collective reflexivity” (Nicholls, 2009).

## Epilogue

While collective reflexivity calls for “collaborative sense-making” at all stages of the inquiry process, it also “demands that the researcher understand a shift in their positionality” from sure and stable to “complex and unstable” (Nicholls, 2009, p. 124). For me, Maria, becoming a qualitative researcher while maintaining awareness and integrity of lived experiences necessitated engagement in complex and unstable positions “simultaneously” and “cross-temporally.” The above acts represent an untangling of the snarl of past-present selves, memories, emotions, sensations, roles, relationships, and social expectations. After a year of dwelling on and dialoging about this process, I came to several understandings (i.e., findings) about how unsnarling happened and thus how to be more skilled at holding complexities and instabilities. These understandings are: (i) witnessing is integral to self-locating, (ii) intuition can serve as a guide, and (iii) song can act as a mediator.

### Witnessing as Locating

The acts of witnessing in this project were layered and served to support self-locating. The importance of being able to locate and examine self within the always changing, dynamic engagements with life and others became clear to me. In crucial moments, I was able to witness a dynamic multiplicity within myself and my entanglements, such as those depicted in the above vignettes. More often, I found myself cognitively grasping for simplicity and assuredness. Yet, defaulting to thinking that felt easier, was socially acceptable, and required less time was counter to the capacity-building I needed to understand experience and emergence at once and as always changing.

Earle, acting as witness, provided me with a remedy. The type of witnessing defined in this project mirrors the dynamic positionality required for collective reflexivity. By authentically and fully witnessing, she modeled, expanded, and validated collective reflexivity.

For instance, Earle could not witness the fullness of my experiences if she herself was not open to such expanse. That is not to say these were the same experiences, rather the result of Earle’s introspection and understanding of her own lived experiences served to open her to such recognition and possibility in others. By engaging in and with complex and unstable positions, she demonstrated how to hold such capacity.

The differences between protagonist and witness allowed for an expansion in my thinking and imagining of what and how the continuous acts of becoming a qualitative researcher could manifest; what was once completely out of my awareness began to take shape and come into view as I was witnessed by another. As a result of that witnessing, I was able to see my progression of becoming a qualitative researcher in a way I would not have otherwise.

### **Intuition as Guiding**

“Tunnel vision. I will my legs to steady, one foot in front of the other. You are leaving your child in a locked, psychiatric hospital.” This is not *déjà vu*, this is different. “I am the parent. I am responsible. I have never been here before and somehow; I know what to do in key moments.” The instability of the unknown was mitigated by intuition. Intuitive knowing foreshadowed the work to come and guided me throughout this journey of familial healing and methodological exploration.

In still, silent moments this knowing came as a gentle guidance: “It was intuition, made actionable via music among other things.” Other times intuition acted as a flair, sent up via my child’s voice: “Sometimes it feels like you still aren’t connected...I am not always, I am working on it.” Or it was a jolt from my other child: “Mom, you’re the one not letting go of the past, move on. Move on.”

These moments did not, in and of themselves, alter my behavior. It was an increasing value for intuition and attention to its guidance that provided an opening for me to become different in my relationships with self and as an individual, mother, and researcher. By attending to and trusting intuition, I was able to navigate a difficult, strangely familiar convergence of time and relationship, set about on patterns of healing, and move on.

### **Soundtracking as Mediating**

Unlike the soundtracking pilot studies in which songs were characterized as fixed openings or anchors, in this project soundtracking was dynamic. Here, songs mediated between and amongst the complexities of meaning around relationships, roles, and time. While music itself is universal, interpretations and experiences of song vary from person to person and within self over time and across cultural contexts.

I employed song to internally tolerate, explore, interrogate, and make sense of the snarl before me. Soundtracking interceded between my past and present realities, allowing for a multitude of thoughts, feelings, and sensations to be examined, understood, and valued within an integrated, yet complex and unstable self. Song also acted as a connection with Earle, who had her own personal listening and remembering experiences. We did not attribute the same memories, thoughts, emotions, or sensations to shared songs, however we were able to communicate and develop understandings through songs.

Soundtracking mediated between our differences. Intra-personally, the introduction of soundtracking as a methodological process highlighted both the generational and experiential differences between authors. Earle recalled the socio-political nature of some of the songs, having been aware of current events at the time. I did not have the same frame of reference, which is not surprising given that song mediates both socially and individually (e.g., Born, 2011). Professionally, my methodological process in thinking with song and applying soundtracking to research was something Earle was willing to try, although different from her own processes. Dialogs about these differences shaped this current project.

