Chapter Two

Starting the journey from where I am: Ontology, epistemology and methodology

Preamble

Research aiming to unearth subjugated knowledges about women's ways of enacting their humanity needs to be underpinned by a credible and legitimate epistemology. The material of the thesis would consist of my reporting what I heard being expressed in the context of my interaction with the thirty women and I wanted to work the '*self-other hyphen*', opening myself to being transformed by our encounter, in order to hear what I do not know and often don't understand. My problem - centrally - was how I could ensure that my account of what I heard is trustworthy? As I wanted to go beyond my own paradigms and knowledge, I needed to ensure that I could hear the unknown, which begged the question of how I could be disciplined about the influence of my own strongly held convictions and tacit assumptions. The methodological/epistemological challenge, therefore, also became a question as to *what I could do to have as receptive an ear as possible.*

As already indicated, the feminist standpoint, materialistic and cross-cultural epistemologies expressed by women-writers from around the world resonated most with my intentions when engaging with the project. Moving on from these insights, I turned to some of the traditional canons of Western academic endeavour and found strong objectivity in the hermeneutic approach and its disciplined rules for interpretation, a scholarship at least 2000 years old. The contributions of Paul Ricoeur, through a lifetime of enquiry in the centre of

European philosophical academies, yield conclusions which affirm many of the ontological and epistemological propositions advanced by feminists from the North and South. Finally, I briefly look at the contemporary ethicist Emmanuel Levinas, who proposes that ethics begins and ends with inter-subjective encounters.

The final section of this chapter describes my methodology, including the choice of the in-depth interview method, the sampling strategy, the interviewing process and the techniques employed for data analysis.

I want to state rather clearly and unequivocally that I am not arguing against 'traditional' methods of scientific inquiry; I endorse Ann Oakley's (2000:45-71) recent work in *Experiments in Knowing*, as she talks about the dead-end of the paradigm wars between – presumably positivist -quantitative and – presumably more 'authentic' – qualitative approaches. I have chosen the approach best expressed by Sandra Harding's *strong objectivity*. In the edited collection, *The Feminist Standpoint Reader* (2004), Harding argues in her chapter that the weakness of traditional scientific methods is that they are applied too narrowly. Methods to ensure objectivity are applied only to the *objects* of the inquiry and only at the *justification phase* of the research process. Left out of scrutiny are the authors of the research and all the complex layers inherent in a research process. According to Sandra Harding, stronger standards for objectivity require, firstly, that the subjects of knowledge (that is, the researchers) must be on an equal footing with those researched. This means that the historical and social locations of the scientific community in question and the interests of what is usually a dominant group must be scrutinised by the same objectivity-maximising procedures of empirical observation and reflection (2004:136). Harding suggests that strong objectivity requires '*strong reflexivity*', operationalised from the earliest phase of knowledge development. Qualitative research methods literature lacks strong exposition of the means whereby claims to knowledge about reality can be verified and scrutinised (Oakley, 2000:291-306). I trust that I can provide clarity about the methods through which I conducted

the enquiry and from which I derived my findings and the present chapter intends to offer the foundations for that trust.

The chapter has been organised into four sections:

Epistemological/ontological insights: Cross cultural writings, natural sciences, more reality checks, my epistemology/ontology as a researcher
Critical hermeneutics
Inter-subjective ethics
Methods of data collection

Epistemological and ontological insights

Cross-cultural standpoint writings

Dorothy Smith states that standard social science constitutes devices deployed to:

> cancel the presence of embodied subjects as knowers. But the standpoint of women insists that we are always located in particular, actual places, knowing the society only from within…To know is always to know on some terms…There is no other way to know than humanly, from our historical and cultural situation. This is a fundamental human condition (Smith 1990:33).

Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (2000) begin their edited text, *Decentering the Centre: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Post Colonial and Feminist World*, with the notion that the most intractable exercises of sexism, androcentrism and racism reside not in people's attitudes and actions but in their invisible embeddedness within the institutional, civilisational and philosophical arrangements of society. These are the levels which have the greatest impact on people's lives, systematically excluding people from symbolic respect as equal human beings and from material resources (Narayan and Harding, 2000:vii-viii). In a world where colonial social relations have changed, however, we face inevitably the need to revise the deepest assumptions of our institutions:

> ... as 'Others' of modernity's ideal humans …are increasingly recognised as fully human, we should expect transformations in the fundamental landscapes of Western

> metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, and even philosophies of science (Narayan & Harding, 2000:viii).

Post-colonial and post-modern theories about *alterity* (the social construction of people as so different as to preclude identification with them as equal to ourselves; or as an *other*) entail a consequential openness to the destabilisation inherent in the experience that one's European assumptions are neither at the centre nor universal. This openness is the only ethical position possible, according to the philosophy of inter-subjectivity developed by Emmanuel Levinas (1979) and it is in line with the insights of Luce Irigaray (1993), Julia Kristeva (1982) and Offelia Schutte (2000). One has to face colonialism, because:

> … what it is to be human, what it is to think, what it is to know reality can no longer be defined according to one dominant cultural code. A Babel of tongues and ideas can no longer be dismissed as "barbarian", "primitive" and "native "(Nye, 2000: 103).

Trinh Minh Ha (1989) takes this analysis a step further by reflecting on the ethical relationship between herself as a writer, with the power to cement her concepts with the authority of academic mandate, and her responsibility to those she is connected to. This is particularly so when one is engaged in a social justice project of solidarity with the oppressed through emancipatory professional practice. Most social work and human service courses and research methods texts only in passing mention such perspectives, if they indeed mention them at all.

An exploration of migrant women's agency and the impact of Australian institutional processes on that agency requires us - logically in my view - to begin by understanding how each woman perceived and constructed meaning in her world. It was at this point that I discovered the profoundly different assumptions about nature, the self, reality and knowledge as reflected in the several philosophical disciplines (Nye, 2000:104). The present investigation then can be understood as an engagement with what Nye sees as the essence of philosophy, as "the reinvention of thought adequate to a changing world". As Gloria Anzaldua (1987) is famous for stating in *Borderlands/La Frontera,* this is the realisation that

there is no *master metaphysics.* Domination is no longer acceptable; as the human being is constantly engaged in interpreting his/her world, we need a *double act of interpretation* and I found tools for this in hermeneutics, the subject of the next section.

