My Wedge, My Self

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Every morning, as I sit in my study on my faded blue office chair, my rosewood desk wedge with the shiny black and gold plated "Dr. Meredith Nash", stares me down. Received as a graduation gift from my mother, she made a point in recounting the delicate process of selecting the 'right' wood and name plate to match the gravitas of my newly acquired title.

Lately, I've been feeling the weight of my wedge in unexpected ways.

In addition to realising that I would no longer receive a student discount at the local independent cinema, over the last few months, I have come to the most uncomfortable conclusion that not only do I have a PhD, somewhere between submitting my thesis and receiving my certificate, I actually became one.

"Hello, my name is Meredith and I'm a PhD."

It is as though my PhD has become a statement of who I am, what I have done and supposedly how I see the world.

As a doctoral student, I struggled with the continuing quest for 'originality'; to choose carefully whose work informed my own; drawing upon the scholarship of others intelligently and thoughtfully; carving out a place for myself within a collective academic psyche. PhD students, however, occupy a space that is at once both powerful and marginal, caught in a liminal space between being and becoming. Within this often frustrating process of finding a place for my work and ultimately myself within the academy, nevertheless, there were those thrilling glimpses into the future in which I envisioned myself 'liberated' and left to my own devices as an appropriately credentialed 'doctor', far removed from the watchful eyes of my supervisors.

While the goals of doctoral research and praxis are centrally focused on the development of scholarly independence and autonomy, undeniably these concepts have originated in and long been dominated by masculinist modes of knowledge in which the 'independent scholar' is represented as male. In theory, the existence of Gender Studies programs and other departments representing marginalised voices, groups and identities in universities around the world indicates how powerfully the assumptions about who has the right to knowledge can be problematised and slowly dismantled, leading to revised images of the 'independent scholar'. In practice, however, Gender Studies programs always seem to be ground zero for "University -wide" funding cuts and staff redundancies. In my experiences as both a Masters student and PhD candidate, my department was forced out of its home three times in five years. Not only were we losing our figurative spaces for knowledge production within the normatively masculine university structure, we were literally losing our right to occupy space on campus. I never had the luxury of an office or even the joy of a mundane stationary raid for post-it notes and a variety of multi-hued pens and highlighters. I learned very quickly that Gender Studies was not valued within my university like Commerce, Economics, Medicine or Law. With

their new and fancy buildings and sparkling student hubs, the knowledge hierarchy did not feel like it was being dismantled; the value of certain disciplines was actually being built into the campus architecture. As I spent the majority of my PhD candidature working on my thesis at home, I often entertained myself with fantasies of a post-PhD scholarly life, surrounded in leather-bound books, writing important things at an oversized desk in my own office with my name and title carefully etched onto my frosted glass door at a university where feminist scholarship was a permanent fixture.

Feeling angry about having to justify the value of my work and ultimately myself as a feminist scholar to the university elite, it occurred to me that I still had my writing and my research. The university could take away my office and my highlighters (and thanks to a redundancy package, eventually my supervisor) but I knew that I could use my PhD research and dissertation to develop ways of looking at my own multiple, shifting selves, as well as a way of seeing that offered agency and new forms of representation for my pregnant informants in Melbourne. For me, the process of becoming an 'independent scholar' would not be unemotional or disembodied as dictated by the principles underlying scholarship and 'rational' knowledge throughout the history of Western philosophy (Lloyd). For me, the use of feminist methodologies would be crucial in undermining the Cartesian dualist assumption that all 'bodies' in social science research are male; both the bodies under investigation as well as the bodies doing the investigating (Clark xxvii).

