



Negotiating Boundaries in Research on Native American Authors

In the spring of 2002, when I was a fourth year undergraduate at the University of Minnesota in Cultural Anthropology, I was asked by Professor Miller of American Indian Studies and American Studies to contribute to a growing online resource called Voices from the Gaps. This Web site about women writers of color in North America was originally designed to fill the gaps in contemporary literary discourse. It serves as a resource of biographical and bibliographical information and as a forum for critical thought on the works of women authors who fall into the category “minority” or “of color.”

With my professor’s sponsorship I took on a project to research Marcie Rendon, an Anishinabe playwright, poet, and children’s book author. This research resulted in my writing a biographical summary and a criticism of her literary work, which was published on the Voices website in the fall of 2002 as an author page for Marcie Rendon. In this paper I will talk about the process of the research that resulted in the Voices author entry for Rendon. In particular, I want to focus on the hidden challenges I faced as a white university student researching and writing about a Native American author. These challenges centered on the issues of boundaries and culture, particularly my role as a white researcher writing about a Native American author.

I describe these challenges as hidden because I think that our own, my own, dominant American culture tends to define itself as cultureless. This positioning creates a mindset that results in the assumption that, as researchers, if we follow the rules we’ve learned about fairness and objectivity, what we produce is truth or close to it. Our sense of being cultureless creates the mindset that we have no boundaries. We don’t necessarily acknowledge that what we see is defined by the categories we impose on what we study. When researching other people, we often don’t acknowledge that they may have different conceptions and categories. We often don’t acknowledge the boundaries that exist between the researcher and the researched. In my studies as an Anthropology student, I’ve learned that these categories and ideas about reality are transmitted through culture. They form the very questions we ask and conceptions we conjure in the making of a product. In my case, the product is an author entry that presents selected facts about Marcie Rendon, her work and her life.

The process of my research can be broken down into three phases. In the first phase I read everything I could find written by and about Marcie Rendon. In the second phase I made contact with Rendon, conducting an online interview and attending two of her readings in Minneapolis. In the third phase I synthesized all the information I had gathered into a final product. Throughout each phase of the research I was confronted with boundaries that delineate separate realities informed largely by our cultural background and life experiences. To protect the uniqueness and diversity of our worldviews—our very identities—we maintain boundaries as a way of claiming power. A boundary isn’t static.



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However, boundaries are real, even if some of us are taught to ignore them. My confrontation with boundaries in the research I conducted made me examine this question: How do I identify and negotiate these boundaries so that I can see more clearly the person for who she is, not for who I think she is?

Through the three phases of the research I found that there were four different responses that helped me to acknowledge and negotiate boundaries: discomfort, surprise, confusion and resistance.

Phase One

In the first phase of the research, when I was reading Rendon's work, I experienced some discomfort in response to her artistic statement. She writes about her own experience as a Native person:

We were kept in their mindset as “vanished peoples.” Or as workers, not creators. And what does this erasing of individual identity do to us? Can you believe you exist if you look in a mirror and see no reflection? And what happens when one group controls the mirror market? As Native people, we have known that in order to survive we had to create, re-create, produce, re-produce. The effect of the denial of our existence is that many of us have become invisible. The systematic disruption of our families by the removal of our children was effective for silencing our voices. However, not everyone can still that desire, that up-welling inside that says sing, write, draw, move, be. We can sing our hearts out, tell our stories, paint our visions. We are in a position to create a more human reality. In order to live we have to make our own mirrors.

In other words, Rendon is saying, “Hey, we’ve been systematically wiped out and targeted, but we didn’t vanish. Now we’re being treated as though we don’t exist, and we’re otherwise being misrepresented by the mainstream.” Rendon is saying that her power comes through self-representation. I had to agree with her, and I think that it’s great that she is making this claim, because I am interested in Native American empowerment. However, I had to responsibly ask myself the question: Where does that put me, the white university researcher?

I felt uncomfortable after reading Rendon's artistic statement, and this discomfort indicated to me that I had reached a boundary. I am not Anishinabe, and for that matter I don't have any Native American heritage—my great grandparents immigrated here. Therefore, I exist on the outside. In fact, I've been raised in a setting that reinforces stereotypes of Native Americans. Not only do I not understand what it is to be a Native American, I had preconceived notions about who or what Marcie Rendon was or might be. If I were to represent her in a Voices author entry, I wondered, would I be in effect disempowering her?



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I had to make a choice about my research. I chose to acknowledge my position as a non-native person, and I chose to try to listen to her without thinking I knew who she was. I chose to actively notice my own viewpoints throughout the process of the research.

Once I had finished reading works by and about Marcie Rendon, I had a few thoughts about who she was. Based on the breadth of her publications and activities and the powerful statements in her writing, I thought, hey, this woman is pretty feisty and outspoken. I'd better be careful about how I interact with her because she might not like that I, a white university student, is going to be "researching" her.

In the second phase of my research, when I actually met Marcie Rendon, these thoughts were challenged.

Phase Two– Interview and Public Readings

I arrived at the Birch Bark Books Nitaawigiche reading and looked for Rendon, but didn't see her. She arrived after another reader had begun. When it was her turn to speak, Rendon informed us that she wasn't very good at reading aloud to other people. She spoke quietly. I was surprised and confused by her shyness.