Texts on philosophy from diverse parts of the world have been published at great rapidity these last two decades and I will also draw on them in the next chapter about the theoretical framework. Such literature does not attribute sanctity to the individual, to the functional and to the pragmatic as we do in industrialised, (post?)-modern, consumer societies, such as Australia. Another important part of the context for my hearing the narratives of the women I spoke to is that their stock of knowledges has been validated across the millennia by generations of ancestors. For example, Egypt, Abyssinia, Kush, Dongala, Nobatia and Alodia (now Sudan) had intense interaction with the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs and so on, during which times Europeans lived as rather 'primitive' pre-literate tribes. Vietnam has a recorded history of 4000 years (Instituto del Tercer Mundo, 2001:504,567), during which time it succeeded in repelling much more powerful invaders such as China and, more recently, the USA. Literature is also emerging about personality inventories as a well-grounded alternative to the dominance of Anglophone and European psychology. For example, Japanese socialisation aims to achieve a 'polished heart' or *kororo,* where a well-adjusted personality accepts things as they are, is sensitive to the needs of others and shuns the privileging of one's own desires (selfishness) and where *independence* means that children are able to carry out the obligations and duties incumbent upon all members of society (Lebra, 1992; Rosenberger, 1992). In order, therefore, to produce trustworthy and valid knowledge, this research needs to begin with creating space for the epistemological and ontological equivalence of perspectives not emanating from Western academic contexts.

My approach to research and to the writing of the thesis is an attempted enactment of solidarity, by giving diverse worlds 'turns' at being pivotal points, dedicating spaces for the articulation of novel realities and needs. My chief intellectual and ethical endeavour is to be faithful to the women who let me into their lives and to the complexities of diversity. This is

neither a call for romanticising the exotic nor for forgetting that Western humanist discourses of human rights have been crucial in the formation and justification of resistance to multiple oppressions around the world (Mohanty, 1991:37). I am arguing instead that substantial exposure to cross-cultural theory and willingness to be personally destabilised are critical formative experiences for those who wish to work with people in an anti-oppressive mode.

I have already referred to Dorothy Smith (1990) at the start of this chapter; she is one of several feminist theorists who 'reprise' certain positions first enunciated by Karl Marx. According to the latter, the method of reasoning which gives primacy to concepts and their speculative manipulation is ideology because it obstructs the exploration of people's lived actualities (Smith, 1990:35). An extreme post-modern approach is to privilege diversity as endless and boundless pluralism; materialist, critical and post-colonial feminists name such theory as akin to a "smorgasbord", sterile in informing action on an individual, collective or political level (Smith, 1990:35; Weedon, 1987; Harding, 2004).

On the other hand, situated partial knowledges in all cultures point towards *truth*; standpoint epistemologies assume that by carefully articulating knowledge from a particular embodied location, social science and human understanding will be enriched through seeing patterns and connections which were previously obscured by totalising categories. Knowledge grounded in an individual's expressions of her reality is seen as valid, rather than as unrepresentative, because it is assumed that each person has a unique sliver of insight into the incommensurable reality under investigation.

I will now examine in some depth contributions from African-American feminist critical theory past and present, from present epistemological assessments in theoretical physics, from revisionist historical feminist literature and, finally, from my own other-than-AngloSaxon nativity.

African-American feminist critical social theory

In the second edition of *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Collins (2000) articulates African American women's subjugated knowledges and theorising: the material grounding of this Black intellectual tradition is in the labour of slavery and, later, in domestic work, as outsider-within white families, enabling unique insights into the contradictions of not only an oppressive social order but of the dehumanising features of US hegemonic knowledge. As Nancy Black, an inner city domestic worker said:

> Now I understand these things from living … Some women, white women, can run their husbands' lives for a while, but most of them have to … see what he tells them there is to see. If he tells them that they ain't seeing what they know they are seeing, then they have to go on like it wasn't there! (cited in Collins, 2000:11).

Already in 1831, Maria Stewart urged Black women to realise that race, gender and class oppression were the fundamental causes of their poverty. Decades before the development of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism and fifty years before the suffragette movement, she taught and lived out the power of self-definition and unison as sisters:

> It is useless for us to reproach whites; for that will never elevate us … Possess the spirit of independence … Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted (cited in Richardson, 1987).

The intellectual wealth of African-American women has only recently been painstakingly traced and published (Collins, 2000:1-3). Sojourner Truth, another slave, offered trenchant critiques about the intersections of class, race and gender:

> That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches. Nobody ever helps me into carriages … and ain't I a woman? … Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most of all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (cited in Collins, 2000, from Lowenberg & Bogin, 1976:235).

African-American feminist re-definitions of intellectual work

Most clearly elucidated by Foucault, there is now substantial acceptance of knowledge production as an exercise of power to sustain privilege (Foucault, 1994). Black American women go a step further in showing that the very category *intellectual* is itself a result of contested political processes. Similar themes are found in the sociology of knowledge (Karl Mannheim in the 1930s, Thomas Kuhn in the sixties) as well as in Gramsci's (1971) concept of the organic intellectual. Problematising the institution of academia, Black feminists propose a *counter-knowledge-as-understanding/wisdom*.

> … developing Black feminist thought as critical social theory involves including the ideas of Black women not previously considered intellectuals – many of whom may be working class women with jobs outside academia … The ideas we share with one another as mothers in extended families, as mothers in Black communities, as members of Black churches, and as teachers to the Black community's children have formed one pivotal area where African-American women have hammered out a multifaceted Black women's standpoint. Musicians, vocalists, poets, writers and other artists and … through their words and actions, grass-roots political activists also contribute to Black women's intellectual traditions … such women are typically viewed as objects of study, a classification that creates a false dichotomy between scholarship and activism, between thinking and doing. In contrast, examining the ideas and actions of these excluded groups in a way that views them as subjects reveals a world in which behaviour is a statement of philosophy and in which a vibrant, both/and, a scholar/activist tradition remains intact (Collins, 2000:17).

This argument resonated with me as noted earlier in this chapter; cultures with histories dating back thousands of years must possess knowledge and wisdom which, as a minimum, should be thought of as being equivalent to those developed by the Western social sciences of the three- or four-hundred year old project of modernity. This African-American theory is clearly relevant to my interest in non-hegemonic ways of being, knowing and acting.

Summarising the standards for assessing the validity of knowledge claims, "[e]pistemological choices about whom to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues" (Collins, 2000:252), these feminists remind us that the producers and authenticators of knowledge have personal, sedimented life experiences of

enacting and re-enacting their culture's systematic oppressions but also the sedimented resistances to those oppressions. Members of dominant groups, by contrast and consequently, are usually personally compromised and would reflexively reject propositions which differ from the taken-for-granted *common sense* in their own life-world and 'foreign' concepts and positions will usually be labelled 'unscholarly'.

