

Proceedings

of the

2022 International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative

Edited by

Silvia M. Bénard Calva

Lisa P. Z. Spinazola

Rishi Raj

Christina L. Ivey

David F. Purnell

Cody M. Clemens

Marlen Harrison

Amy Arellano

Estefanía Díaz

Elda Monetti

Himanee Gupta

Dawne Fahey

Tony E. Adams

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Learning My Truths: The Power of Developing My Own Body Pedagogy

Josette Ferguson (jrfergus@uncg.edu)

Abstract

While living and surviving in the Global Pandemic of COVID-19, I was inspired to write a piece about my identity and the power of self-love. For this piece, I have drawn upon the themes of identity, mental health, and the power of self-love. By using my story and literature from Black Queer educators, feminists, spiritualists, along with other theorists, I have created an autoethnographic essay that will push readers to think about their own truths.

Keywords

Identity, LGBTQ, truths, self-love, mental health

As I pursue a doctorate in the white supremacist institution of Education, many of my Black and Brown colleagues and I share imposter syndrome. The root of this imposter syndrome has a long-standing relationship with the lack of trust that I have with myself. The Imposter in me is a bully. They love to chastise me and berate me, which often makes me question if I am intellectually fit to obtain a PhD. All the questioning transforms into overthinking, causing me to wonder if I am intellectually capable to do the work required to earn this degree. Then not to mention, my mental illnesses, Depression and Anxiety, regularly pop in whenever they please to join in on the fun of the Imposter ganging up on me. When this happens, I become trapped in my head by their constant ridicule and belittling. Here is one of the conversations we had recently:

Imposter: I don't understand why you are even bothering to get this PhD. You know you aren't that smart or that intelligent. Who told you you could pursue such a prestigious degree? You do not have the mental capacity and wherewithal to achieve such a feat.

Me: My daily affirmations remind me that *my presence is needed in this world* and that *I am equipped with the tools to begin anew*. Even though you don't see it, Imposter, I am MORE than capable and able to achieve this degree and anything else I put my mind to.

Imposter: That's what you say now, but I know when my dear friends Depression and Anxiety show up, I doubt you will be saying that. Oh look...there they are now.
(Anxiety and Depression enter the conversation)

Depression: Hello my dear friend Imposter. It's been a long time (pause) Actually not too long. You know Josette tries to tell us that they can get rid of us, but we know that's all mumbo-jumbo. Josette, you will never get rid of me. I am your shadow. I am a part of you.

Anxiety: Don't forget about me. I am here too. You like to try to ignore me, but I always give you a run for your money. No pun intended. You get it...runs *(laughs out loud)*. I love to run you to the bathroom.

Imposter: Alright you two. Pipe it down. I called y'all here as reinforcements not as comedians. Like I was saying, Josette thinks they are *all big and bad* because they are

saying their daily affirmations and taking care of themselves. But we both know otherwise (pause) right?

Depression: Yup! I definitely do. I know when I arrive. All that self-love and self-care goes out of the window. You grow content with sleeping all day and being shut in on a sunny day. It actually makes a perfect environment for you to set in Imposter.

Imposter: Oh, it definitely does! I am so excited for all the work we will do when their defenses are low.

Me: You know I can hear you.

Anxiety: We know you can hear us, but that doesn't change anything. It is not like you will put in the work needed to keep us at bay.

Me: Y'all watch and see. I will put in the work that is needed. You don't run me! I run me. I can show you better than I can tell you!

This recent raw conversation I have had with my mental illnesses and Imposter has shown me that I have some inner work I need to do. Today, I have made the decision to have a brutally honest conversation with my inner self. Here is a piece of that conversation:

Why don't you trust yourself?

Because I don't trust myself to not inflict harm on myself.

In order to stop inflicting pain on oneself, you have to forgive yourself for the pain that you have experienced in the past.

I am not ready to forget and forgive that pain. By remembering the pain, I am actively policing my bad behavior, so I don't do the past actions ever again.

Emotionally harming yourself is horrible. You only end up resenting yourself in the process. You have to move through your pain, productively. You have to be one with your feelings so you can fully move forward and heal.

I am not ready to move forward. I have gotten so used to being in pain that I would not know where to begin on how to forgive myself for acting out of feelings of hurt.

Sounds to me you need to begin writing and reflecting...

These powerfully raw and real conversations have me realizing that I need to take time to reflect and assess the damage done by my Anxiety, Depression, and Imposter. Now is the time for me to dig through the rubble and rocks: to make sense of the hurt I have experienced. As I search through the debris, I find my truths that I had discarded. I discarded these truths because I was told that they were "fallacies" and "not realistic". I held onto those assertions. Not because I wanted to believe them; but I wanted to belong. I wanted to be accepted by my family, my Black community, and those in greater society. Now, I am learning I have to listen to my truths that are housed in my body, mind, and soul otherwise I will be miserable. As I sit and look at what I have excavated, I come across the following passage from Lama Rod (2020),

“[B]alanced self-agency is completely dependent on my own embodiment. When I am not embodied, I have no real-time sensitivity to how my body is speaking to what is happening around me as well as inside of me. The reality of trauma is thus called into consideration, because trauma does disrupt the equilibrium of the body, making it

difficult to understand why the body needs, because its sensations are not necessarily in line with what is happening around us in our environment at the time. On top of that, trauma may make it difficult for us to be in our bodies because of pain. Therefore, it can be hard to trust myself, and it is hard for me to know what I really need.” (p. 31)

From what I have unearthed from my ruins, I think to myself:

*“Is unresolved trauma the reason why I have trouble trusting myself?
What unresolved trauma do I need to work through, so I can fully trust myself?”*

As I sit and grapple with these questions, I am led to think about what my therapist told me in my last therapy session,

“Josette, you are doing some amazing work in therapy, and you have come such a long way. You have developed the tools to help you navigate your Depression and Anxiety on your own. Also, you are blossoming in your personal expression of being non-binary and doing the work that is required so you can be your best self. Since you are able to mitigate your mental illness on your own and are doing a lot of the self-reflection, I am suggesting we scale back our sessions.”

My therapist was right. I am doing the emotional labor to take care of myself and my mental health. Yet, as I am faced with these questions, my Imposter peers through and tries to convince me that I cannot do the emotional work needed. I find myself going through the motions of a panic attack. My breathing becomes erratic. I have trouble gasping for air. I desperately try to ground myself.

