Bringing my creative self to the fore: accounts of a reflexive research endeavour

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Bringing my Creative Self to the Fore

Accounts of a Reflexive Research Endeavour

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ABSTRACT (max 120 words)
This ‘writing-story’ explores how reflexive and embedded methodologies may be conducive to the adoption of creative forms of expressing knowledge gained through research experiences. A sample of my attempt to break some of the traditional boundaries of the academic prose is provided; firstly, through the discussion of the centrality of reflexivity to the development of my attempt to provide an intersubjective narrative of my study. Secondly, by showing the style of narrative I chose to use in my research reporting, one which involved the use of photographs to create ambience and stimulate the readers’ engagement with the context of my research.

Keywords: reflexivity, intersubjectivity, embedded research, photographs, writing-story

INTRODUCTION
At the beginning of 2006 I arrived in New Zealand to undertake my doctoral studies. Conflicts in outdoor environments was my main research interest during the first stages of my research efforts. As a rock climber and trumper¹, I was interested in how different people engaged with the natural environment and why conflicts sometimes occurred in a recreational space that I considered so pristine and therefore not suited for such negative interactions. Gradually I became more familiar with the issues surrounding recreation conflict in New Zealand and was introduced to the idea of conflict between trampers and hunters in the backcountry. As a foreigner to New Zealand, coming from a large and chaotic industrial city in a developing country, hunting was not a familiar, or totally acceptable, pastime to me. However, possibly due to my acknowledged ignorance of the practice, and to the prominent status of recreational hunting in southern New Zealand, I became inquisitive and was genuinely open to learning more about the activity.

The alleged conflict between hunters and trampers became my research topic and, following a thorough review of the recreation conflict literature, I designed my research to measure and identify the reasons for conflict on Stewart Island, a remote island south of the South Island of New Zealand, and more specifically inside the limits of Rakiura National Park, which comprises 85% of the island.

¹ Tramping is the New Zealand term used to refer to ‘bushwalking’ (AUS), ‘rambling’ (UK) or ‘hiking’ (USA), and means an extended, mainly overnight, foot travel in outdoor/natural environments.
The location was selected in light of a management review process taking place during that period; I was expecting to contribute to the management of a National Park, a recurrent aim of recreational conflict studies (e.g. Manning & Valliere, 2001).

In the southern summer season of 2007 I went to Stewart Island for the first time to conduct what I called then my first ‘field trip’ to survey hunters and trampers. Carrying hundreds of questionnaires during the island’s high tourist season, I went tramping along the several trails available inside and outside the National Park, took water taxis to different hunting blocks, and delivered surveys to every hunter or tramper whom I met on my visit (I personally hand-delivered 260 questionnaire surveys during my visits to Stewart Island). It was not until my first long visit to the trails of the island (a 24-day trip fully immersed in the tramping tracks of the National Park, mostly on my own) that I realised that the quantitative data collection that I had chosen to employ was not appropriate to unveil some of the issues that I was increasingly becoming bewildered by. The conflict that had been described to me by park managers and reports was not so clear anymore, and other more significant issues were arising. Why was I not being able to perceive the often mentioned conflicts if I was so immersed in both activities there? And why, at the same time, were trampers’ experiences and conversations so different from the hunters’?

I returned from this experience with more questions than answers. Being fully aware of the recreation conflict literature, I was intrigued by why this literature was not helping me understand what was happening on Stewart Island, beyond the alleged conflict. I then began to look for other possible avenues, and environmental philosophy showed me that there were other ways, or lenses, through which to approach the issue. These philosophical lenses seemed more appropriate to use to engage with what I was investigating than the management-focused literature that dominates the academic discourse on recreation conflict studies. From this moment I decided that it was necessary to take a different methodological approach and I chose a reflexive, embedded engagement using a critical interpretativist perspective (Davies & Harre, 1990; Hoskins, 2000; Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001). This is not to say that philosophical questions or approaches to research can or should be analysed, or undertaken, using only reflexive and interpretativist perspectives. However, in engaging with these sorts of questions and in embracing philosophical approaches to my study of hunters and trampers on Stewart Island, I was able to open a world of possibilities that, up until that point, had been suppressed by the more traditional ways of doing research into outdoor recreation conflict (e.g. Confer, Thapa, & Mendelsohn, 2005). Breaking with the traditional perspectives presented/discussed in recreation conflict studies by not only acknowledging the importance of environmental philosophies to the analysis of the phenomenon but in fact including them in my discussions, was a first step towards escaping the structure and the dominant scientific narrative of this literature.