Another epistemological test of knowledge claims deriving from these African-American women posits that *lived experience is a criterion of meaning*. Knowledge systems without correspondence to life are referred to as foolishness:

> To black people like me, a fool is funny – you know…people you can't tell anything to, folks that would take a shotgun to a roach … using thirty four words where three will do (Mabel Lincoln and Ruth Shay, in Collins, 2000:257-258).

This is in line with Western feminist writing about multiple forms of caring and about the daily sites where women learn to assess the knowledge claims of others, within contextual rules about relationships, with understanding built on listening empathically (Smith, 1987; Chodorow, 1978:167; Hartsock, 1983, Gilligan, 1982:15, 19; Collins, 2000:260). As I will show in Chapter Four, this mode of *conversational learning* was common in the cultures the women in this study came from and still 'inhabited'; they were essentially 'products' of communal societies. *The use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims* is thus another feature of understanding across non-western communities: "dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination." (hooks, 1989:131)

Thus, Black American English always presupposes the presence of a speaker and a listener. Other linguists (David Abram, 1996, amongst others) point to the feature of modern English (as well as other modern languages) as not using fully those grammatical tenses in the verbs which indicate *ongoing process*, being more oriented to *task and function* and having a level of abstraction where situations can be depicted – and reified - without the presence of the human subject. The title of Abram's (1996) book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, stands for an

ongoing argument for the need to realise what the reliance on the written word has done to our human capacity to understand without words, with our senses and whilst in conversation.

The ethics of caring and of personal accountability

Statements expressed with emotion demonstrate the authenticity of what is being said. Aretha Franklin's powerful song, *Respect*, if denuded of its emotion, would be emptied of meaning (Collins, 2000:263). Meaning cannot be separated from empathy – literally, *feeling inside of the* other - with the emotions, spiritual and other convictions of the acting, living human being one is in conversation or in relationship with. Such ways of knowing and authenticating claims to truth may still operate in the intimacy of Western nuclear families but with the increasing individualisation of human experience encouraged from early socialisation onwards, their fate may be sealed into directions predicted by certain strands of post-modernism (Fraser & Lee, 1992).

The ethics of personal accountability

Validity criteria include scrutinising the speaker's personal, ethical commitment to their ideas; for example, in the feminist and ethnic activist circles that I participated in, public experts may be dismissed if they are known to have *terrible personal politics*. Such speakers or academics may be relied upon for giving an official function public profile but their ideas are not turned to for guidance in the daily practices of life and work.

> Neither emotion nor ethics are subordinated to reason. Instead, emotion, ethics, and reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims. In this alternative epistemology, values lie at the heart of the knowledge validation process (Collins, 2000:266).

Black women as agents of knowledge

Having knowledge entails a responsibility for praxis, in pursuing the implications of the proposed ideas. Living out one's critique as a musician, as a singer, an actor and an activist is part of demonstrating the authenticity of one's intellectual work. In my experience, a similar principle applies to social work practice, where people who demonstrate continuous and comprehensive commitment to the ethics of empowering others in their professional and personal lives, are the most respected, even if not necessarily the best rewarded materially.

Epistemological evidence from the natural sciences

In the 1970s, Fritjof Capra (1984) wrote *The Tao of Physics* about the challenge posed by quantum physics to Newtonian/Cartesian assumptions about the constitution of the natural world – inclusive of humans - and of the scientific endeavour. Providing support from an unexpected quarter of scholarship for some of the previously mentioned positions, complexity theory emanating from quantum theory and applied in the biological and cognitive sciences provides evidence about the interconnectedness and self-directedness of all living systems (Zohar & Marshall, 1997; Zohar, 1997; Vella, 2002). Cognitive sciences cut across biology, psychology and epistemology and propose that cognition only occurs through dialogue (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Capra, 2002:30):

> The world everyone sees is not the world but a world, which we bring forth with others (Maturana & Varela, 1987).

Other reverberations are with eco-feminist thought, such as that of Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993; Shiva, 2000); with natural scientist Cindy Cowden indicating that she can only understand organisms by "*seeing with a loving eye*" (Cowden, 1984, cited in Capra, 2003) and in Jane Vella's recognition that quantum thinking is very much used as the basis for pedagogical theory (Vella, 2002:181-2).

More reality checks

Preparing for the writing of this thesis, I have kept returning to feminist writers from non-Western countries so as to keep myself continuously open to unexpected and unknown ways of being and knowing. Some of these writings I experienced as jolts but usually they were delightfully stimulating and engaging, even entertaining.

This thesis has illuminated for me the centrality of racism in the development and construction of Western history and culture. For example, Susan Lanser (1999) deconstructs a US novel, *Yellow Wallpaper*, occupying almost canonical status in gender studies, by exposing the profoundly racist activism of its author, Charlotte Gilman. The cultural context of the author in mid-nineteenth century America was a time of racism, xenophobia and national anxiety about the immigration of non-Anglo-Saxon people, such as other Europeans, Jews, some Asians and Latinos. Public discourses used phrases such as: "encroaching alien vermin, that turns our cities into Babels"; "yellow as a sick persimmon"; the "dark-pigmented things, the half-caste, the mongrel bloods"; Mediterranean people had "hot, degenerated blood". Yellow connoted inferiority, with conflated demonisations such as "in the guise of Bolshevism with Semitic leadership and Chinese executioners, (Asia) is preparing an assault on Western Europe" (Lanser, 1999:205). Charlotte Gilman, although an advocate of racial equality for Blacks, was a virulent racist, eugenicist and anti-immigration advocate. She claimed that the poor were of inferior stock and that America could not "put a little of everything into a melting pot and produce good metal (if the mix contains) gold, silver, copper and iron, lead radium, pipe, clay, coal dust, and plain dirt" (Lanser, 1999:206). The *Yellow* in the title of her novel is impregnated with such allusions and Lanser concludes by critiquing the text reading conventions accepted as legitimate in an *interpretive community* within academia: interpretive acts often involve projections of ourselves into the texts, events and actions of others, "because what we need the most is our own image reflected back to us".

The racism displayed within several British and American classics, including those of Charlotte Bronte and Conrad's (1981) *Heart of Darkness* have attracted lethal deconstructions by post-colonial critics, such as Chenua Achebe (2000; 2001) and Gayatri Spivak (1987; 1998) the latter coining the phrase *epistemic violence*. While espousing post-modern critiques, there continues to be blindness among feminist academics in the manifestations of racism and classicism in their daily situated lives. As Adrienne Rich urges all women intellectuals, we can only have made a *good start* in the work of reading beyond our current paradigms (Rich cited in Lanser, 1999:210).