As she read her poetry, Rendon sounded awkward and uncomfortable. This was not the Rendon I had envisioned. The confusion and surprise of seeing Rendon as a shy speaker made me realize that I had been looking at her too simplistically. I had assumed she embodied my vision of what it is to be confident and outspoken and feisty. I thereby breezed over a boundary. My confusion and surprise were important indicators that I needed to keep myself in check, stay on my toes and continue to notice how my thoughts about Rendon might not match up with reality.

Due to Rendon's hectic schedule, I conducted an online interview. She took the interview seriously and responded generously to my eighteen questions about life, work and general topics. However, she mentioned her family only briefly, and she didn't talk about the struggles in her life. I tried to phrase my original questions to include these aspects of her life, but Rendon chose not to address them in her responses. I viewed the lack of information about family as either her desire for privacy or her perception that it was irrelevant to this project. But, I thought, how could her life struggles not be relevant to her writing? In short, I wanted the dirt.



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Keying in on one of her responses, I sent an e-mail message asking her to elaborate on the experiences that compelled her to “write to stay sane.” She responded evasively: “I think that rather than trying to ‘list’ the struggles faced, it’s more important to say the ‘meaning’ derived from such struggles...”

I rephrased my question, saying how it might be nice to have a context for the meanings derived. Rendon said she didn’t have an answer, but listed a bunch of themes: “loss, freedom, loneliness, alone-ness, personal significance, every human life is precious, we are never alone...”

I rephrased my question again. She didn’t respond for a while.

Finally, she sent me an e-mail that said, “Okay let’s start over. What are you trying to ask me?” This issue was never resolved, and I never learned about her struggles. I read Rendon’s response as a resistance. I had met another boundary.

The issue may have been privacy, but it may have been something else. I went to my advising professor to see what she thought about Rendon’s confusion. Professor Miller explained that Rendon might view herself more in the context of her community than as an individual. She might see her struggles as the struggles of her people. Her writing isn’t really about her as an individual, but as a representative of her community.

In the interview Rendon wrote, “I am a Native woman and I write for a Native audience because that is what I know. If I can make another Indian laugh or cry then I feel like I have done my job as a writer.”

Phase Three– Selectivity

In the third phase of the research, I needed to assemble the collected data into a final product. I wanted to include the most direct information by using excerpts from the interview and quotes from her writing within the author entry. Yet it was not possible to include everything I had learned and read about Rendon. I had to make choices and set limits, which shaped the way Rendon is represented in the final product.

Most importantly, I had to choose which information to include and exclude. I made this choice based on what I thought to be essential and important information. I don’t know to what extent my choices were based on what Rendon thinks is essential or important, but I tried to emphasize things that she emphasizes in her own writing. It’s necessary to understand that, as the researcher, I had free reign to select things that I liked.



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I therefore chose quotes that to me seemed empowering and beautiful. For example, I opened the Voices entry with the following quote:

*woman
you are strength
you have given birth
to daytime visions
and nighttime dreams
you are the keeper
of a nation
yet to be born*

-- Dreaming into Being

I chose this quote because I think it's beautiful. I also chose it because it a powerful statement about womanhood. What's important to remember is that I chose this quote to the exclusion of other quotes. I didn't choose, for example, the poem "jesus christ" which begins, "jesus christ wasn't born a woman, menstruation would have kept him out of the temple..." In making choices, I set limits.

By the end of my research process I was still a little curious and confused about who Marcie Rendon really is, but I definitely had some thoughts about her life and her work, and these thoughts influenced how I represented her. I think that an important criticism of my author entry of Marcie Rendon would be to ask, did I romanticize her?

In summary, my experience as a researcher demonstrates that the researcher is an integral component of any biographical work. The biography is really a product of the interaction between the researcher and research subject. The influence of the researcher comes at each phase of research – from fact-finding, to interviewing to selecting and formulating a final product.

Therefore, researchers need to be aware of their own relationship to the research subject. They must make conscious efforts to listen or read without preconceived notions of who or what it is they are listening to or reading about.



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The second reading I attended was at a cabaret where there were six different presenters. One danced, another did stand-up comedy, others read poetry, and there was even a Chinese opera singer. When it was Marcie Rendon's turn to read, she commented, "Americans say they don't have culture, but I can tell you that this, this event tonight, this Cabaret, is very American." Then she read this poem:

*I am tired of being
romanticized
your emptiness
attempts to
devour me
mind &
heart &
soul
I run
as canny as a fox
sit in wide open spaces
hidden only
by the shadow of a
cottonwood leaf
harried
hurried
you pass me by
searching
hidden valleys
secluded caves
for bits of you
you think
you'll find
in me*

--Dreaming into Being



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I think that if we are going to be good researchers, we have to know who we are. We can't pretend we're cultureless. Rendon says, "Your emptiness attempts to devour me." We cannot deny that the dominant American culture consumes other cultures. The American academic world is not exempt from this activity of cultural consumption. But fortunately, culture isn't static. We are each creators of culture, and in each moment we are recreating our vision of ourselves. We have choice, so we need to acknowledge this choice and notice how we think and how our thinking affects what it is we create. We, too, are in a position to create a more human reality.

Further Reading:

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