My personal aim with this paper then is to share with other researchers, from different disciplines or from post-disciplinary backgrounds, how my journey into the hunting ‘enclaves’ of Stewart Island, into the tramping tourists’ space, into my doctoral research, and into the
environmental philosophy literature made me reassess my methodological choices and provided me the opportunity to include emotions in my academic writing. In order to do that, however, I will focus my discussion here more on how a reflexive and embedded methodology can be conducive to creative approaches to research, and less on how my journey actually occurred. I will, therefore, limit the inclusion of ‘research findings’ that relate to hunters’ and trampers’ experiences on the island, or how I have argued in my thesis that the philosophical positions regarding the natural environment adopted by these recreationists and tourists greatly influence their experiences on the island. I will highlight instead a sample of my attempt to break some of the traditional boundaries of academic prose; firstly, through the discussion of the centrality of reflexivity to the development of my attempt to provide an intersubjective narrative of my study. Secondly, by showing the style of narrative I chose to use in my research reporting, one which involved the use of photographs to create ambience and stimulate the readers’ engagement with the context of my research. With this in mind, this paper can be considered a ‘writing-story’, as proposed by Richardson (1995, p. 191), or a story “about how [I] came to construct the particular texts [I] did.”

**A REFLEXIVE AND EMBEDDED METHODOLOGY**

Although a reflexive methodology arises from an act of reflection on previous experience, it is the reflection in experience that allows a reflexive methodology to be possible. According to Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith (2004, p. 31), a “[r]eflection is generally characterized as a cognitive activity; practical reflexivity as a dialogical and relational activity.” An act of reflection about my research, and my experience within my research, led to my choosing a reflexive engagement that inevitably involved constant inquiry into my own position in the research, beyond simple acknowledgements or post-event thinking. Therefore, as a relational activity, reflexive engagement necessarily requires the ‘Others’ who are involved in the research process, that is, a reflexive methodology requires a constant dialogue with research ‘participants’ to continually reframe the researchers own understandings of what is being studied. Such a requirement reveals a process of co-construction (Denzin, 1997). It is hence not a solitary contemplation of previous research situations, or a monological reflection, but a dialogical activity that “we make […] happen in the instance” (Stronach et al., 2007, p. 196). In my case, being, or becoming, part of the tramping community of New Zealand, I was able to constantly reassess my truths in regards to trampers’ experiences of the outdoors and tried, to the best of my ability, to make clear throughout my writing my views about my own tramping experiences in this research. Also, being, in one way or another, a tourist, a foreigner in this country, gave me access to several other tourists and immigrants who engage in very disparate ways with the New Zealand outdoors, and with whom I learnt a great deal in regards to culture and its effects on how we perceive the natural world. Lastly, as a researcher of hunters’ experiences, but not a hunter myself, I was regularly exposed, willingly, to hunters, and therefore was constantly questioning and being questioned about my understandings of this practice. In this regard, it comes to mind a significant
occurrence that happened as I presented some initial thoughts about my research material in an interdisciplinary conference in Dunedin, New Zealand (Carvalheda Reis, 2009). As I was discussing what I perceived to be hunters’ contradictory treatment of different species of animals, an argument that I sustain but now with a slightly different take, I was somewhat aggressively questioned by an academic in the audience who was himself a hunter and who felt extremely upset by my comments/’findings’. Being still a PhD student, among a considerable audience of senior academics and being ‘attacked’ by a more experienced peer, I felt vulnerable but at the same time reassured that some of the issues I was dealing with were extremely contentious, personal and therefore indeed contradictory. Discussing with him, afterwards, made it even clearer for me that the conservation discourse that is enmeshed in the hunting performance in New Zealand is exceptionally powerful, and significant, not only for academic discussion, but, more importantly, for individuals. This discourse does indeed position animals as more or less worth of care and, as I consequence, as more or less worth for hunting, the point I was trying to make in the mentioned presentation. What I had not fully realised then was that these discourses were inseparable, and inseparable also from the broader New Zealand ‘bush culture’ (Ross, 2008), a conclusion I was only able to make after my interaction with this academic/hunter. This event changed the way I approached my discussions and made me dedicate a lot of my time reading and writing about New Zealand’s conservation history and discourse. My point here, therefore, is that events like this one need to be acknowledged and included as part of the research, part of the ‘field experiences’ even though they might take place months after being in the research’s selected ‘field’ location. They not only contribute to co-constructing meanings but also to making one aware of one’s constant engagement with, and presence in the research.