For example, in her brilliant research into Islam and gender relations around the world, Deniz Kandiyoti (1999) shows that the monolithic concept of patriarchy needs replacement with the nuanced analysis of the particularities of gendered relations of domination, beginning with looking at women's active and passive strategies of resistance. Islamic countries have diverse indigenous histories and traditions, methods and relations of production, kinship systems, inheritance lines and property rights, mediating not only women's control but also the ways in which Islam is interpreted. Looking at case studies from Sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa, the Middle East and Southern and Central Asia, she illustrates *the patriarchal bargains* women strike and actively negotiate with men to maintain or extend their security, advantage and protection, including being paid for their services to husbands. Women in Asian and Arabic speaking countries can appear to collude in their own oppression by upholding vigorously the curtailment of their freedoms dictated by Islam but a closer investigation shows such submissions were estimated to be a small price to pay for securing male responsibility for their economic security. Kandityoti concludes:

> It should be clear that these different levels at which I have invoked Islam -kinship systems, the state, and political ideologies - cannot be conflated and must be kept analytically distinct. We should now be moving towards finely grained historical analyses of how they intersect, interact, and change (Kandityoti, 1999:232).

My epistemology/ontology as a researcher

As I am of Russian background and have participated in various incarnations of the Russian diaspora in three continents, including some close contact with contemporary Russia, my material here is likely to be more detailed because I am a quasi-insider.

My claims to insider knowledge, however, need to be subjected to post-colonial critiques of the problematic of the nativity of the researcher, the ascription of power of authenticity to her voice as an insider and the double privilege of her location as a scholar with Western credentials. The interrogation of what Jayati Lal calls "*the excavation of the Third World as a resource for Western theory*" is equally needed (Lal, 1999:100). Articulating one's own positioning at the beginning of research has become a mantra intended to show the author's awareness of current post-colonial thought. It remains a cosmetic effort, though, if it is not extended to the entirety of the research enterprise.

Clifford and Marcus (1986) have been notable in their contributions to the attempt to decolonise anthropology. Feminist critiques of the putative authenticity of the native researcher as tantamount to an epistemology of identity have included authors such as Gunew & Yeatman (1993), Butler (1990:17-18), Minh-ha (1989) and Berger-Gluck and Patai, (1991). In the quest to articulate non-colonising representations from non-subjugated standpoints, Jayati Lal concludes by arguing against the possibilities of a unique synthetic position which surmounts all the dialectics embedded in research, as we all live in contradictory locations: "*[t]here can be no blood count that determines post-coloniality*" (Lal, 1999:115). As researchers or writers, we choose the positioning(s) that we articulate and she warns against the false sense of security imparted by identity-based ontological categories, forgetting that self representation is as much a discursive construction as is the construction of the 'other'. We can only make a beginning in a decolonised methodology but that beginning has to be made (Smith, 1999). Perhaps a way forward through the politics and epistemologies of location inherent in the researcher-researched relationship is that the insights and material *must* (Jayati's emphasis) be put to political purposes.

Bell books, finally, reminds white people that they cannot overcome domination by seeking to learn from black people's cultural and human wealth (hooks, 1992:21-39); mutual recognition of racism and its impact on *both parties* is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy.

Critical hermeneutics

Over 2000 years, biblical scholars have developed hermeneutics as sets of rigorous rules for interpreting and achieving understanding of texts, according to available historical evidence of meanings operating in particular locations. Influenced by hermeneutics, Wilhelm Dilthey and Edmund Husserl focused on uncovering the primordial act of understanding, thus developing phenomenology. Husserl's major paradigmatic departure from Descartes was to point to the existence of a reality beyond one's own consciousness: that is, the Eidos, the universal essence or noematic content of the object of our attention (Dostal, 1993). Husserl's theories, however, did not move beyond principles for accurate empathy and, consequently, tended to lapse into solipsism (the view that the self is all that exists or can be known- Moore 2004). Nevertheless, the work of the phenomenologists is central to the emergence of a sustained critique of positivist approaches to social science and research and has led to the – often explosive – development of other than natural science and mathematical-statistical based approaches, collectively often referred to as *qualitative methodology*.

Hermeneutics and ontology

Heidegger escaped Husserl's problem by exposing the subject-object division as fallacious in the project of understanding human existence. Through an ontological inquiry into *Being* or *Dasein*, he revealed that being in the world is characterized primordially by *understanding* as the grounding of existence: one cannot be other than, simultaneously, understanding one's position in the world. *Understanding is therefore not a method but an ontological fact* (Heidegger, 1978:50-89; Thompson, 1981:39-41). The coterminous entity *being-understanding* is bounded

by one's inner universe of possibilities, is constituted by the projection of oneself into the future and the past, and being is, consequently and a priori, *historical*.

This seems to provide the beginning of a solid epistemological and ontological framework for my method of listening to women's narratives. It also illuminates the aptness of using *memory* for understanding people's lived reality, contradicting a possible charge that the narrative method only delivers *soft* data. In fact, there is no other way of finding and articulating human meaning except through an act of memory retrieval, simultaneously projecting into the future, according to one's inner conceptions of what is possible in reality.

Gadamer added to Heidegger's hermeneutic principles by emphasising that the historicity of being implies the *impossibility of taking the traditional Archimedean vantage point for alleged objective observation*. Gadamer also showed that, however reality may be objectified, there is a prior form of understanding constituted within language: *the truth of being can only be disclosed through language* (Gadamer, 1975:273-4, 432).

Paul Ricoeur, the eminent French philosopher, has contributed a voluminous body of work about the means whereby we can know anything and understand anyone, including oneself. His philosophical analyses have led him to propose some verities of human existence, focusing firstly on ontology and secondly proposing rules for attaining understanding.

Ricoeur - ontology

Ricoeur's major work on the voluntary and involuntary led him to conclude that *necessity and freedom* are both a-priori features of existence. Human beings "*have a freedom which is human and not divine*' (Ricoeur, 1966:486). Of salient importance for my inquiry into migrant women's agency, he contends that the voluntary comes first as: "*I understand myself in the first place as he who says I will*" (Ricouer, 1967:215). He breaks *willing* down into three realms: *I decide, I move my body and I consent*, corresponding to *needs* motives and values, *skills* emotions and habits and, finally, *character* and *unconscious life*. Other ineluctable, ontological facts are that being is always embodied and that the unconscious is another aspect of the

involuntariness of life to which one must give consent (Ricoeur, 1966). These propositions preceding his theory of interpretation and understanding feel strongly consonant with writings authored by women.