In my dissertation, I explore feelings about body image and 'fatness' in a sample of pregnant Australian women in Melbourne, Australia. I was drawn to qualitative methods because these approaches appeared to be the most effective means of giving my informants a 'voice' through open-ended interviews and of allowing for a rich contextualised account of women's subjective experiences of pregnancy (Mies 119). Enhanced reflexivity on the part of the researcher, the recording of women's life narratives, and the possibility for more developed critiques of dominant socio-cultural meanings are a few of the most important claims of feminist research which were important for my research (England 82). In longitudinal studies of motherhood, pregnancy or childbirth, women's personal accounts are commonly multi-layered and complex, reflecting women's different ways of knowing. I chose a narrative framework and adopted a 'feminist' interviewing style in order to make visible the complex lived experiences of pregnancy. As most of my informants were pregnant for the first time, I became preoccupied with ensuring that they had the opportunity to express *their* feelings especially if those feelings did not fit seamlessly with 'public' or cultural accounts of pregnancy. This framework was important considering my informants were engaged in an ongoing project of negotiating their pre-pregnancy identities with their pregnant identities; narrative analysis allowed for a richer understanding of both emotional and physical transformations of self. As I became personally involved in the lives of my informants, Ann Oakley's classic discussion of the blurring of boundaries between 'friend' and 'researcher' resonated with my experiences in my attempts to practice feminist methods (41).

Throughout the research period, it became a project in itself to understand and process the

conflicts and contradictions around power in my relationships with the women that I talked in my position as a childless woman, a feminist researcher and a 'doctor-to-be.' I did not share the experience of pregnancy with my interviewees but my research experiences inevitably led to considerable reflection on the process. The more I listened to my informants' unique experiences of being pregnant and the more I asked a wide range of questions, invariably, the more questions I was asked by my informants over time about certain aspects of being pregnant even though they were aware that I had never been pregnant. This was one instance in which the unbalanced power relations between myself and my informants became apparent. My embodied position as childless throughout the research process, however, was also one aspect of my personal history that had the potential to shift power to my informants. I believe that the fact that I was a young woman interested in the lived experiences of pregnancy rather than a mother with experiences of her own to colour the research meant that my informants felt empowered and respected. My status of 'non-mother' was important because I was never in a position to judge my participants or their pregnancy behaviours and compare them to my own.

My story of becoming a 'doctor' and the shape of my research, however, were framed by more than just my own committed adherence to feminist principles and methodology. For the last four years, it has been my experiences as a social commentator and freelance writer that transformed my experience as a PhD candidate but also my approach to doing research and my praxis as a feminist scholar.

During the early stages of my research, I developed a public profile as a pregnancy researcher as a result of my initial attempts to recruit participants for the study. I put out a press release through the media office at my university detailing the study and noting that I was looking for pregnant women to interview. The day my press release was distributed to the major media agencies in Australia, Angelina Jolie had just given birth for the first time. High on the fumes of Angelina's fertility, as a result, my imminent research about pregnant body image was picked up immediately as an interesting media story framed around whether pregnant celebrities make 'real' women feel 'fat'. Immediately following this, I was inundated with emails and phone calls from pregnant women who wanted to participate in the study as well as from other journalists and news agencies wanting to speak to me about my upcoming research. I started a research website as a way to allow prospective interviewees to contact me and this proved to be extremely important for the development of an online presence. Details of my work appeared in every major Australian newspaper, I was invited to appear on breakfast television shows, and I did a number of radio interviews throughout Australia. It was at this point my PhD research developed a personality of its own, outside of academia. I realised that if I wanted to maximise my public presence, I would have to find another way to make my research visible and valuable to women outside of the confines of my dissertation. It was at this point that my research transformed into a blog called "The Baby Bump Project" and I became very committed to making my work accessible to a non-academic audience.

The Baby Bump Project grew out of my dissatisfaction with the dearth of 'feminist' web

resources available to pregnant women. Most of the sites I looked at fell in to two categories: 1) informational websites or forums about pregnancy and birth or 2) sites that paid fawning tribute to celebrity pregnancy without any reference to the gap between the fantasy worlds of the rich and famous and the everyday struggles and negotiations faced by the majority of working, middle-class mothers in the West. Like my approach to interviewing, I saw the blog as an alternative space in which women could talk about their lives in a place where it was okay if their experiences did not match cultural or biomedical representations and expectations around pregnancy. Every day, I provided a feminist and sometimes academic spin on a range of issues including celebrity motherhood, body image, moral panics about maternal obesity, breastfeeding and birth.