During this research endeavour, although I was researching hunters and trampers on Stewart Island, I obviously was never able to strip myself from my ‘tramper self’, my ‘woman self’, my ‘Brazilian self’ or even my ‘researcher self’. These are all part of who I am, and how I see the world, my research and its participants is modulated by the meanings carried by these physical/social/emotional/political signifiers (Hoskins, 2000; Lyle, 2009). Maybe more important than that, while I was on the island I was always tramping and therefore I was drifting between social spaces, at once critically aware of my own position as a researcher, but in some ways part of the ‘researched’ space by being in fact, and in addition, a tramper. A tramper who was researching trampers while, at the same time, tramping. Simultaneously, an international visitor and a woman researching local hunters and their engagements with tourist trampers. This ever ambivalent position created a tension within myself that led to the realisation that I could never be an ‘impartial’ researcher, ‘detached’ from the research and the researched. I was as much part of the process as the people whom I met on the island, and therefore it was crucial that I engaged fully with a reflexive methodology in order to gain a better understanding of the subjects of my work, including of my own subject position within the research context (Hoskins, 2000). More importantly, I became aware that my position could never be one of ‘presenting research findings’ that were ‘extracted’ from interviews
or whatever other methods. I was just presenting one interpretation of the story I shared with others and that others shared with me, however theoretically informed and rigorous my interpretation and presentation were. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 2) have argued, “researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s stories.”

Here, another glimpse of my journey seems useful to illustrate my point. I recall going on my first trip to Stewart Island and one of my supervisors, a man, warning me that I should be prepared for ‘delicate situations’, as I would be interacting with a crowd of mostly male hunters. More than that, he asked me to be very careful, especially as I was potentially going to share backcountry huts with this ‘distinct type’ of men. The terms ‘delicate situations’ and ‘distinct type of men’ were probably not used verbatim by my supervisor, but certainly words that had that effect on me. As my supervisor, he was concerned with the appropriate compliance to Health and Safety regulations, and current regulations at the time did not cover the specific aspects of my trip, such as going to the bush alone, for a considerably long period of time, and potentially sharing huts with an all-male crowd. I was nonetheless scared. My first night in a hut on the island was spent alone and I could hardly sleep thinking of these ‘crazy hunters’ roaming in the bush. This sentiment was created by my own interpretations of what I heard, from the most different sources, about hunters in general, not necessarily New Zealand hunters. The comments made by my supervisor, for instance, did not carry such meanings but these were created by my own previous experiences and current interpretations of them. Obviously, this sentiment of restlessness was significantly amplified by my Brazilian background, which makes me constantly wary of potentially dangerous situations in remote settings. This experience, and this position, made me more aware, therefore, of some of the issues trampers from different parts of the world might be raising when meeting a ‘horde’ of hunters in the Stewart Island bush. Some people coming from large cities in the United States, or from Iran, or from South Africa, to mention some of the nationalities I met on the island, were ‘understandably’ uncomfortable to be sharing a small hut with armed men who were drinking considerable amounts of alcohol in the evenings. Would such an issue be raised or explored, were I not a Brazilian female who, myself, felt the discomfort? If so, would the approach be the same?

Also, such a reflexive engagement with the research inevitably led to an embedded position. By embedded I mean the act of getting involved and immersing yourself in a culture in order to make sense of it. This embeddedness necessarily involves an understanding of the research as a constructed act of exchange between the researcher and ‘Others’. I started to understand my role as one of being just another participant in the research act, one who performs in an “intersubjective process of ongoing negotiation” to interpret the contexts and cultures (Hoskins, 2000, p. 48). Therefore, in my writing I was always explicitly present, telling the stories as I experienced them, not so much as they were told to me.
I was there to interact with the people I met, and to live the tramping experience. But it was work, and the preoccupation with meeting, talking, seeing and trying to understand behaviours, values and feelings was always present in my mind. That immersion was what made it possible to feel and understand what I now formulate as the process of commodification and spectacle that happens with each one of us, in some way or another, while engaging with tourism experiences in the natural environment. (extract from the thesis, Reis, 2010, p. 209)

According to Tedlock (2007, p. 57), “[r]esearch in the human sciences has undergone a radical shift in perspective, from considering the world as a collection of objects (objectivity) or subjects (subjectivity) to understanding the world as a set of dialogical processes and psychodynamic relationships (intersubjectivity).” For my research, this suddenly meant that there was a subtle process of negotiation going on between my subjective position, and the Others’ subjective positions, the outcome of which became the construction of an intersubjective narrative of events, performances, and experiences. As Crossley (2005, p. 175) argues, we are intersubjective beings, moulded by our interactions with the Other, and intersubjectivity is “a fabric of ‘social becoming’ [which] entails constant and ongoing interaction.”