*Inhale...Exhale
Breathe, Josette.
Breathe in for 5 seconds...
Breathe out for 5 seconds...
There you go! Another deep breath.
Breathe in for 5 seconds...
Breathe out for 5 seconds...
Woosah.*

Finally, the Imposter crawls back to the hole they slivered out of. This is when I remember I have to use my tools to keep Anxiety, and my Imposter at bay. First, I light incense. The aroma of Chamomile and Nag Champa soon fill my space and my nostrils. Next, I add ylang ylang and lavender to my diffuser, which soothe the nagging thoughts of displeasure. Then, I reach for a Rhodonite crystal. Its coolness reminds me that I will be okay and that I am not my mental illnesses and Imposter. Lastly, I begin to reflect and write.

*Breathe
Shake
Dance
Nah, but for real*

Breathe

*Take in
Deep breathes*

*Of air
Of space
And
Time*

Ground yourself

Ground your thinking

*Place your mind
Into today
Not into a distant memory
Or time*

*Be present
In here and now*

Breathe

Now, I can focus. Words begin to flow out of my pen as I journal. Writing brings me clarity and helps me to sort through piles of paper that take up space in my brain captive. The wisdom of Christopher Poulos (2018) reminds me that,

“Writing directly about the human experience of being vulnerable exposes authors of evocative texts to critique (or even attack) by readers, but they forge ahead because they know that there is something powerful to be explored, something meaningful in the emotionality rich world of a writer encountering [their] world.” (p. 3)

Writing about my life experience aids in my healing, growth, and wholeness. I write this essay as a way to make sense of the pain I house in my body, mind, and spirit that my Depression, Anxiety, and Imposter unearth whenever they come to play. The journey of navigating the pain housed within me is quite vulnerable. Nonetheless, I invite you to walk alongside me. As I begin this inner work, the words of adrienne maree brown (2017) brings me solstice,

“I know that to truly understand, to truly be able to transform myself and develop that own unflappable core, I cannot vicariously live [other’s] spiritual lessons: I must walk my own path.” (p. 12)

The experiences in this essay are only my own, however, I know they are relatable. As you read my autoethnographic essay, take time to ponder and reflect, how you can transform yourself and live in your truth.

Where do I begin?

Unearthing Childhood Truths

I grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina as a shy, heavy-set tomboy. I was constantly ridiculed about my body weight, my lack of femininity, and my innate quiet nature. From an early age, I was encouraged to ignore the truths housed in my mind and body, because I was “too young to know better” and I had “yet to experience life”. That is why it was best to follow what any adult said, since they “knew better”. Given that I was bigger than the other girls my age, I was often teased by my family members and told on multiple occasions I needed to lose

weight to fit in. Furthermore, since my mother bought my clothes, she would persuade me to wear dresses and skirts, which would literally make me want to jump out of my skin. And let us not forget to mention, the many times I was scolded and belittled for being a shy and reserved child, who needed to “step out of their comfort zone” and “learn how to speak when spoken to”. These comments made me question the truths of my body, gender identity, and my quiet nature. These comments taught me early on that my body, gender identity, and natural mannerism needed to be policed and controlled.

Even though I was raised in such a loving environment, snarky, offensive, and overly critical comments from my parents, and family members are the words I remember from my childhood. Their comments and critiques illustrated to me that I could not and should not trust myself. Now, my internal voice mimics the voices of my childhood as I continuously repeat these comments in my head.

*You are not pretty enough,
Little girls don't act like that,
You are stupid,
You are not smart enough.*

These phrases consume my thoughts and mind. They play over and over like a broken record in an old-time diner, which still has the same jukebox from its founding in the 1950s. These comments are ingrained in me: entrenched and tattooed into my skin. They are a part of me. From childhood to adulthood, I have grown accustomed to believing, and accepting that my natural sense of knowing is flawed and needed to be corrected.

*I was flawed.
I am flawed.
Is this the unresolved trauma I need to work through?*

As I end my twenties, I recognize I have some unlearning that needs to occur. I will never feel comfortable to trust myself if I believe my innate nature to not be true. I will not be able to trust myself until I start believing in myself. Mama Lorde makes it plain in her infamous essay on the *Uses of the Erotic*,

“We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance.” (Lorde, 2019)

I was raised to *fear* myself. I felt that what I knew to be true about myself was a hallucination (Dipierto, 2020). This hallucination was a dream of a distant memory that would never come true in this lifetime. But only be longed for and yearned for. I have spent the majority of my life living in fear. Fear of living in my truth. Fear of showing up as my authentic self. I am afraid to show up as my whole self: as an unapologetically Queer, Black, and Guyanese, and non-binary person.

I can not suppress myself any longer.

Unearthing Truths of My Gender Identity

*What is gender identity?
Is my assigned sex important? Or is it just a filler until I come into my gender identity?*

*Who am I?
Who do you think I am?
What does your imagination say I should be?
What does my imagination say I could be?*

I grew up as a mixed black girl in the South in the 90s. As a young child, my African American mother ingrained in my sister and me that we had to use our double minority status, being an African American woman, as a superpower. One of her favorite phrases is “don’t forget who you are or *whose* you are”; meaning to not forget my ancestry, my surrounding community and how I was raised. At a young age, I instinctively knew I was not fully a girl, but I knew I was not fully a boy either. As a child, I felt as if I was the perfect mixture of both a girl and a boy. The term that many of my family members used to describe me was “tomboy” because I enjoyed wearing boys' clothing and playing sports with my male cousins. When I was at home, I loved playing with the neighborhood boys and my younger brother. We were like the Sandlot (1993) kids from the movie. We would be outside for hours. From sun-up until the streetlights came on (or when my mother called us home), there was always a new adventure. Some days, we were archeologists searching for artifacts and new species of insects in the maze of woods behind our houses. Other days, we were elite athletes refereeing our own tackle football games that would hold up the neighborhood traffic in our cul-de-sac. Those were the good ole days.

Once I received my first menstrual cycle, my mother sat me down and told me, “Josette, since you are now having your period, you are officially becoming a young woman. This means that you are too old to play with the neighborhood boys. You have to be more lady-like. The time has come for you to become a lady.”

Remember, don’t forget who you are.

I began to feel my autonomy be stripped away from me. My mother began to buy me more flowery dresses for church, and skirts and tighter shirts to wear to school. With more feminine clothing came the accessories to match. I wore large hoop earrings that could literally fit around my ear, and carried a tiny navy-blue pocketbook that only could hold a stick of gum and my pink lip gloss. It seemed like overnight I was transformed into this feminine creature that I knew nothing about.

Remember whose you are.

On the day of my 16th birthday, I stared at this feminine creature in the mirror. She wore a white long flowing gown that fit all her curves perfectly with a sparkling tiara on her head. On her fingers, she had acrylic nails painted in a French manicure. I did not recognize this person in the mirror. She was a stranger to me, and I to her. As I stared in the mirror, my mother hovered behind me and said with glee, “You are now a lady!” I forced a smile, yet all I could think to myself was

this feminine creature is definitely not me.