Hermeneutics and epistemology

Ricoeur treats human action as susceptible to the same rules for attaining understanding as texts, although some have argued against this equivalence (Thompson, 1981). He begins with a critique of the structuralist school of linguistics, insisting that there is a level beyond the sign and the formalisms of language. He urges us to not only look behind the symbols but to enter into the symbols and start by thinking with the symbols:

> … their substance is indestructible, that they constitute the revealing substrate of speech which lives among men (sic) (Ricoeur, 1967:317).

Reflection on the symbols aims to arrive at a deeper understanding of being. Understanding a text or social act involves two possible movements, the first one of scepticism about what is presented or said and a search behind the represented in time or for the underlying discourses or contextual issues which might account for the particular expression; the second movement needed is to begin with a willingness to listen to what is being revealed as articulated by the author. Both approaches to interpreting represent one moment in the hermeneutic process (Ricoeur, 1967) which I experienced during my research when trying to hear what the women were experiencing whilst, at the same time, applying a critical analysis, looking in the archaeology of the countries' terrains of colonialism as well as recognising links to worldwide patterns of geo-political dynamics.

The hermeneutic circle

Ricoeur adds that the foregoing subtleties are not a licence for arbitrary interpretation; hermeneutic rules start with the definition of the process as a *dialectic* one. As part of the scholarly project of developing tools for exploring the social world, Ricoeur accepts that diversity is a fundamental human condition and people's expression of their sense of reality

is contingent upon their location in time and space . Given this pluri-vocality (or multi-vocality) of existence, one needs submit the subjective intentions of the author to the objective meaning of the texts to look behind the text (critical political deconstruction); one needs to clarify the linguistic sense of the speech; and, thirdly, we need to look in front, at what the speech is referring to. Consciousness is, in the first instance, a realm of falsehood since it is built through socialisation and incorporation by osmosis of the mystifying discourses of all social traditions. According to Ricoeur, true consciousness must be achieved by means of a demystifying and corrective critique. The emergence of truth requires scrutiny and discussion by those who are familiar with the subject matter and the truth of a text may be regarded as the world which it unfolds, which is always illusive and equivocal (Ricoeur, 1974, 1991, 1993).

Application to the research method used in this work

We cannot step outside of ourselves or outside time: Ricoeur pointed out that the act of speaking has three dimensions, in addition to the rules of language. The act of expressing oneself is a creative act in itself and it is also, simultaneously, the making of one's own history, as history is the process by which people produce themselves through language, projecting themselves forward and backward in time out of their world of possibilities. Thirdly, the primary intent of speaking is to point at a reality beyond one's self. This certainly constituted for me the way out of the impasse of solipsism and the opening up of the terrain of multi-vocality, the space to hear layers of meaning echoing the imponderables and ineffable grounds of being (Ricoeur, 1974:290).

While I was initially motivated by a simple desire to give the women a voice, the notion of 'authenticity' of a voice has been roundly critiqued by feminists and philosophers since Wittgenstein. The speech, once uttered, acquires a life of its own, as the content is distanced from its author's original intentions. The content or meaning of the text now acquires saliency and is the object of attention, losing its mooring in the psyche of the author (Ricoeur, 1974). Ricoeur refers to the distanciation of the text as a key property of text or speech or acts.

Although I believed that the distance between what I am able to record of the women's stories and their intentions or experiences is a weakness of the narrative method, I was heartened to learn that, in fact, this distance or distancing is an inherent property of language.

I had another anxiety about the limitations of what the women would feel able to tell me in the context of our brief relationship and interaction. Feminist oral historians point to the salience of dialogue as the grounding for women's meaning-making and as the site for negotiations of the power relations of a situation at hand (Minister, 1991:35-36). The beginning of the thesis interview dialogues needed to consist of an equalisation of power imbalance between us, so that each woman could feel comfortable and validated as the expert from whom I needed to learn. Therefore, my embodied participation of encountering each woman and her story provides potentially stronger data than other methods, because I was able to hear and feel with all of my senses the meanings of their experiences, through nuances of their bodily expressions and vocal tonality. Within the confines of one face-to-face dialogue, I was able to touch their worlds and hence understand and capture meanings a written text, or a cleverly constructed survey or experimental trial, could not possibly hope to convey. As Ricoeur points out, the written text is even further distanced from the original intentions of the author because it does not know its audience and is completely severed from the socio-historical conditions of its production (Ricoeur, 1974).

This all lends more weight to the likely trustworthiness of my recounting. Adherents to the critical hermeneutic research tradition include Grondin (1994), Rosen (1987), Gross & Keith (1997) and Cohen *et al*. (2000), the latter applying the approach to research for the nursing profession and there is a strong emerging tradition in China, integrating the epistemology with neo-Confucianism and applying it very effectively to social work practice (Chu, 2003; Tao & Brennan, 2003).

Inter-subjective ethics

The 20th century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is part of a new - but also very ancient - school of thought which proposes that ethics precedes ontology and which includes other proponents like John Roth (1999), Martin Buber (1970) and Levinas (1988:163) defines ethics in terms of what it is not:

> For an ethical sensibility ... the justification of the neighbour's pain is certainly the source of all immorality.

These philosophers posit that *the starting point of any human life is interconnectivity with others in mutual subjectivity*; there is no self without the other and inter-subjectivity is the primary condition of life. The inescapable location of any human being in relationship to others and to the natural environment means that s/he cannot evade the question of morality as doing right (responding in respecting and safeguarding the subjectivity of the other which can only occur by treating the other as having equivalent worth to oneself) or wrong (taking away or denying the subjectivity of the other by privileging one's own).

Deborah Bird Rose (2004) traces the genealogy of the modernist project, beginning with Zoroaster (c. 3500 BC) first articulating the concept that, through conflict, the world is moving towards a conflict free state. She attributes to Christianity the teleological view of time as *linear*, with the present requiring sacrifice - which means people - for a future heaven, or apocalyptic new earth. She proposes that Christian ideas of time infused secular thought from the Enlightenment to create the modernist project of progressing humanity towards an enlightened, civilized future on the basis of scientific evidence and reason.[1]

---

[1] While in wholehearted agreement with the development of her argument, in my opinion, she errs in naming the disregard of the individual under the wheels of salvation a Christian concept. It is, in fact, a notion derived from Western European culture, based on Roman imperialism and systems of administration. The Eastern Christian church has continued its understanding of spirituality as centrally preoccupied with one's daily ethical encounters with the world around us, beginning with the routine development of inner life (Palmer *et al.*, 1995).