As our conversations continued the topics expanded to include what sort of gear we had, how tiring the day had been and if one of us had seen a kiwi – the second most important objective. A comment made by one trumper in a hut book was followed immediately by a response that emphasised how common this narrative of ‘I saw (or did not see) a kiwi’ was amongst Stewart Island trampers, and how this stresses the idea of Nature commodified. In response to the inquiry “Where are the kiwis?”, was the suggestion: “Perhaps there is more to Stewart Island than kiwis?” It seems that the latter trumper became disturbed, as I did, with the constant ‘search’ for the ‘prized’ kiwi. (extract from the thesis, Reis, 2010, p. 215)

A complementary characteristic of the intersubjective nature of my methodology was grounded on the premise that my own subjectivity, or my own subject position, expressed through my narrative, develops in and through intersubjectivity. As Crossley (2005) rightly remarks, in this process of subjectivity development, intersubjectivity also is affected and reshaped. In this sense, the reading of my research writings (thesis, papers, etc.) by other ‘Others’ contributes to this interminable process of co-creation (Richardson, 1995). Hence, the choice of a reflexive methodology, which espouses that understanding and meaning emerge in the making, is complemented by an understanding of an intersubjective self and the presentation of an intersubjective narrative, however much it may appear to privilege my own various voices.
BRINGING MY CREATIVE SELF TO THE FORE

After realising that I needed to go beyond descriptions of ‘facts’ in order to legitimately engage with my research and the people who were part of my research endeavours, I decided that I had to try my best to follow Ellis’ (1997, p. 117) inspiring comment that we should “add blood and tissue to the abstract bones of theoretical discourse.” Following her account of autoethnographic contributions to social science research, I started to believe that a co-constructed narrative inevitably will be as much about the writer’s experience as it will be about the Others’. Although I did not engage in an autoethnographic exercise in this project, I nonetheless tried to bring myself to the centre (and continue to do so), and, in a sense, attempted to tell “a personal, evocative story to provoke others’ stories” (Ellis, 1997, p. 117). Personal, not because it is about me only, but because I engage with it in the first person and present it as, in the end of my process, I could finally perceive it. As Richardson (1992, p. 136) phrases it, “in writing the Other, we can (re)write the Self,” and this is what happened when I first wrote down this material, and continues to happen every time I re-write it.

On the other hand, as Connolly (2007) argues, layering the different narratives – the ones from the researcher and the ones from the ‘Others’ – is essential to this type of text, one which hopes to be rigorous, meaningful and significant at the same time. Therefore, the dialogue must be as explicit as one can make it, clear both to the researcher and to the reader. The use of quotations from people with whom I had conversations, for instance, was a method I chose in an attempt to bring other voices to the conversation and not to ‘pretend’ that these are their responses to my theoretical questionings. Richardson (1992, p. 131) has warned us that “no matter how we stage the text, we – the authors – are doing the staging. As we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them.” I am aware, therefore, that in choosing which parts of their narratives I present, I am also choosing which parts of the story are going to be told. Certainly, they were the ones I considered the most relevant ones, but were not necessarily the ones that were ‘meant’ to be told. Such a process is an inherent risk in any qualitative research where the researcher is the one interpreting the material ‘narrated’ to her/him and presenting it to the reader. The difference lies in how the researcher chooses to engage in and acknowledge this process (Hoskins, 2000). Somers (1994) refers to this story as an ontological narrative, reflecting as it does, the ontological position of the writer. Although I did not use formal linguistic tools to analyse the Others’ accounts, I critically engaged with their narratives and situated these within relevant theory. The co-constructed meanings will be further developed as the reader constructs her/his own understandings of the text, in an equally intersubjective way. My narrative was (and continues to be) multivocal, influenced by all my ‘Selves’ and by all the ‘Others’ who engaged in the project (Lyle, 2009).

Moreover, in writing about writing, or writing-stories (Richardson, 1995), as I do here now, I am dialoguing also with others who struggle, as I do, to write rigorous, ‘academe-appropriate’ accounts of our research endeavours, about the knowledge we gain with the experience of ‘looking into’ someone else’s experiences, or what we customarily call our ‘research findings’, and also, and
more particularly, about the knowledge that we gain with the experience of looking into our own experiences [of the research]. This ‘collection’ of knowledge is our contribution to academic, intellectual thinking and should be regarded as genuine and as important as any other scientific account of research (Holt, 2003).

Here and then, my multivocality is/was greatly influenced by Ellis (1995; 1997) and her powerful autoethnographic accounts, and also by Brearley (2000) and her creative ways of expressing how she perceives the Others’ voice, and by Richardson (1992; 1993; with Lockridge, 1991) and her poetics and rigour. However, my accounts did not engage with autoethnographic writings, such as the works of Ellis, or artistic interpretations of lived experiences, such as Brearley’s use of music and Richardson’s use of poems. My engagement was no less meaningful or passionate, “writing from the heart as well as the head” (Ellis, 1997, p. 128). My way of attempting to explore my artistic, or creative, self was expressed through my use of photographs in selected passages of the thesis.