For me, gender identity is how I perceive my body, my personhood, and how others interact with it. My gender identity manifests itself in my demeanor: in the way I walk, talk,

dress, and style my hair. It is how I present myself in public settings and express my body. My gender identity has nothing to do with my biological genitalia. Stephanie Jones & Hilary Hughes-Decatur (2012) state in their article, “bodies are pedagogy.” (p. 58). My body is pedagogy for me because it guides me to liberation and freedom. It teaches me how to best show up for myself as well as those in my community. Through my journey of rediscovering my gender identity, I am becoming emancipated from the metaphorical chains to fit into gender norms and heterosexist ideals. Lama Rod (2020) elucidates, “without my body, I cannot experience liberation.” (p. 9). In order for me to be liberated, I need to feel comfortable with my body: to see my body as a home and a place of refuge. Only then will my body be a sanctuary, where I can trust my body for the truths that come from my mind, spirit, and soul. As I grow older, I am learning to listen to my body and let my body be my teacher, because my body is continuously teaching me new things about myself.

*Harmonious Soul
Being harmonious within my soul
As well as outside of it.*

*Striving for wholeness
And understanding
Of myself
To be my best self*

*I am my best self when
I recognize and accept my flaws
I welcome criticism of myself
From myself
And I accept my imperfections
That comes with being human.*

*I too have to
Understand
Accept
And make peace with
That I can never run from myself*

*Running is easy
Yet, I can not run forever.*

Now at 29, I am unlearning the ideas that were drilled in my head by my parents. They pushed me to fit into a binary world because they were protecting me from a life of ridicule. However, I was never meant to fit in. In November of 2020, I decided to venture into a place that I had only heard about in whispers and dreams. I was quite familiar with the gender binary of men and women, but I was unfamiliar about this space of being non-binary. Now, in this open space, I am free. I can be what I desire to be. I can choose my fate in ways I thought was only

possible in a fantasy. I can be me and not have to apologize for being otherwise. In this space, I am pure. I am me.

Remember who you are. Whose you are.

Conclusion

At this stage of life, I am learning what it is to love myself unapologetically and what it is to trust that I have all the answers for myself. By loving myself fully, I am beginning to lead a more joy-filled and enjoyable life. In loving myself, I acknowledge that I need to unlearn the statements and phrases that my parents and family members have instilled in me. For me to love myself, I need to unlearn body politics that have led me to ignore my bodily responses to living and moving in my truth. For far too long, I have allowed my life to be owned by other's anxieties and fears. I have allowed the Imposter to run the show and live my life for me. I will not do that any longer.

Therefore, let me reintroduce myself: I am Josette Ruth Ferguson. I am a Queer, non-binary, Guyanese African American womxn, who builds Black political power in North Carolina through civic education and engagement. I teach those in the Black community the importance of participating in the United States' democratic process. In addition, I train Black community members across the state of North Carolina on how to better engage their community in voting. Daily, I work on loving myself fully and unapologetically, and healing my wounds that are afflicted upon me by this white supremacist world that we live in. In order for me to be an effective political organizer and community advocate, I have to take care of myself and be well.

In the words of Mama Lorde,

“When we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense.” (Lorde, 2019)

Today, like every day in my future, I have made the decision to take back the reins of my own life. Like my therapist and support system constantly reminds me, “I have every tool that I need to be my best and authentic self”. Because I have taken the time to forgive myself from my past, and I am healthy managing my mental illness, I am loving myself more and more each day. In the powerful words of ancestor bell hooks (2001),

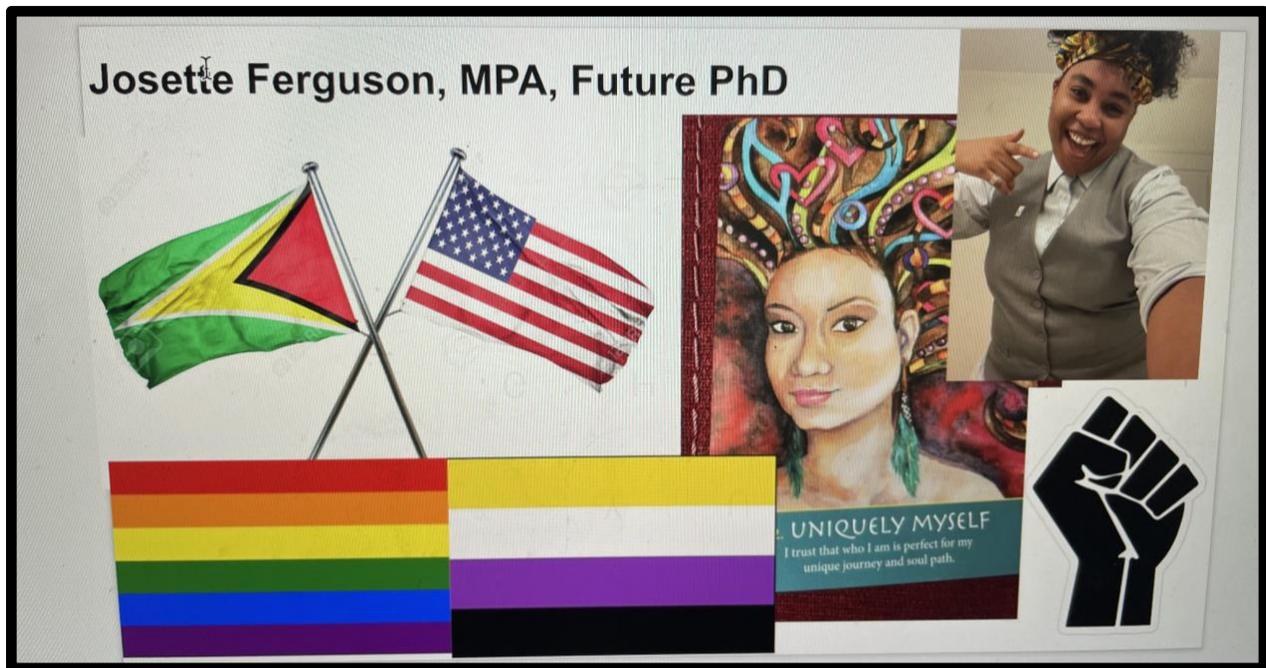
“The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change.