Whether a Marxist dialectical materialism, the benefits of economic liberalism, or bringing democracy to the Middle East, there is the same disregard for lives destroyed during the implementation of the grand plan (Bird Rose, 2004:15-19). Western thought is a monologue about its vision of the world as binary, with one pole defined as desirable/good/civilised and the second as the negation or absence of the first, hence needing to be subjected to a process of improvement by the superior towards being more like themselves; hence, man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, civilisation/savagery. These paradigms underpin the modernism project, which is essentially violent. Bird Rose cites the apt encapsulation by Plumwood of critiques by Luce Irigaray and of eco-feminists such as Maria Mies (Bird Rose, 2004:20):

> A crucial feature of the system is that others never get to talk back on their own terms. Communication is all one way as the pole of power refuses to receive the feedback that would cause it to change itself, or to open itself to dialogue. Power lies in the ability not to hear what is being said, not to experience the consequences of one's actions … The self sets itself within a hall of mirrors; it mistakes its reflection for the world, sees its own reflections endlessly, talks endlessly to itself, and, not surprisingly, finds continual verification of itself and its worldview.

The refusal to hear the other speak, or to only give them voice through the constructions of the narratives and epistemologies of the powerful, is violence and the peak of immorality, according to Levinas (Bird Rose, 2004:20-21) and the same point is made in a deconstruction of Australian multiculturalism by Elizabeth Povinelli (2002). This implies that a research approach based on dialogue between two human beings whose subjectivity has full equivalence requires enormous critical self-awareness on the part of the researcher and that this is the only possible ethical standpoint.

Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000:1057-8) comment on the need for the extinction of social researchers' fear for closeness to the researched as a source of contamination of data:

> Today, no one takes seriously talk of 'going native' … In its place looms the "Other", whose voice researchers now struggle to hear … We are trying today to show that we

> have lived close enough to them to begin to understand how the people who live those lives have constructed their worlds.

Method of data collection

As Denzin (1989:25) has argued, each methodological and methodical approach one might adopt to study a phenomenon will reveal different aspects of that reality and he suggests *triangulation* to achieve a more complete understanding of the reality one attempts to understand. Through triangulation, the weaknesses of one data collection method are compensated for by the strengths of the other complementary one(s), a quality which was achieved in this study by surveying established social theory – inclusive of research literature pertaining to the migrant experience - extensively and choosing frameworks which seemed to have most heuristic value. I found writings by women and men from non-English speaking cultures particularly illuminating, some of those contributions written in an academic vein, some direct narratives of personal experiences (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1986; Huggins & Huggins, 1994) and some artistic expressions (Harding *et al.*, 2002), including lyrics of musicals.

The women's narratives were the major source of information and the section below will outline my strategies for attaining logical exactitude and strong objectivity in the manner explicated before. The third source of evidence about migrant women and their agency resided in research reports produced by governments and researchers cited briefly in the literature overview in Chapter One.

The type of research I carried out belongs to the category aptly described by Becker as making the invisible more visible (Becker, 1986, in Denzin, 1989:33) and the methods used did not intend to refine or verify existing theory but rather wanted to explore and uncover, as well as - in the process - affirm existing 'knowledges-and-frameworks-in-use', beginning with my own sets of hunches based on personal and professional life experiences.

Choice of method

It was clear that I needed to undertake my research through in-depth interviews; because of my own purposes in completing a doctorate study and the consequent time constraints, I could not offer the women spaces in which they could engage in an untrammelled stream of consciousness, a method which has been thought to lead to 'pure' qualitative data or 'voicing'. Totally unstructured in-depth interviews also assume that people wish to be given the opportunity to talk about themselves at length and most women do not have the luxury – nor, often, the time - to do this. The women helped me by giving of their time in the midst of the 'normal' demands on their time and they would agree to participate in the study if they would find it meaningful in some way. A clear explanation of who I am, what I was doing and what I hoped to achieve through the writing of the thesis to which they were contributing represented the first step in contacting the women and soliciting their participation.

Having a clear purpose for our conversation not only furnished a meaningful context but also safety, where self-disclosure was circumscribed by parameters we had both agreed upon before embarking on the interlocution. It was also understood that we began as strangers and would probably not continue with a relationship. Although I am stating the obvious, an interview, as such, is a foreign concept to many cultures where more intimate or familial interpersonal paradigms operate. This was another problematic I needed to negotiate; both of us, my interview partner and I, were both located in an Australian culture where professionals render services traditionally the purview of the family or the neighbourhood/community in the countries of origin. As I had based the stratification of my sample on the condition that the women I was to interview would have been in Australia for a number of years, I could assume that they would have a degree of familiarity with the prototype of a professional relationship, given that anyone coming to this country needs to go through a settlement process in which much bureaucracy is involved, as would be their 'normal' life when settled. At the same time, I needed to deal delicately with the possibility

that some women may feel hurt when I would not reciprocate their gift of connection with me through the maintenance of a relationship of friendship. A semi-structured interview approach to our dialogue would provide the best means of addressing these issues.

Spelling out the themes that I would like us to explore together at the beginning of the interview, eliciting their expectations, establishing the level of their comfort and agreeing to maintain these parameters, would set the scene and the pitch at which our dialogue would proceed. Established and clearly enunciated themes are important for maintaining a focus on the research questions whilst privileging the women's own discourses (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996). Sondra Hale (1991:133) supports my approach by suggesting that the small but significant degree of distance demanded by the conventional interview mode shields the interactional and inter-subjective interpreter of another woman's life from false assumptions of mutuality.

I needed to rely on interpreters for three Vietnamese, one South-Sudanese and three Lebanese women. This is an inherent problematic for this genre of research; given that our modes of communication are socially constructed and assimilated into our identities, filtering our interactions with the world, being deprived of direct access to a woman's mode of expression entails a loss for me as a researcher (Minister, 1991:27-30). Sociolinguistic studies show that speech is an act or an enactment of identity, singling out individuals as members of particular groups and located in particular spaces (Etter-Lewis, 1991:52). Well-established feminist insights about gendered patterns of communication have implications for the use of interpreters in a conversation between women:

> Women talking to women use a unique dialectical choice of words co-ordinated with unique non verbal system for the purpose of exploring and naming issues unique to women. Women engage in the process of self and gender construction, and they do so protected and sustained within their own socio-communication system (Minister, 1991:34).

It is likely, unfortunately, that some precious insights and understandings have been lost in the translation, in addition to the limitations of the interview process itself as an artificial form of dialogue (Hesse-Biber *et al*., 1999).

Sampling strategy

My sampling strategy was *purposive, theoretical and stratified* (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Strauss, 1987; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A determining factor for the overall quality of my study and for the conversations I held was how I was introduced and how I was represented to the interview partners. The sample was a purposive one as I was relying on my personal and professional contacts with workers in ethnic services for referral to women. The workers I was relying on were colleagues and workers with whom I had had warm and trusting relationships for a length of time in my capacity as the manager of a Migrant Resource Centre.