Following Brearley’s (2008a, p. 4) argument that “creative approaches to research have emerged from postmodern theories of reflexivity, multiplicity and complexity and the doubt that any single method or theory has a universal claim of authoritative knowledge,” it seemed only appropriate to engage with such an approach. Believing that “there are multiple ways of experiencing, knowing and communicating.” I found support for my use of photographs as a means of ‘experiencing, knowing and communicating’ (Brearley, 2008a, p. 4). The photographs did not represent an engagement with visual methods as a method of analysis, but they were nonetheless one aspect of my methodology. It was so because it was an expression of my ontological and epistemological positions in the research, one of a fully embodied engagement. Through the use of these photographs I intended to not only ‘put myself into the text’ in a more symbolic way, but also to evoke feelings and emotions through the provision of an affective context. Such an affective context was aimed at the reader, but it provided an affective context also to myself, the writer, being constantly reminded of my experiences on the island. This exploration was a response to pleas for accounts that are emotional but that contribute also to the understanding of everyday lives and experiences. In this way I hoped to follow Ellis’ (1997, p. 120) claim that “[t]his dialogic, multivocal narrative decenter[ed] my authority by holding it up for readers to inspect.” In the end, my use of photographs enmeshed with the text was my way of acknowledging and embracing intersubjectivity, providing an overt context to engage the reader in the construction of meaning.

I used photographs in three distinct ways. The first one embedded photographs in the text, with words partially covering segments or the whole of the picture (see Figures 1, 2 & 3). These photographs are my visual recollections and representations of sentiments elicited during the time of writing. The photographs were not intended to be clear depictions of a location, or a time. Instead, their brightness was slightly weakened, their borders faded, and no caption was present to facilitate the reader referring to a particular location. In fact, I did not use captions in any photographs as they were not aimed at ‘projecting reality’. As Chaplin and Gibson (in Holm, 2008, p. 325) have argued,
“images are not neutral and do not portray a truth but only the producers’ and viewers’ co-constructed understanding.” Also, it was not my aim to tell the reader explicitly what I meant when using a specific photograph, in any particular place of my writing. My wish was only to provoke feelings that might allow the reader to engage him/herself with the research, the researcher and the participants in a more meaningful and embodied way. Also, I hoped to make clearer my own position through the use of a different form of language, that is, visual and affective language.

These photographs were used in the chapter of my thesis that presented discussions about New Zealand hunters’ engagement with the natural environment, particularly the power of the sublime landscape of Stewart Island on hunters’ embodied experiences and narratives (for a more thorough discussion on this topic please refer to Reis, 2009). Being an extremely rugged location, isolated in many ways from urban contemporary life, and representing a typical New Zealand sublime nature, the pictures enmeshed with the text were my means of ‘translating’, however possible this may be, how one may view, feel and experience such an environment. As I experienced this environment myself, and felt the power of it over my own experience on Stewart Island, I felt the need and the desire to make it an ‘actual’ part of my narrative and therefore experimented with its ‘physical’ inclusion in the thesis through my use of the photographs. Like the quote in Figure 2 tries to demonstrate, hunters refer constantly to the idea of nature’s challenge as a main motivator for their engagement with hunting. This challenge has deep meanings for them that emerge from the opportunity to feel and act as their predecessors, those who lived through, and participated in, the era when the harshness of the New Zealand natural environment was firstly tamed. Being immersed within a sublime environment is a central aspect of this challenge and therefore it was essential for me to portray the sublime in some way in my narrative. Their more physical engagement with the sublime nature through the awakening of all their senses is represented in Figure 3, both through one of the hunters’ quotes but also through the photograph, which was chosen because it reminded me of a specific moment of one of my own trips when I felt particularly immersed in that sublime landscape; the wind was calm after days of rain and storm, but the trees were permanently bended by the power of nature. I felt I had been permanently bent as well.