Without love our lives are without meaning. Love is the heart of the matter. When all else has fallen away, love sustains.” (p. 17)

Love is transformative. By loving myself I can create meaningful social change. Through love of myself, I can fully love those I am in community with and lead trainings from a place of care and love rather than necessity. Sharing this story is where I begin anew. I am telling my truth and sharing my journey so that not only I, but *ALL* of us can be free to be completely authentic to ourselves. By doing our own inner work that is grounded in self-love, then we can show up in love in our communities. Lama Rod (2020) reiterates,

“It is love that directs and motivates me because it is the love for myself and others that helps to maintain the humanity of everyone involved in my work to challenge injustice.” (p. 23)

Love is truly all we need. By doing my own inner healing work, I have learned to love my whole self. I invite you to do your inner work: to love yourself wholly and fully, so you too can be free and liberated.



Pictured above is my counterstory (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001) Included in this collage are:

- The Guyanese and United States flag, which represent my ethnicity
- The LGBTQ flag, which represents my sexual orientation
- The Non-binary flag, which represents my gender identity
- The Black power fist, which represent my political identity
- A card from my Feminism affirmation deck. This serves as a reminder for me to ALWAYS be true to myself.
- A picture of myself.

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Understanding a Naked Face in a Masked Society

Gina S. Reynolds
Purdue University
ginareynolds@purdue.edu

Abstract

The pain caused by debilitating headaches eased from my body in a drug-induced spell. The respite gave me time to think, reflect, and process my lived experience of wearing a face mask while teaching and doing my Ph.D. at a large Midwestern University. For me, the face mask caused physical distress. This autoethnography tells my story and my daughter's story, who also experienced physical issues with face masking in this time of COVID restrictions. Using photos, scrapbooks with journaling, and recorded photo elicitation interview conversations, I explore our lived experience through the time of COVID restrictions. With qualitative thematic coding, I identify themes that weave in and out of our stories containing connections to the concepts of ostracism, invisible disability, and expectation violation theory (EVT). This research gives insight into the lived experience of those experiencing a societal event differently than what is perceived as normal.

Keywords

autoethnography, face masking, invisible disability, ostracism, expectation violation theory, COVID

My body embraced in a warm cocoon, safe, secure, and so at peace. There was no pain, only blissful warmth. The drug-induced relief of drifting into and out of this warm, lovely sleep gave me a respite I desperately needed. For weeks, my head had pounded, my vision blurred and my mental capacity diminished. Rarely, had I been able to get through a day without tears streaming down my face from the ongoing pain. Most days I pushed through until I absolutely could not physically go on. Those times, when it was more than too much, I would cancel life. I could not afford the luxury of that option often. When I awoke from the drug-induced sleep, I began to realize just how bad my life and health had been in the last few months. Coping with teaching at a university and living a masked life in a body that screamed, "take the mask off!" left me with physical and emotional wreckage. The nightmare was not over, but a slight reprieve to think, evaluate, and feel some sense of "normal" was an incredible feeling.

Over the last year, my physical body gave warnings consisting of occurrences of black spots floating before my eyes, feelings of fainting, slurred speech, and the most debilitating of all, increasingly horrendous headaches. Part of the sensemaking and my turning point came when reviewing literature for a related research project regarding people who physically were unable to wear face masks. I emotionally identified with others' personal accounts that I never expected to relate to. I began to realize that I needed to represent my experiences through autoethnography.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography allows a person to write personally, bringing understanding of their lived experience to approach a societal phenomenon (Wall, 2006). It is a reflexive, qualitative process where the researcher becomes their own subject and, from autobiographical writing, draws conclusions about society (Hunter, 2020). Reflexivity requires rigorous self-reflection to find intersections between self and social life (Adams et al., 2017). Autoethnography often includes interviews, journals, photographs, and recordings (Goodall, 2006; Hunter, 2020). Photos offer three roles in autoethnography by aiding in recollection, helping to substantiate the researcher's claims, and assisting in relaying the experience (Holbrook, 2005).

Through the time of COVID restrictions, my personal method of coping used autoethnography drawing from a personal scrapbook, recollections, and recorded conversations with the aid of photos which were originally used as preparation for another project. Using these sources allowed me, as a researcher, to engage in sensemaking about my experiences. Sensemaking creates coherence by connecting experiences like observations, beliefs, and actions as reasons for one another (Schildt et al., 2019). To aid in understanding I topically and analytically coded the data (Richards, 2021). These sources enable me to answer the research question of how the lived experience of two individuals with medical issues coped when mask-wearing became problematic and how they worked to create an understanding of this societal issue during the COVID restrictions. Furthermore, this research will add to the body of autoethnographic research concerning disability and photographic methods.

Face masking

The use of face masks in the United States during the COVID pandemic has been confusing and controversial (Venkateswarlu et al., 2020; Szczesniak et al., 2020). Furthermore, the idea that some people cannot medically or physically wear masks has also been confusing, conflicting, and perhaps even contentious. The Center for Disease Control states, "Research supports that mask-wearing has no significant adverse health effects for wearers" ("Uses of cloth masks," 2021). However, other research shows that masks can have significant adverse health effects for people with certain health conditions (Lazzarino et al., 2020; Greenhalgh et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2020). The conflicting information about mask-wearing has made it difficult for individuals with health conditions who struggle to wear masks and for those around them to understand how to respond.

Societies response to those that are experiencing a phenomenon differently can often be surprising for the individuals who did not expect the treatment they received, which creates an expectancy violation (Burgoon, 1993). Negative responses from others can lead to ostracism which is the feeling of being left out or excluded. Difficulties people have that make normal activities a problem can sometimes be considered an invisible disability. It is a physical problem that is not always obvious to others, bringing unique challenges (Pelliccio, 2019; Santuzzi, 2014).

Ostracism, Invisible Disability and EVT

The first challenge I encountered in the literature dealt with ostracism. While reading a published dissertation involving the concept of ostracism, I realized that I connected deeply with the themes and found that what I was feeling was the ostracism to which Pelliccio (2018) referred. Individuals who feel ostracized feel like they don't exist or are being ignored or excluded somehow (Williams, 2007; Williams, 2009). Williams (2007) points out four

psychological needs that are threatened by ostracism. Those needs are belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. Even minor threats to these needs can be distressing (Williams, 2007). Pellico (2018) points out that the lived experience of ostracism may not always be identified as such by the target as it would be the researcher who is looking at contextual elements and meaning systems. There are seven dimensions of exclusion clues that may be found in the lived experience: disregarding, differentiating, slandering, hurting, avoiding, exploiting, and deregulating (Kerr & Levine, 2008). This ostracism feeling of non-existence figures prominently into another construct: invisible disability.