The colleagues/workers had experienced me, firstly, as a fellow migrant who had the professional education and experience to occupy a position of some influence in the relatively powerless ethnic sector. They knew that I had continued to study part-time for the demanding award of a PhD in the context of long hours of work, the intense stress of working in a chronically under-funded community sector and, in particular, under the often unreasonable conditions pertaining to work in the ethnic field. The irrationalities of such contexts are issues all staff (including myself), talked about daily with irony and humour, sometimes with varying levels of bitterness. Secondly, I was also seen as an insider because I had related to the workers as equals, even though I may have been in a position of authority. Treating the workers as 'equals' means that I had usually seen their perceptions, their judgments and their value and cultural base as equally valid to the 'other' dominant 'Anglomorphic' perspective.

The third important factor in my representation through workers and colleagues was my personal commitment to migrants and my professional capacity to exercise some influence in

the public agenda towards their empowerment. My introduction to the women through a known, respected and probably liked member of their ethnic communities was important as they explained the purpose of my work and my motivation for interviewing them.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1986:11), an American citizen with an Egyptian father, describes his insistence on accompanying her at the beginning of her anthropological research on Bedouins in Egypt. Although embarrassed by this unconventional familial involvement in her professional work, she later writes about the impossibility of having gained any real entry into Bedouin society without the respectability conferred upon her by her father's introductions and I believe that a similar dynamic was at work in my case.

The sampling strategy was also guided by the intention to build theory from the evidence given to me about the lived realities of migrant women's capacities and incapacities to be the authors of their own lives. I carefully absorbed the logic of grounded theory as articulated by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998) and thus made decisions about who to include on the basis of my knowledge of social theory and practical life experience of migration and gender issues. I was – as already mentioned in the first chapter - also guided by the theory which was emerging in the last decade of the twentieth century, stemming from post-colonial critiques by women of colour. At the time of writing this thesis, there has been a veritable flood of previously unimagined insights about ways of being and knowing shared by the majority of human beings living on the planet (*Signs*, 2004).

The stratifying criteria used were, firstly, related to geography and historical period. I selected countries from which women had migrated in significant numbers during the period where services were in place to support them. Related to geography, I interviewed six women from each of five regions of the world: Vietnam, Lebanon, the former Soviet Union, the Philippines and the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea and South Sudan). Related to (Australian) historical period, I located my research in the post-Whitlam Labor Government era, after the abolition of the White Australia policy, the politicisation of minority groups, the

establishment of migrant support services and as Second Wave feminism had been fully launched. I made sure that a range of 'colours' was represented- that is, Asian, Arabic, European and African, and a range of religious beliefs, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, atheist. I told my informants that I needed to speak with women representing the broad spectra of education, ages and from urban and rural locations. A final stratifying criterion was self selection, as the women who participated were those who, at the very least, had some sympathy with my purpose, or who may even seriously have wanted their voices to be heard in the public arena.

Conducting the interviews: Pointers for effective dialogues

My key problem was how to listen well; the actions that I took to construct my interviews as an inter-subjective dialogue were only a beginning. There was continuing unease about my time with each woman being embedded in the power differentials between us and my appropriation of their lives as a resource to advance myself, primarily, in spite of my intentions and practice of personal engagement with women's empowerment: Jayti Lal's (1999) admonition about *excavations* of Third World women as resources for white academics remains pertinent. I still feel that I have *taken* from the women and I am reflecting on how to meaningfully honour their gifts and be accountable to them, apart from the simple courtesy of giving them copies of what I have written. This seems to imply a need for me to renew contact with the women, as a starting point, although I have mentioned before the fact that they knew that our interactions would not be the possible beginning of a friendly relationship; understood as accountability, though, I feel I owe it to them to 'report back'.

The dialogues needed to be experienced by the women as, firstly, sympathetic, warm, friendly, safe and trustworthy and, consequently, useful for them and for me. A positive relational context is essential to facilitate free and frank disclosure and I would want to suggest that the quality of primary social research data is directly related to them being elicited through warm, genuine human contact. Quality here means richness, 'thickness', capacity to illuminate for both speaker and reader, which exemplifies the principles of a

hermeneutic circle, with research being seen as a dialogical and reflexive process, through which the historicity and geography of both parties to the interview encounter are clearly taken account of in the search for meaning.

As Linda Smith (1999:44-49) articulates in her tentative methodology for non-colonial research, the goodwill of the researcher is of more importance to people than the technicalities of methods used. Of significant import to the richness of the dialogues was that I attempted to come with an attitude of humility, as a student wanting to learn from my dialogue partners as the experts on more than just their lives: indeed, as human beings whose strength and resourcefulness I personally admired. The above factors are not just *part of the context*, rather, they are an indissoluble dimension of the conversations we participated in.

Having been connected with the women through my initial informants, I rang each woman and arranged to meet at a place and time that was convenient to her. Except for an interview in a café and another in a university cafeteria, all were held in the women's homes, which – obviously - assisted in my understanding of their lives. Interviews ranged from one lasting five and a half hours (broken-up over two weeks) to an average of 90 minutes, with seven being between forty and sixty minutes. After the normal introductions and establishment of warm rapport, we had – as outlined above - a brief negotiation about how we would proceed, including my use of the tape recorder. The majority expressed hesitation about the tape recording but then agreed to go ahead; I needed to stop to turn the tape over and some of the women did alert me to the fact that the tape had stopped. Nevertheless, I am convinced that, although people usually forget about the tape recorder, being recorded served possibly to inhibit their disclosure and impacted on my sense of the propriety of probing about sensitive issues given the tape recording. A minority of women, two from Russia and one Filipina, had strong anxiety about the tape recorder, which mutely signified a rule of the conversation: *I could only broach relatively safe topics.*

We explored themes according to the women's *biographical* accounts, beginning with childhood and family life in its geographical and social life-world. The theme of *agency* was elicited through questions about their intentions (plans of life as young women), their choices and decisions (around marriage, migration), how they authored their lives by reflecting on what they would consider the good life and how they feel about the way life has turned out for them. Questions of *identity* were explored by asking the women to describe themselves, what motivated them, how they think they are perceived in Australia, how they respond to these representations and conversely. Questions of *ontological security* were broached by exploring their feelings during the first few years and by asking for their perceptions of Australian culture and people. I ascertained what resources were available to the women throughout the life cycle, including material, symbolic and interpersonal capital. I then focused directly on their struggles during settlement and what services or people in the community were involved or absent in their efforts. A good half of the interview related to experiences at different stages of settlement and the nature of contact with the full range of services, privileging their estimations of the attributes of service systems and professionals. The final lens used for understanding their ability to author their own lives was their observations of their own and their family's levels of participation in Australian society and what they needed to move closer to their lives' projects.