It is worth noting that during my process of choosing the photographs I was increasingly aware of the impacts the sublime nature of Stewart Island had on my own experience and this awareness was not only made explicit in my writing but also influenced my interpretation of the material I had collected and analysed quite some time before the time of writing. Again, in choosing a reflexive methodology, I was able at that moment to re-interpret, re-analyse, and re-assess what I had already ‘defined’ as my ‘research findings’. As mentioned before, this is a constant process and, for me, my use of photographs enhanced my analytical possibilities.
Few studies in the leisure and tourism realms have discussed the gendering aspects of the sublime. In fact, the sublime does not feature in many discussions in these fields, despite its ‘re-emergence’ in philosophical debates over the last 20 years. In this sense, Bell and Lyall provide an important contribution, discussing how the New Zealand sublime landscape (tourism/leisure) experience has moved from one of pure aesthetic contemplation to one of active engagement, but which remains an experience that is nonetheless ephemeral. They call the latter the ‘accelerated sublime’. These authors have not, however, dealt with the gendering aspects of Nature or the sublime in such experiences.

In engaging with issues of gender as they are performed through Nature, my interpretation of the hunting experience in the sublime landscape differs in important ways from the tourists’ fleeting engagement in an ‘accelerated sublime’ proposed by Bell and Lyall. Such an interpretation had been evolving throughout the course of this project, but had a particular impulse after my engagement in the Annual Conference of the Sociological Association of Aotearoa New Zealand where I presented two papers discussing the sublime in New Zealand tourism practices and, more particularly, in the masculine performances of hunters on Stewart Island. In this forum I had the opportunity to be chaired by Bell, who made important comments about the way I was presenting my thinking, which triggered further developments and refinements. Bell and Lyall in their book argued that the sublime is excessively explored by tourists to destinations such as New Zealand, in a ‘post-modern’, accelerated way. This historically and culturally situated Eurocentric approach to the construction and appreciation of landscape and nature, namely the sublime approach, has undeniably persisted in contemporary representations of New Zealand, particularly those images associated with tourism and recreation. The argument of this presentation was that a restricted version of the sublime aesthetic persists in tourism and recreation marketing imagery, specifically that of primitivism, which best serves the purposes of product marketing. But more importantly, in the second paper I went a step further to argue that experiencing a recreational space as a sublime landscape may not necessarily be the result only of p
Although the photographs were taken by friends or by me while I was on Stewart Island, and were deliberately chosen with possible reactions in mind, my wish was that readers should engage freely with them and create their own meanings, significances and interpretations that will, nonetheless, influence their analysis of the material being presented. In Holm’s (2008, p. 326) words, “not only are the producer’s intentions for a photograph important, but also the photograph invites many ways of seeing it because viewers see the photograph in relation to themselves.” It was therefore my intention not only to bring myself to the text, but to bring the reader as well, further contributing to a co-constructed, intersubjective set of interpretations.

There was also a careful placement of words within/over images, as aesthetic meanings were underlying the rationale for providing the affective context. Such a preoccupation is involved in any kind of writing, particularly writings that intend to convey more than what the words are saying, but also in academic writing with all its codes, terms and norms (Richardson, 1995). These are, in one way or another, aesthetic concerns and I too strived to achieve a certain aesthetic in my ‘pictorial’ writing.
That's what I actually do enjoy about hunting on Stewart Island because I was actually having to be patient and taking my time, especially walking. You can't just flog along; you have got to be looking around you and all your senses are working, your eyes and your ears and you have also got to watch where you are walking because you want to be careful not to stand on a twig, that's going to go crack or a particular branch because there is lots of fallen trees and logs that are rotten and they will have moss covering them and it looks like you can go and stand on them but as soon as you stand on that it will just crush them. So you have got to be very careful about how you walk and even though you are walking slowly it's sort of quite physical because you are actually balancing on one foot and slowly moving and slowly putting one foot down. So it is actually, it's not like a gentle little walk. And you are going up hills and down hills and all these odd places, so it can be pretty tough. But it's peaceful and you actually learn your patience again especially when you take your time and every now and then you take five steps and stop and just wait and look around and listen and then you take another five steps and wait. If you think you are in a good spot, you just stop and if you see a deer sign you might decide, okay they have come through here, so you might stop there and wait several hours to see if any come through. (Tim)

My second way of expressing my embodied engagement with the project was through the use of snapshots of my memory ‘guised’ as photographs. These photographs, unlike others, represent special personal moments or moments that helped my understanding of the project. They were
intended to illustrate to the reader my visual and emotional memory of my experience on Stewart Island, at the same time illustrating a point I was intentionally trying to make in my discussion. In talking about kiwis and their significance to the tourist/tramper experience on the island, for instance, I wished to show readers how I too was able to photograph one, and how I had a clear memory of that moment (Figure 4); how I, as a researcher/tramper/tourist, transited between different spaces, in that instance clearly performing the norm and taking the picture of the ‘prized’ rare animal. While discussing the ethical issues involved with killing animals, I framed a deer (the valued prey) jaw bone found near a backcountry hut to question our common, rational assumptions about the issue (Figure 5). The photographs served, in this way, almost as supports, to myself and to the reader, for what I was discussing, why I saw relevance in the issue, and how my own performance played a significant and influential part in my analysis. The photographs were framed as if they were in a photo album where one goes back occasionally to remember travels, events, people and locations; they showed my attachment to certain experiences, what I looked at and noted while I was the researcher/tourist/tramper on Stewart Island; they were visual diaries of my research and overtly showed the readers how my understandings of the experience were constructed from my days on the island until my last day writing the narrative.