An invisible disability has no visible features or features that cannot be readily attributed to a disability (Santuzzi et al., 2014). Common invisible disabilities could be things that cause chronic pain like rheumatoid arthritis, autoimmune disorders, depression, PTSD, or learning challenges (Santuzzi et al., 2014). Invisible disabilities can be challenging to define and provide adequate protection for those individuals who experience these disabilities (Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), 1991; ADA Amendments Act, 2008; Colella & Bruy`ere, 2011). Though it can be difficult, there are laws in place to protect people, however, often, they are misunderstood or ignored (Pendo et al., 2020).

What can be surprising to individuals experiencing ostracism or invisible disability is how they are treated by those around them (Pellico, 2019). Expectancy violation theory (EVT) posits that experiences can be understood by examining the ways norms or accepted behavior are violated (Burgoon, 1993). In ostracism and invisible disability, an expectation violation occurs when others violate social norms regarding inclusion or acknowledgment (Robinson et al., 2013). In other words, individuals do not expect others to treat them differently from established social norms and are surprised when they do. My sensemaking of health experiences during COVID restrictions connected with the extant literature on EVT, ostracism, and invisible disability.

Method

Using qualitative autoethnographic methods to reflect with the aid of tools such as photos, scrapbooks with pictures and text, photo-elicitation conversations, and reflexivity allowed responses and notes to be coded thematically into categories that connect to extant literature. Thematic coding involves first reading through the data and looking for patterns and emerging topics; these topics are then categorized, reflected upon, and coded analytically (Richards, 2021). Analytical coding involves interpreting what is going on and the tensions and interplay between data (Richards, 2021). Using qualitative methods gives the researcher insight into intangible things like social norms, roles, attitudes, and motivations (Mack et al., 2005). Qualitative data can come from many sources.

Gathering data by collecting scrapbook pages containing notes, photos, and news headlines from the COVID period offered thick, rich details for study. These artifacts were not collected initially as a precursor to this research but as a way of personally making sense of a global societal issue. Partway into this collection, it became clear that this scrapbook could be used for other purposes, such as data for this study. Pages and quotes about the research question were extracted and analyzed.

The second main body of data was a practice photo-elicitation interview that I framed as photo conversations. Photo-elicitation uses photos as tools in the interview process to aid in recollection, participant voice, and meaning-making (Richard & Lahmen, 2015.) For this research, I conducted an informal interview or conversation to prepare and refine a schedule of

interview questions for another study (Reynolds, under review). Once finished, it was clear to the interviewer and the interviewee that this was valuable information. As time went on it became apparent that this communicative piece needed to be included in my autoethnographic experience. Transcripts of conversations and photos were shared and added to the data for coding of this project.

Data and Analysis

The themes of fitting in, rejection, disbelief, and hope out of hopelessness stood out through the data. The themes weave through the telling of our lived experiences. Autoethnographic methods allow me to explore my lived experience with personal data and see commonalities and patterns intertwined with my daughter's experience. Through analysis of these artifacts and conversations, I engaged in self-reflexivity to make sense of my time living through COVID restrictions with medical issues that made life seemingly impossible. It became difficult to function normally. Part of my journey in sensemaking was remembering, and to do that, I scrapbooked.



Figure 1-Photo 1

My COVID scrapbook became a way of remembering, coping, sense-making, and a reminder that I'm sane. This scrapbook had elements of the COVID pandemic in general and the things that my daughter and I experienced in trying to remain a part of society even though we should not be wearing masks. (Photo 1). For me, it was teaching in-person at a university that had devastating physical, emotional, and tangible effects. My university required masks to teach, no exceptions. I knew masks bothered me and told my supervisor so, but the world would not acknowledge there were people who could not tolerate mask-wearing. The world, which encompassed society and media, just put forth the attitude that everyone "can and should" wear a mask. This attitude was my first connection with the theme of disbelief. I could

not understand how others could not see mask-wearing as a potential problem for some of us. For me, the world's opinions on mask-wearing were damaging and faulty assumptions.

In July I wrote,

I was at the time thrilled that we'd go back (to school) in person, however, it was later discovered that would be in-mask. That was not exciting, how in the world will I teach in a mask? Well, I did. Hated it, got lightheaded and saw black spots a few times, but I did it.

My daughter also experienced physical, emotional, and other material effects from her inability to conform to the new norm of mask wearing due to her asthma.

In the summer of 2020, before I started back to school in-mask, my first recollection of those who could not wear a mask was with my daughter, who has asthma. While at work as a

waitress, she felt lightheaded and felt like she would pass out while wearing a mask. She told her managers before that wearing a mask affected her ability to breathe, but she was told there was no option not to wear it; they told her she just didn't want to wear it and was trying to get out of wearing a mask. The theme of disbelief is evident in the plain fact that she was not believed and, in the frustration, and doubt she felt over not being believed. She felt forced to wear a mask to keep her job.



Figure 2- Photo 2

Because I was teaching at a university with "no exceptions" to the mask rule, I felt I had no choice but to continue struggling to wear it. The idea for my daughter and I that we had to "fit in" and do like everyone else falls under the theme of "fitting in." We wore the mask at a great personal cost trying to fit into society. These recollections begin the first revelations of the theme of fitting in. Both my daughter and I knew we couldn't do it but pushed ourselves to try and fit in and lead an everyday life like everyone else. Trying to fit in and wear masks like everyone else caused severe medical conditions and had detrimental effects on our endeavors to work, do school, and other normal life functions because of our health issues. The scrapbook I kept during this time reflects my struggle to find a mask I

could breathe through and relays headlines from the confusion I felt around me from society at large. (Photo 2)

When I finally was in tears every day with migraine headaches that never ended while still trying to do my Ph.D. coursework and instruct two courses in-mask, I had to get help. The final straw was when I had a migraine accompanied by aphasia, and I literally could not speak coherently. This event scared me. In my scrapbook, I wrote,

I started having more visual migraines (about 1 per week). My headaches got worse and progressed to full-blown migraines 4-5 days a week, then constant, even turning into scary aphasias migraines where I couldn't speak correctly. My grades suffered; life was a nightmare. I cried a lot. But, according to the world, everyone can wear a mask, and IF you can't, shop online, no exceptions!



Figure 3-Photo 3

The aphasia headache makes it look like you are having a stroke; your speech is incoherent and slurred. I was scared, and my family members were worried about me. This fear and emotion contributed to my sense of hopelessness in this seemingly never-ending struggle of pain. In desperation, I went to the doctor.