Analysing the material

The tapes were transcribed by a professional transcriber, through research support funds, and by me. I listened to the professionally transcribed tapes again to include my comments about my intuitions and hunches throughout our interaction, including the physical surroundings of their homes, the emotional dynamics around specific topics and my impressions that might have been unsaid. I used the coding methods of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), heuristic theory (Moustakas, 1990) and feminist research methodologies (Harding & Hintikka, 2003; Berger-Gluck & Patai, 1991; Behar & Gordon, 1997).

Somers and Gibson (1991:47) pointed to the dilemma in cross-cultural research about agency, culture and identity, which are themselves historically constructed concepts. A product of modernity, the notion of the social actor as struggling against the constraints of his/her social embeddedness is in itself highly problematic and culture-specific; the authors conclude that narrative and *narrativity* are the new means for hearing how women (and men) constitute themselves and their worlds (Somers & Gibson, 1991:59). Already before the interviews began, I was aware that asking the women to reflect on themselves in their engagement with life could be an imposition of a grid derived from the culture I belong to rather than being intrinsic to the lives of the women themselves and, in the last chapter of the thesis, I will recapitulate and reflect on the several impasses inherent in my research methods.

My analysis of the interview material is akin to the insights initiated by Carole Gilligan in her seminal work *In a Different Voice* (1982); I was aware, however, about the fact that the focus of the study precluded the building of a relationship of trust over some time to allow exploration of their intimate family relationships. Quite clearly, my research only elicited partial truths and the writings of James Clifford and George Marcus confirmed that this was the only possible movement (1986:1). The writings and art of Efi Hatzimanolis (1993:128-142) comforted me, however, as she wrote about memory and migrant women's narratives being fragmented expressions of contested desires for the future, of their pasts and their contemporary locations in the discursive and material intersections of power and difference Again, there are few women or men who have the luxury of being able to devote their time to the quest for deeper knowledge, be it as researchers or as researched. A number of authors point to issues of interpreting material offered by 'the other' in qualitative research, such as working the self-other hyphen (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The dilemmas feminists encounter in undertaking cross-cultural research have been summarised by Shulamit Reinharz in her *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992:109-125). There is an imperative to avoid as much as possible methodological ethnocentrism leading to

bogus claims to empirically-based universality and validity across cultures (Mohanty, 1984; Sandoval, 2000), as well as the perils of cross-cultural relativism which glosses over human rights abuses (for example, Andrea Dworkin (1974) using Chinese foot-binding as a parallel to the commodification of women's bodies in the beauty industry.

Taking into account the scholarly traditions of feminist oral histories, I was careful in writing up the material to demarcate what each woman said and what I sensed she was not able to say readily, because her experiences did not fit the dominant meanings as reverberating in the Australian language and one of my key quests was to hear these layers of reciprocal meaning giving. Women may also mute their expressions because particular emotions/stances may challenge their loyalty to their cultures' orderings of normality or value. Gluck and Patai (1991) provide valuable pointers in their seminal edited text *Women's Words*. The researcher needs to listen in *surround sound mode*, be listening for the multi-levels of meaning, the hesitations and for whose story is being told. Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, in the same text (1991:18-23), indicate that self-reflections reveal how women act to preserve or restructure their psychological orientations, their relationships and their social contexts. They suggest that we have to listen in three ways: firstly, to a woman's *moral language*; secondly, attend to her *meta-statements;* and, thirdly, attend to the *logic of the narrative*.

In my seeking trustworthy representations and interpretations of the women's narratives, I was reminded by Clifford and Marcus (1986:4-7) that my material is no more than "instances of discourse" and partial truths. People's lives are not fixed, but rather meanings are continually constituted and reconstituted through speech acts, expressing a multiplicity of negotiated realities within historically located and contested sites. I aimed to arrive at understandings and representations of the narratives which are as faithful as possible to the women I feel so privileged to have met and whose lives I appreciated having been allowed into for a brief, and almost always, poignant moment.

I engaged in a critical self-dialogue between the interview data, the theoretical frameworks and related writings, and Australian literature, such as empirical research, multi-culturalist theory, government policy documents, statistical and program evaluation reports about the welfare state and community services, a dialogue which – as already elaborated - also included my own heuristic journey and experiential knowledge. In this way, I looked for evidence which would satisfy the need for triangulation and saturation of my data (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Nelson & Hardy, 2002). I had begun the research with a hunch that the enormous creativity and energy of migrant women has been obscured in much academic writing and research. These hunches and the several momentous discoveries emanating from conversations with the women, with colleagues and supervisors and from academic literature all served to alter permanently the way I perceive and think about these issues. I had been granted 'thick descriptions' as elaborated in chapter four of Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000). In reproducing the *thick descriptions* through my narrative of the journey of this thesis, I will be writing it in the first person and elucidating my processes of meaning-making, including the sources which corroborated or contradicted interpretations.

Final heuristic reflections

I have been engaged with being a Christian disciple within the Orthodox church, representing an Eastern world view, for over two decades and I will not be able to bracket this fully. I, therefore, need to be aware of the nature of the energy and insight I derive from it. I was puzzled by Paul Ricoeur's (in Levi-Strauss, 1963) final references to *truth*: is it what is left over after undergoing the critiques of various discourses and what the author authenticates as approximating what is real for them? Since we create reality, however, does not truth depend on the range of critical resources available to us? What about spiritual critiques and systems: who is to arbitrate about and amongst them? What place does Western social science allocate now in 2005 to spiritual truths? It is no longer sufficient to

relegate this to the realm of individual privately-held beliefs and conceptions which are most likely to be illusory. Indeed, current social work texts as well as more general social science works give spirituality legitimacy as a sphere of life (O'Connor *et al.*, 2003).

The final movement in attaining understanding of a text or anyone, according to Ricoeur, must involve a personal incorporation of the insights attained and application to oneself to develop greater self-understanding. In a debate with Claude Levi-Strauss, Ricoeur said that it is not possible to separate any understanding from self-understanding:

> … if meaning is not a segment of self-understanding, I don't know what is (Levi-Strauss 1963:636).

In tune with French philosopher Jean Nabert, Ricoeur (1970:46) sees reflection not as an intellectual or epistemological exercise, but:

> … reflection is the appropriation of our efforts to exist and our desire to be, through the works which bear witness to that effort and desire.

I also feel - very much like Ricoeur - that the self of self-understanding is a gift of understanding itself and of the invitation of the journey to meaning offered by the study of and my contact with the women.