In Blog Land, I was still in the strange position of being the childless woman fixated on understanding mothers but I never claimed to know more than they did. I encouraged women to send in photos and stories of their pregnant and postpartum bodies to dismantle the illusion that all women look perfect and skinny when they are pregnant and beyond. Readers eagerly contributed their comments on my posts, sharing their thoughts and photos and engaging in a dialogue not only with me but with *each other*. I felt that the blog allowed me to provoke discussion with other women in a way that would be difficult or even impossible had I only focused on sharing my research with other academics in peer-reviewed journals. Over a short period of time, the blog proved to be a success, garnering an international readership and wider exposure. My work made its international debut in *The Globe and Mail* and various North American pregnancy magazines, leading to further opportunities to consult on documentaries about celebrity pregnancy and a slew of invitations to write about pregnancy in mainstream publications. As a result of seeking out ways to cultivate my expertise outside of the academic sphere, I began to attract consultancy income as a pregnancy and parenting expert for popular publications on women's reproductive health issue and soon after was regularly sent products and books to review on the blog. These early experiences as a media figure opened my mind to the idea that I did not have to seal my fate in academia. Rather, it became increasingly important for me to approach the social reality of women through the establishment of new relational spaces or virtual meeting points between women through the internet, the mass media and through networks in the maternity industry.

As I reflect upon my somewhat conflicted reinvention from *PhD candidate* to *public figure*, it is clear that I was looking for a way to be known and to belong, simultaneously and incoherently trying to find a home for my research outside of my gendered and political subjectivities as *student* and *feminist* within the politics of my university. Given the high level of interest generated by my research not only from the media but from women themselves, suddenly I felt empowered to bring the experiences of women to the fore but also to have my own voice heard for the first time as an 'authority' so different from my typical experiences as a PhD student.

This public power, however, came with surprising *responsibility*. As I continued to be interviewed by various media outlets, I realised that my position as a PhD student commanded

an almost unwarranted respect. I was routinely referred to as "Dr. Meredith Nash" in magazine articles in spite of my attempts to explain to journalists that I was not yet a doctor but only a PhD candidate. Pregnant women who read about my study sent me emails with complex health questions, unaware that my position as a PhD candidate in Gender Studies hardly qualified me to provide them with any legitimate medical advice. Being a public figure was liberating but also a weight on my conscience to work and write and think in a space where, for the most part, my ideas were taken at face-value.

At first, it was extremely difficult for me to answer questions from journalists and to perform my expertise in the way that I was expected. Although I became adept in the art of the 'sound bite', I cannot deny that at the time and still to this day, I feel uncomfortable simplifying complex emotional experiences of pregnancy weight gain, for instance, in one sentence or less. I will never forget a taping of a television interview with a national Australian current affairs program. The journalist asked me if I thought that pregnant celebrities were a "bad influence" on everyday pregnant women. As I started to provide my response, prefacing that body image is complex and shaped by a number of different factors, the journalist cut me off. "Can you just say yes or no?" I was taken aback for a minute but I realised that this was a new game and I had to learn the rules if I wanted to play.

The mass media is a world without footnotes, where a phone call to an 'expert' constitutes 'research' and where using academic language is your death sentence. My participation in the public sphere has often been met with disapproving looks by my colleagues, as though I sold myself to the devil. Engaging with a non-academic audience is seen by many academics (feminist scholars included) as too low-brow. If only I had a dollar for every time I have been given The Why-Are-You-Wasting-Your-Time-Talk. Nevertheless, while my foray into minor celebrity has been met with some resistance within an institutional culture that devalues non-academic writing, at the same time, I have been extremely lucky to have received support from elements and key individuals within my university that understood the power of knowledge transfer. Over time, my university became extremely focused on encouraging academics to put their research out in the public domain and entire departments were constructed around knowledge transfer. I became heavily involved as a student and as later as a consultant in a three-part unit designed to teach PhD students how to abandon their footnotes and translate their academic work into something accessible for a non-specialist audience. In this program, I was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship to transform my dissertation into a mainstream book, contracted by a literary agent, and provided with mentorship from an influential writer, feminist academic and public intellectual who has been helping me to develop my manuscript proposal.