Figure 4
The third and last mode of my employing photographs did not involve embedding pictures in the text, or framing them as in photo albums. Although these too represent moments of remembrance, they were intended to be metonymic, my visual translation of events I experienced on the island, that is, as symbolic images of my experience in the context of the text (Figures 6 and 7). They were, therefore, used quite similarly to the second mode described above, but were less descriptive of my own experiences as a tramper on the island, and were more fragments of Others’ experiences, sometimes captured on camera by friends who shared the tracks with me on different occasions of my research, and sometimes by me during my solitary endeavours.

Figure 6, for instance, was included in the midst of my discussion about time-keeping in the tramping experience. Some of the material I was analysing in that particular moment were alluding to the importance of finishing the tramp within the time proposed by the Department of Conservation (DOC), the agency that administers New Zealand National Parks’ tracks and walks, or even doing it faster in a display of competency. My argument was that the ‘tourism product’ Nature, in the guise of an ‘extreme tramping experience’, was overly commodified and that the experience of this product had to be the same, for all, in search for a consensus. The tourist space there is produced by Others (e.g. tourism service providers, national/local tourism agencies, etc.) but the adherence to the
consensus that forms such a space is almost unconsciously performed. In order to competently finish the ‘extreme tramping experience’, one needs to do it within the set standards, or in this case, the times previously ‘stipulated’ by DOC. Comments extracted from visitor books found in the island’s several huts – such as: “The trail is challenging. Only five hours!”; “hey... I’m back & Southern Circuit in 4 days. Nice but very tough!!!!”; “2.5 hours from Mason, wet feet for first time”; “4h from Freshwater [hut]”; “5 h to come here girls, paddling and splashing in the mud, under our lovely rain”; “Freshwater [Hut] → North Arm [Hut]: 6hrs +, no DOC overestimates here!”; “had dodgy knee but even so path was abysmal. Leave at least 7 hours. We took 9” – were visually summarised, or represented, or expressed, or perceived, by the picture.

![Image of Doughboy Bay Hut](image)

Figure 6

What is interesting to note here is that the photograph depicted in Figure 6, as with all the others, was taken during one of my visits to the island, and therefore at least several months before I even considered including photographs into my thesis. However, it is symbolic that, in one way or another, the ‘time’ was also important to me. It was affecting me in such a way that I, too, was taking note of how long it would take to get to the next hut. When looking at the photograph later on, after comprehensively thinking through the issues of time-keeping and how commodified the tramping
experience was being performed on Stewart Island, I was made aware, probably once again but in a more vivid way, of my own position in the ‘race’.

This idea of the tramp being a race made a lot of difference to how I was experiencing the environment. The tracks, which can be strenuous, were becoming harder and harder, and the hours seemed to stretch longer and longer. There was little joy involved, and I hardly ever noticed the scenery. When it started to become less and less pleasurable, I realised the effect of having engaged in those dialogues; they were becoming my truth. As a ‘bush-walker’ for more than ten years, the feeling of being in the outdoors had never been so negative. I did not want to be part of the race but the race was ‘out there’ and that was what was making these trampers [including myself!] such an adventurous group holding values in common. (extract from the thesis, Reis, 2010, p. 211)

Sometimes it’s frustrating. I think sometimes it’s annoying, sometimes you just feel like ‘couldn’t the trail be a little bit better? A little bit drier? Or go a different path, or...?’ I don’t know, but, I was definitely more positive than my boyfriend, he would get really down, really frustrated, especially if he started to get hungry, he would just, like, completely lose it. I was more kind of the one saying ‘it’s ok, honey, you can do it, we chose to do this’. (Linda)