### **Discussion of Findings: Understanding Difference**

Once difference is ignored, suppressed, or deemed inferior, understanding is stunted. Learning happens within spaces of relational difference from difference, internally and externally, where “the encounter with otherness becomes a necessary precondition for meaning and understanding (Todd, 2003, p. 10). “It is openness to difference that can provoke meanings beyond our own culture’s prescriptions—and lead to new thought” (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 13).

Our continued discussions included what Maria posited as “daring to risk being different amongst difference.” As qualitative researchers we often know what being different on behalf of social justice should ultimately look like: it is inherently connected (Barad, 2007; Carspecken, 2018), answerable (Patel, 2016), and even improvisational (Bresler, 2006; Oldfather & West, 1994). How to manifest these qualities, especially simultaneously, for us required an honest exploration of difference and how we express our value for difference or, conversely, what our silences say.

Honest exploration of difference, within and between us, in our work, and as a place within qualitative research, meant valuing intuitive knowledge, co-dwelling in spaces of dialectical tensions, and being willing to tolerate discomfort (Jones & Jenkins, 2008; Pillow, 2003). We understand the practice of researcher witnessing – ourselves and one another, located within larger collectives – required explicit communication, compassion, and trust. When faced with tensions in layered, complex difference, we did not choose either/or. Rather, we opted to make explicit some of the ways qualitative researchers experience difference, learning from the other about difference (Jones & Jenkins, 2008).

Understanding ourselves, one another, and how method(ology) developed required us to lean into and embrace the unknown, working through fears and tensions and toward more nuanced understandings of what social justice means and could look like within the context of research. We continually acknowledged, as insiders with varying power, that “the practice of research is subject to the expectations of ‘powerful others’ who exert structural control over the research process in various arenas” (Reybold et al., 2012, p. 713). Navigating tensions in influence and power for us meant, in part, continuing the work of becoming embodied, intuitive witnesses to ourselves, a precursor to witnessing embodiment in those with whom we work, teach, and study (Jolly, 2011). By acknowledging, understanding, and holding the complexities of our own cognitive, affective, and embodied selves, we became/become sources for open-ended interactions with others that “enables the expansion of self” (Bresler, 2006, p. 26).

This is not easy work. Honest self-exploration can be daunting (Kuntz, 2016). Utilizing what is gleaned from such self-exploration for a common good, one that always considers the other without minimizing self, takes skill and practice. We engaged in an ebb and flow of witnessing and providing feedback while carefully treating one another as a thinking, sensing, and emoting beings. We made suggestions, shifted our feedback based on what and how ideas were presented, and explicitly asked how the other interpreted acts of witnessing. These actions constituted our reflexive relationship. In this way, we quite literally shaped, via experience with and in tensions of difference, our definition of an actionable, compassionate reflexive practice. We value the recognition of an always dynamic, unrefined element of self. Witnessed within the complexity of relationship, exploration of what is not yet smoothed out allows for improvisation, possibilities to emerge both in method(ological) development and in the development of self and relationships (Bresler, 2006; Oldfather & West, 1994).

Yet, there are also elements of being connected (Carspecken, 2018) and answerable (Patel, 2016), a cumulative wisdom from deeper and more nuanced understandings of self, other, and society, that come into play. The encapsulating term for this actionable wisdom is discernment. Discernment, a skill in insight and synonymous with good judgement, is an

important part of qualitative researcher expertise (Kincheloe, 2001). While largely a cognitive process of weighing options, discernment also involves use of intuition or “gut” feelings to make the right decision for the other (Underwood, 2009). The reconfiguration of these two processes, a critical plus compassionate actionable reflexive praxis and the ability to apply knowledge, including intuitive knowing, in specific contexts with specific people using good judgement, provide a frame for our discussion of process as reflexive discernment.

### **Discussion of Process: Reflexive Discernment**

Reflexive engagement alone, no matter how actionable, interconnected, and compassionate, does not account for good judgement. “One can mean well, be well-intentioned towards the other, but do something that will ultimately harm him in some way” (Underwood, 2009, p. 15). Or, as we have discussed, one can do or say nothing with sometimes equally harmful effects.

Discernment, while not a new concept in qualitative research, is not widely discussed as a focus or part of inquiry. Discernment of patterns is one of the first steps in qualitative analysis (Saldaña, 2011). We suggest qualitative researchers ought to be at least as well-versed in discerning their actions with other humans as they are at discerning data. Discernment is vital to relationships, the heart of qualitative inquiry.