Going to the doctor gave me incredible relief when he finally confirmed for me: I was not alone. Face masks caused my debilitating migraines; this really is a "thing." My doctor acknowledged that masks could cause migraine headaches. It was a surprise to me that I felt joy! I was still in incredible pain; nothing had been solved, I felt like I was

failing at least one class and was hanging on to my mental health by a thread, yet I felt inexplicable joy! The next step was a series of drugs with horrible side effects that didn't help much and caused more issues. The drug induced relief mentioned earlier in this paper describe one of the brief relief episodes after receiving two strong drug injections that cost \$900. However, the biggest thing for me was that someone finally acknowledged my pain. I felt validated when the doctor confirmed my experiences and believed me.

Getting someone to believe me not only fits with the theme of disbelief but also leads to the theme of hope in hopelessness. The joy that grew out of the struggle to find help led to being believed, which surprisingly led to incredible relief. This emotion surprised me since I had not fully understood how hard it had been to be doubted, to be questioned, until someone affirmed what I knew to be true for me. That positive affirmation of my situation let loose a flood of positive emotions. These emotions made me realize how deeply I had been affected by others disbelief. I had not realized!

Sometimes we were acutely aware of our difference as people treated us in unexpected ways when we held our ground and didn't conform. While talking with my daughter, she recalled a time on her campus when she did not mask,

People would avoid me, and they would go to the other side, ya know, oh wow cool, I'm being ostracized by the entire community because I couldn't breathe. I found myself looking around at first, like (what is wrong with me?) I found a lot of judgment for no reason; you guys (government) are trying to supposedly protect lives and make people's lives easier and better but like where was my protection. No one was watching out for people like me.

Her description relates what went through her mind as she sensed and saw people's non-verbal and sometimes verbal reactions to her not in a mask. At first, these reactions were surprising, but she learned to ignore, or at least pretend to ignore them, or pretend to comply as much as she could.

While trying to appear normal and continuing to wear a mask at work my daughter had an incident where she collapsed onto the floor of the walk-in cooler. As she sat there, gasping for air from almost passing out, she was still prohibited from removing her mask. Once she had the energy, she called me to come to get her as she was unable to drive and still not correctly

breathing hours later. We went to the doctor who told us she could be put on FMLA and that this was a "disability." They told us we could try steroids which might make wearing a mask easier, but there would be other side effects. I, as her mother, was livid! We live in America, where there are protections for such things, or so I thought. I was not only surprised but outraged at the treatment she received.

This treatment led to the second theme from our lived experience, that of disbelief. Often people with invisible disabilities are not believed (Ysasi et al., 2018) and are made to "prove" their problem is real. This phenomenon was the case in my situation. I often felt that people didn't believe I struggled to wear masks, and many gave non-verbal signs of not listening or caring. They made it evident they didn't want to hear it or offered "fixes" for my situation as if a different type of mask would be the solution. It became clear this disbelief existed when a colleague of mine meant to compliment me by saying that she truly believed I had a problem after seeing how devastating my symptoms and medications had made my life. Though given as a compliment, it made me frustrated and angry that I had to provide that "proof" of my condition to be believed! For my daughter, a lot of people, including her employer, "...thought I was lying and just trying to get out of wearing a mask for some reason. They'd challenge me, ask to like see medical certificates and stuff." Disbelief became a prominent theme in our experience.



Figure 4-Photo 4

Pictures played a role in gaining further insight into my daughter's battle to live normally during the times of mandated mask wearing. Because I was doing some related research and I knew she fit the demographic of someone who medically could not mask, I asked if she would practice my interview questions with me which included taking two pictures to represent her feelings about not being able to wear a mask and barriers or struggles this created for her. Through the course of practicing my interview questions with her regarding the pictures, I gained insight into her struggle in ways and contexts I had not previously known.

One of her pictures gave voice to some intangible and material ways the inability to wear a mask had affected her and even how masking in general affected all her classmates (Photo 4). Her picture was of an unfinished painting she did for an art class. She said,

It's an unfinished painting that I did in class. I had to run out during it because I started hacking up a lung. I had to sit in the bathroom for over 20 minutes with my inhaler, trying to just be able to breathe, and I never finished the painting, and that happened a lot, like a lot that semester. Probably about once a week, I'd have to take 20-30 minutes in the bathroom. It was hard cause I could never keep up with the class. I just felt really behind, and it definitely affected my art, my grades, my GPA went down significantly. I had to fight with the professor just to pass the class...he didn't feel I had learned to draw faces well, I told him, what face, all of our live models are wearing masks. I can't learn to draw noses, (or) eyes, when it's all hidden. So, I'm actually doing remedial work this summer to catch up because ya know, it affected my education, and I know it affected my peers

too; there were college wide low grades. Almost everybody got that feedback about practicing your faces and stuff. Ya, it definitely left me feeling like this semester was an unfinished painting. I learned a little, but I never got to finish or get that polish. It just was ugly, not complete.

Currently, she feels like these are things that will never get finished, learned, or completed. Life is interrupted in irreparable ways.



Figure 5-Photo 5

Through this experience the theme of set apart is clear in how she felt left behind and now is working on her own to catch up. She physically was set apart because she needed time to breathe in the bathroom. These are experiences, times, and goals that she currently believes will probably never get “finished” or completed.

The other pictures she showed me also related to her art. It was a beautiful picture out of her apartment window. For this one, she told me,

The camera frame is really disorienting; if you look at it, it's definitely an art kid picture. The sky is very dark, very red, the color we are taught is used to express anger. It's also purple which leads to the depression melancholy area too. I felt like that really encompassed all my feeling regarding the masks, this anger that people won't listen to me and that my voice isn't as important as other peoples.

Wearing a mask was disorientating to her world, like her picture. Like the picture carrying negative meaning with beautiful colors, her experiences also had bright spots in the negative world she was experiencing.

One of the questions I asked her was about the best conversation she had regarding not being able to wear a mask. She responded by telling me when some acquaintance-type friends left school and were going out to get something to eat. They invited her but the situation with wearing a mask in the car came up. They assured her they didn't care. She recalled,

And I took it off, and I was like, thank God. They all took it off, and they said this feels awesome. We checked out each other's faces 'cause we had never seen each other faces, like Ann, you have an amazing smile I never knew. It was a really cool moment. I wish we could be like this all the time.

She felt normal.

This normal feeling and part of her story illustrate several of the themes in our experiences. First, she felt set apart. She knew getting in that car would require a masked situation for her; she was different. It also illustrates her attempt and desire to fit in and be normal. She wanted a normal experience of going somewhere to hang out with friends, to fit in and be a part rather than set apart from the group. And lastly, we see the hope in hopelessness as she experiences the "awesome" feeling of seeing her friends smile, a normal experience, and perhaps a hope that life can be better again someday.