Quotes were used in conjunction with these photographs also, but they were not overlaid; rather, they were placed in proximity to the images with the clear purpose (although unstated) of providing the reader a chance to glimpse an example of what the experience would have been like for the participant whose comments were being revealed. Again, the photographs were intended to serve
as visual (loose) representations of emotional/embodied experiences. In fact, as mentioned above, all
gaphotographs were taken long before my decision to use them in my text. Over half of them were taken
by friends who, at some stage, shared Stewart Island tracks with me. All of these friends were aware
of my position as a researcher interested in other people’s experiences. Some of them were mainly
tourists in their visits; others were fellow researchers with similar interests in nature-based leisure
pursuits. The photographs were requested long after our shared experiences, and my intentions were
fully disclosed when I made such request. All of my friends gladly accepted my request with no
further questioning. The images are therefore mine, as I chose and positioned them within the text and
the research, my friends’, who captured instances of our experiences with and without much
reflection, others’ who participated in the research, as the pictures referred as much about their
experiences as of our own, and the readers’, who will read the text and hopefully take ownership of
the images as intrinsic parts of their interpretation of the material presented. In summary, through all
of those images, my wish was to add layers of meanings and emotions to my self-reflected, narrative
‘voice’. Whether the reader engages with them the way I hoped they would, as tentatively described
above, if they create their own ‘reading’ of my intentions, or if they disregard the images altogether, is
not important. What is crucial to me, as the narrator of the story, and to the piece of research I am
sharing, is that the option to engage with the material presented is available to the reader for
inspection and affection. The way the reader chooses to engage with the text, even if s/he dislikes and
rejects the approach, will provoke other stories, will incite other meanings to be constructed, and will
allow the study to be further developed, by me or by others.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Social science research has been using reflexive and creative methodologies for some years
now, but tourism studies has only recently included such an approach in the theoretical discussions of
the field (Hall, 2004). Hence my intention was to “reframe the narrative voice” of academe “in ways
that open up social science discourse,” in this case tourism and recreation research, “to a larger and
more varied audience, that make social science more useful, that allows for the silenced voices of
others and the silenced parts of ourselves to speak themselves” (Ellis, 1997, p. 134). My quest for a
more useful social science was echoed in my choosing a non-traditional and non-linear way of
approaching ‘data’ and ‘findings’, engaging with my research and my writing in an emotional way.
As Lash (2003) points out, reflexivity presumes non-linearity as it involves de-stabilisation and dis-
equilibrium. Therefore a linear argument could not appropriately portray the ongoing process of de-
stabilisation and re-construction. Moreover, research must be accessible as well as rigorous.
Following Richardson (2004), to be accessible contemporary research should engage the reader using
different forms of narrative. In my own research I have chosen what I consider a more emotional style
of narrating to incite not only the theoretical/academic thinking of the reader but also his/her
emotions.
My journey into this research has been one of change and discovery. On Stewart Island I became aware, in a most vivid way, of issues that accompany any research act, but that are not always acknowledged. Stewart Island then became a place where my understandings about myself and my project changed dramatically, and negotiating that understanding with others became a major process in my research. My ‘field trips’ to Stewart Island became part of my life experience; they were not ‘research moments’ removed from my own Self. There was no ‘stripping’ of my woman, immigrant, mother, stubborn Self. There, as everywhere else, I was the same complex of Selves, struggling to understand other people’s experiences as well as my own. Similarly to Ronai (1992), who could not let go of her experiences as an erotic dancer for her research in her everyday life, I could not let go of my experiences as a foreigner woman trampler while acting as a researcher on Stewart Island or, when back home, in the office or on the streets, I could not ignore conversations, signs, news, about hunters and trampers in New Zealand. As Katz (1994) reminds us, for me there was no ‘field’ out there to be ‘entered’ and then ‘left’. The ‘field’ was within me and the way I tried to express this was to bring, as much as I could, visual statements of my presence in all these places. The photographs helped me to bring Stewart Island, the hunters and the trampers physically and symbolically closer to me and to my work, allowing my writing to match my “personal experience[s] and the experience of the universe which [was] flowing into [me]” (Neville as cited in Brearley, 2008b, p. 14).

As Polkinghorne (1997) argues, the formats in which we report our research are not neutral and thus reflect our epistemological stances. In the case of my doctoral dissertation, a ‘traditional’ form of presentation would mask my own journey through this research, my contributions to the experiences, and my way of understanding them. The ‘messiness’ of the material I wish to present required, at least for me to be able to make sense of it, a rejection of linearity and an embracing of the idea that our thoughts, feelings and perceptions are formed in a circular process of ongoing negotiation and interpretation (Ronai, 1992). As Hoskins (2000, p. 56) has argued, “how the researcher’s subjectivity becomes part of the inquiry opens the way for creative ways of writing research. One way to explicitly acknowledge researcher subjectivity is to integrate the voice of the researcher into the research text”; my use of photographs was my way of making my own subjectivity part of the inquiry, of integrating my and others’ voices into the research text, and thus hopefully providing a creative reading experience for the reader as much as it did for me.

REFERENCES