Up until this point as a newly minted PhD, my feminist praxis has not only been heavily predicated on qualitative research but also thinking through the uses of communications technologies as a primary means of engaging women outside of academia in feminist dialogue. For me, blogging and interacting with pregnant women and mothers online has felt like a new frame for the axiom 'Our Bodies, Our Selves' in which mostly middle-class women

from around the world can come together and talk about their maternal bodies uncensored in virtual spaces (Shaw 49). While my actual PhD research prioritised face-to-face social interaction as a primary means of knowledge production, my experiences in the media have also shown me that while perhaps not a replacement for human contact, there is also value for feminist scholarship in exploring the embodied dimensions of virtual human-technology interactions. For example, in addition to my blog, I have been experimenting with different forms of social networking including "Facebook" and "Twitter" to engage pregnant women in conversations about their bodies. The mobile nature of these avenues for 'meeting' has proven to be satisfying not only for the immediacy of the interaction but also in terms of the possibilities for women's agency as both consumers and producers of knowledge about pregnancy. The dynamic interface of Facebook, for example, allows 'fans' of The Baby Bump Project to post web links and images in addition to their own thoughts in a forum that is not moderated by me in the way that the blog requires.

And this brings me back to my mighty wedge. As an early career researcher, it is very easy to get wrapped up in publishing in the 'right' journals and networking with the 'right' people and attending the 'right' conferences. Although I am traveling down a different road in my adventures in the public sphere or writing a book for a popular audience, it is by no means an easy stroll. Simplifying complex ideas while at the same time trying to keep my writing incisive, witty and intelligent is an ongoing project of frustration with only momentary daily glimpses of success. This project, much like the writing of my dissertation, challenges me and my capabilities as a writer with every new sentence.

Becoming an 'expert' in the public sphere was somewhat unexpected but has, over time, earned me a level of respect that I am still working exhaustively towards in my academic life, whether it is trying to land a post-doctoral award or applying for full-time teaching jobs. Sometimes when I think about who I am and where I want to be, the institutional politics of university life seem so far removed from the non-academic life I have created for myself.

Am I diluting my credibility as a feminist scholar by engaging with feminist ideas in the public? Maybe I have lost a little of my power among my peers by taking Facebook seriously as a tool for feminist praxis but the truth is that everyday women engage with Facebook and blogs in a way that they are unable to with peer-reviewed feminist journals. Ultimately, while I decide what it means to be Dr. Meredith Nash at this point in my life, I do feel that writing for 'real' women is an important component of my feminist praxis right now. I am aware of the dangers of letting myself slip too far outside of the hallowed halls of academia. I have already been warned that writing a book for a non-academic audience is a waste of my time when I could be transforming my thesis into an academic book. But the truth is that when I started my research, although I did not fully comprehend the weight of my project at the time, I was doing it for the women in my study. No one had ever asked these women how they felt, what they thought, what they knew. My interest in their lives was meaningful and my continuing engagement in the public sphere is an outgrowth of the indebtedness I feel to my initial group of 38 women who made my research possible.

And my wedge?

Sometimes now when I look at my wedge, sitting on its high horse, it feels a little bit like my title is mocking me. I am not surrounded by leather-bound books. I still do not write behind an oversized desk in an office of my own at a prestigious university. It is not always clear to me that Gender Studies will remain a fixture at my own university. Sure, I still get a little thrill upon receipt of an e-mail addressed to "Dr. Nash" but being a PhD is not a license to relish in my own self-importance. Right now, being "Dr. Meredith Nash", a feminist, an 'independent scholar', means more to me than what my degree represents.

All I can do now is just laugh at my wedge. Being "Dr. Meredith Nash" is the freedom to do work that makes a difference in the lives of women (both 'real' and 'virtual') inside or outside a university.

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