The emotion was evident that this belonging and being normal was rare and exceptional for her. This telling led to other confessions of times she spent twenty minutes or more of class

time in the bathroom crying and trying to breathe and recollections of being singled out in class and put on the spot because she was "different" than everyone else. She said,

Well, like for instance. my first week at art school I went into a class with a face shield because in the guidelines for my school, it said that if you have a health disability, you can wear a face shield. And my teacher, in front of the entire class, called me out and said, why are you not, ya know, properly protecting people and made a big scene and a big stink. I had to argue with my teacher in front of my entire class that it was within our guidelines and my right. It was the last time I wore a face shield at class.

Being set apart or singled out because you are doing something differently than everyone else led her to feel forced to once again try and fit in. She concludes that part of her story by saying, "it was the last time I wore a face shield at class." Because of this experience, she went to mask-wearing at a great cost. Fitting in, being set apart, and hope in hopelessness all play a part in this piece of her story. By this point, the disbelief is no longer evident, as now it is a new norm for it to be there; it's not a surprise. This fact contributes to the hopelessness.

Findings

Codes of fitting in, set apart, disbelief, and hope in the hopelessness lead to connections with expectancy violation theory, ostracism, and invisible disability in existing literature (Burgoon, 1993; Pelliccio, 2019; Santuzzi, 2014). The theme of fitting in is clear as we both wore masks to try and be like everyone else. Being set apart comes through clearly as our treatment by those around us is different. Disbelief played out in multiple ways. We struggled to be believed and understood by others and others seemed to struggle to believe our issues were real and severe. Finally, the hope in hopelessness is shown with several examples of times where we both experienced positive emotions despite our difficult situation when being treated like others, believed, and belonging.

These themes connect with the concepts of ostracization, invisible disability, and EVT. First, we were surprised at the way those around us treated us. EVT says that when experiences violate expected norms, individuals will react to the expectation violation (Burgoon, 1993). When others, individuals, or society, indicated through words or actions that our problems with wearing a mask were not real or important, this created a violation. We expected to be believed and given some measure of understanding when we were often not. People with invisible disabilities are often not believed (Ysasi et al., 2018).

The idea of not being able to wear a mask creating a disability was a new concept suggested to us by a doctor. While the mask itself is not a medical condition, it compounds other known and unknown medical conditions for us. These conditions create an inability to function normally. The literature shows recognition of the inability to wear face masks due to disability; however, many also point to a lack of understanding (Pendo et al., 2020). While invisible disabilities remain challenging to define, the problems we face correlate with the literature on invisible disabilities. People did not understand us. Our conditions were not "visible", and we tried to "pass" as normal. These are all common with invisible disabilities (Ysasi et al., 2018). We became different when we could not or would not "pass".

These differences led to being set apart and sometimes excluded; this relates well with the literature on ostracization. Times of being avoided or excluded because we were not able to mask gave direct feelings of ostracization, like when my daughter had people physically avoid her. Other times, it would be a non-verbal or a sense that we were not acknowledged or disregarded as I did when a colleague complimented my believability since my symptoms were now severe and

evident. People who feel ostracized often go to extremes to blend in as we did by wearing masks when our physical bodies were screaming for us to take them off (Hales et al., 2021).

Discussions/Conclusions

This reflexive research allows these findings to contribute to the literature on expectation violation, ostracization, and invisible disability in perhaps unique ways. Furthermore, this research may help communities understand those negatively impacted by community health initiatives. It remains critical for societies to acknowledge people who experience difficulties with masking and become informed about the reality of this problem. Giving people information and awareness opens avenues for conversation and understanding of others who may be living a parallel existence to the data presented in this research.

We need to do more research to discover how many people are affected by conditions that make masking difficult. Researchers and public health officials must find creative ways to include people living this experience in planning public health initiatives. These plans should consist of acknowledging and supporting those who experience masking differently.

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Exploring Arts in STEAM: An Autoethnography

Roshani Rajbanshi
Kathmandu University School of Education
roshani@kusoed.edu.np

Abstract

Different forms of arts are used in our daily lives. The holistic development of the learner can be achieved by integrating arts. However, schools usually neglect arts and concentrate on content and assessment. In this paper, the author uses an autoethnographic approach to explore arts integration in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) through the lens of Curriere described by Pinar. Transformative learning theory and living educational theory also guide the autoethnographic exploration. The author describes how she discovered the importance of arts in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and used arts as a tool for transformative pedagogy. Furthermore, to get the holistic understanding of STEAM as a pedagogical inventiveness, the author reflects on transformation in knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) while using arts-informed pedagogy.

Keywords: STEAM, Arts integration, transformation

Introduction

The Arts are everywhere, and art is in everything. Art touches people's hearts and lives. Art cannot be separated from reality. Art is included in every ritual in the form of performing arts and/or visual arts. For instance, during holidays like Christmas and festivals like *Tihar* (a local festival of Nepal), people garnish their houses with decorations and lights for aesthetic value. Arts can be expressed through literal arts through narratives in story form. Teachers, elders, and family members use storytelling as one method of passing information across generations. Other forms of arts such as Earth arts focus on natural landscapes. Performance art focuses on acts. Installation art considers an entire space rather than just one piece. Process art highlights the process rather than the result; and video art emphasizes multimedia.

According to Coulter (2007), the story is a traditional way of passing history, religions, and societal values. Storytelling is one of the most effective pedagogies used by teachers who have found the with imaginative characters and places that stories offer allow students to understand complex topics more the topic deeper. Many teachers practice role-play and drama in their classrooms for better understanding. Different forms of arts such as performing arts, visual arts, creative arts, aesthetic arts, and rhetorics (Taylor, 2016) help students develop imagination and creativity. Arts also aid in the exploration of contextual difficulties, allowing students to gain a greater grasp of the situation (Segura, 2017). Arts as cultural artifacts enhance cultural ways of knowing if included in the classroom. Thus, using arts in schools and incorporating arts as pedagogy has become a necessity in today's world. Yet, even as art has become a part of people's everyday lives, the Arts are a neglected subject with more focus on content and assessment of other conventional subjects in schools. Therefore, the main purpose of

this paper is to reflect on my own learning experience through the lens of Currere and to argue for enhancing pedagogy through the use of art.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Living educational theory guided this study with the question "how can I improve what I am doing?" (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2013). Using living educational theory in such a way helped me empower myself to improve my pedagogy and understand the living contradiction.