Underwood (2009) places motivation and discernment central in her work in compassionate love as a framework for research. We do not quibble with Underwood’s conceptualization and appreciate her description of the process of discernment as being both analytical and intuitive. We also agree that motivation and discernment are key processes in moments of choice. However, we are in consensus that motivation is an internal, personal process and therefore cannot be understood through our manner of inquiry. Rather, we replace motivation with our developed definition of reflexivity, which manifests in an iterative and relational way. “However, discernment occurs, whether more or less intuitively or explicitly, it is a crucial component to ensure loving action” (Underwood, 2009, p. 16).

Without discernment, it is quite possible to fulfill a commitment to actionable reflexivity by acting in ways that are neglectful of others. For instance, one might act based on a personal, closed reflexive praxis where notions of what another might need or want are conjured and assigned. Similarly, one could take up externalized, pre-conceived ideas, language, and roles of how compassion should look, ignoring the dynamic and unique context of each participant or co-researcher relationship. This would be especially troublesome as common definitions of compassion almost always singularly focus on other as in need, thereby priming thoughts for othering (Curtin, 2014; Underwood, 2009). In both cases, a researcher might be acting reflexively, however these actions do not constitute good judgement for the benefit of another.

The good in good judgement accounts for self and other with the goal of mutual thriving. Compassion calls for a cultivation of our aspirations to benefit others (Curtin, 2014, p. 40). We don’t merely turn on or adopt an attitude of compassion. Cultivation requires honing our skills in discernment, our ability to know if what we are doing is truly helpful and socially just. Conversely, discernment requires reflexivity, a way of checking on current and past actions to judge their goodness against how they were received and/or what contribution or impact they had on social justice. In this way, the process of reflexive discernment shapes and strengthens our skills of compassion.

We framed the intuitive human experience in the way Sinclair (2019, p. 144) described embodied feminism as not only “opportunistic, emergent, sometimes inconvenient, neither comprehensive nor respectable,” but also as “frequently bringing agency, invigoration and surprising pleasures.” It is important to remember that doing the difficult, complex, and at times

painful work of deeply understanding self and other humans toward the continual creation of a more just society also brings excitement, energy, and satisfaction. We find this invigoration, present in intuition, also emerges from acts of compassion; that the “desire to help, far from dragging us further into suffering ourselves, actually gives us energy and a sense of purpose and direction” (Lama, 2011, p. 55)

### Significances of Inquiry

This project is significant in multiple ways. Theoretically, soundtracking promotes the idea of removing distance between theory and lived experiences (Carspecken, 2018; Kim, 2016). We presented Maria’s lived experiences as raw and authentic, sometimes awkward, and painful. We consider déjà vu and intuition as guides, pointing us to cross temporal patterns that could be reshaped in present day. Methodologically, we contribute to an actionable definition of reflexivity as critical plus compassionate. Combined with discernment, we developed the idea of “reflexive discernment,” a process of relating with and to others in ways that support mutual thriving. Practically this work speaks to the potential for developing intuitive skills and maintaining layered, discerning reflexive praxis as ethical research engagement (Freeman, 2000; Nicholls, 2009). Consideration of ourselves and our needs must be held alongside the needs of others. Capacity-building for such compassionate work is both possible and necessary. Socially, soundtracking, a method of engagement deeply rooted in personal, embodied experience, is conceptualized as one way to expand human narratives and thus increase social connection and well-being (Dennis, 2016). Our work is mitigated by our own reluctance to dwell in uncomfortable places, by powerful others who impose restrictions on us and our work (Reybold, et al., 2012), and by the expanse of what it means to understand and effectively contribute to social justice within human conditions. It is not easy; and it is both necessary and worth the effort.

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### Author Note

Maria Rybicki-Newman is a Ph.D. in Education candidate at George Mason University specializing in Qualitative Researcher Methodology and Education Policy. Maria's current work focuses on reflexivity, researcher positionality, and creative methodologies. Specifically, she is interested in exploring ways in which scholarly spaces, places, and systems might promote and support the difficult, messy work of rigorous reflexive praxis to extrapolate and transform our individual-collective socialization toward Othering. This work has implications for both the process of qualitative inquiry and how researchers are socialized. Please direct correspondence to [mrybicki@gmu.edu](mailto:mrybicki@gmu.edu).

L. Earle Reybold is professor of qualitative research in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University (USA) where she teaches courses in qualitative case study, grounded theory, and advanced qualitative analysis. She also serves as affiliate faculty with the Women and Gender Studies Program and the Higher Education Program. Dr. Reybold has concentrated her research on faculty identity and epistemology, faculty experience of bias and discrimination in the academy, faculty disability, and epistemology of inquiry. Please direct correspondence to [ereybold@gmu.edu](mailto:ereybold@gmu.edu).

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