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow; Taylor) also influenced my teaching-learning, as it helped me to see transformation within me. The transformative learning theory helped me explore my present and past through the lens of Currere and see my pedagogy, myself being transformed while exploring arts. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman (1995) describe states *currere* as an "autobiographical self-report communication, an individual lived experience as it is socially located, politically positioned and discursively formed while working to succumb to none of the structurings" (p.16). This understanding of Currere fits well with the autoethnographic approach in the form of one's own story in which an "I" critically reflects on one's praxis and observes the transformation. Spry (2018) mentions that autoethnography should be based on material methodological foundations of research that exist in a particular sociopolitical context. Hence, in this paper, I describe my autoethnographic journey linking my personal experience with the pedagogical practice, using arts to explore my and students' learning and finally, I reflect and redefined my way of knowing arts. Guided by Pinar's methods of *currere*, this paper presents my learning in four stages:

1. Regression, where I recall my past to capture STEAM as it was;
2. Progressive, how I see STEAM now and practice it today;
3. Analytical, I provide logical reasoning of looking at STEAM; and
4. Synthetical, get the overall picture of STEAM, to demonstrate my lifelong learning.

Thus, through monologue and self-reflection, I represent the epistemological knowing of my transformation.

Importance of Arts in STEAM

Looking at my *currere* from the regression phase, I tell the truth to myself (Pinar et.al, 1995). In this phase, I refer to my past and I confess what I learned. Recalling my past, I remember working in STEM Outreach Center while doing PhD in one of the universities of New Mexico. Working for almost five years, I understood the importance of STEM pedagogy or an integrated approach to teaching.

I also came to appreciate the research being done on STEAM and its highlighting of the benefit of integrating arts into STEM. Taylor (2016) mentions that STEAM can be a tool for the sustainable development of education. STEAM prepares students with higher-order abilities, much needed to cope in 21st century. Integration of arts develops creativity, helps students think outside of the box and fosters imagination and innovation. Considering the myriads positive impact of arts, I got interested in arts and started exploring arts in STEAM. I found that integration of arts made STEM teaching fun. The students created different personalized items when they were given the opportunity to create anything they wanted. The arts integration allowed students to be creative and some examples are given below in figure 1, 2, 3, and 4).



Figure 1: A crown with LED lights



Figure 2: A Hello Kitty with two LED light



Figure 3: A pop-up card with LEDs in the eyes



Figure 4: A pop-up card with LEDs

Arts: A tool to transformative pedagogy

During the progressive phase of currere, I put forward how I use the Arts today. I began using art when I started teaching participatory action research classes in one of the universities of Nepal. One of the essences of participatory action research is reflection. Thus, in each class, I, along with the students, reflected on our own learning. This reflection was becoming monotonous, so a boost was needed. After that, I asked everyone to come up with art-based reflections. In the first few classes, only a few students participated in art-based reflection. Later in the session, the students' creativity in art-based reflection sparked their curiosity. Many chose poetry; some expressed themselves through music while others expressed themselves through drawings and sketches. The students used art to convey their learning and understanding. Thus, the use of arts in the class helped students reflect better in their learning, and it was interesting to everyone. Thus, the importance of arts in any discipline helps students become creative and reflective. Furthermore, arts-informed pedagogy inspired the students and me to build a more

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Autoethnography as a Spiritual Path: Using Evocative Autoethnography as Homily and Teaching

Csaba Osvath
csabaosvath@usf.edu

Abstract

As a protestant theologian and ordained minister, I began actively using autoethnography in my ministry and gradually my sermons or homilies became “autoethnographic” - first-person, evocative, deeply personal, crafted in a similar way as I create and approach academic autoethnography. “Autoethnographic sermons” shared in a sacred space/time with a performative dimension, allowing my voice and body to communicate - has been an intriguing experiment that resulted in a more engaged ministry and in the growth of my community.

Keywords

spirituality, communal autoethnography, service, counseling

Recently, I was asked by a young graduate student interested in autoethnography. Tell me what was it like to learn from Dr. Ellis and Dr. Bochner? What was it like to be with them, to take their courses, being a student in their classes? I could easily recollect those memories, sitting around the long wooden table, in a circle, taking the inward journey from the mind to the heart, but also the outward journey from the heart to community and others. For me, it was the first time in graduate school when I encountered academic research with an aesthetic, evocative dimension - research that spoke to my intellect as well as my heart. In a way every class centered on the core of autoethnography, namely how can we make life better and how our work may invite and encourage a responsiveness to the other and a responsibility for the other.

So, without hesitation, I replied to the student. Well, it was like being part of sacred community. Oh, like in a church? she asked.

I know this comparison may carry some negative connotations. For some people it may even be an insult to compare any aspect of higher education to a church, religion, or spirituality. But if we put aside our ideas, opinions, perspectives about religion, we can explore autoethnography from a unique vantage point, not as an academic discipline but as a spiritual path, or as a contemplative engagement enhancing the spiritual dimensions of one’s existence.

Though Dr. Ellis and Dr. Bochner emphasized love and the realm of the heart and soul during their lectures, autoethnography in academia still centers on knowledge acquisition and knowledge production. Universities value science, knowledge, technological advancement though it is not clear if these domains can save us and this planet without changing human consciousness.

As Joanna Macy pointed out, “there is no technological fix, no amount of computers, no magic bullet that can save us from population explosion, deforestation, climate disruption, poison by pollution, and wholesale extinction of plant and animal species. We are going to have

to want different things, seek different pleasures, pursue different goals than those that have been driving us and our global economy.

Autoethnography is one of the best tools to create a shift in our desires and wants. Good autoethnographies make us care, and it creates communities centered on healing and compassion. Even this virtual conference is a testimony of the transformative power of autoethnography and the community it creates. This reminds me of a statement from Jack Kornfield, a Buddhist teacher and scholar who addressed a community by saying:

Perhaps this is the best we can do: to help when we can; to witness each other with kindness; to offer our presence; to show the trust we have in life. Spiritual life is not about knowing much, but about loving much.

And I resonate with his emphasis on love because this is the one aspect of academic life that seems to be ignored and undervalued.

As a religious scholar and ordained minister my academic path intersects with my ministry and in a sense, they form a symbiotic relationship, shaping and influencing each other. Wendell Berry who is a farmer and a writer talks about a similar interplay between farming and writing, stating “What I have learned as a farmer I have learned also as a writer, and vice versa. I have farmed as a writer and written as a farmer. He also adds, ...if one is a writer, is to accept the place and the farming of it as a literary influence. One accepts the place, that is, not just as a circumstance, but as part of the informing ambiance of one's mind and imagination.”

And to build on this statement by Wendell Berry, the ways I encountered autoethnography and narrative inquiry through Dr. Ellis and Dr. Bochner at USF placed an emphasis on these disciplines as the informing ambiance of one's mind and imagination. So, it is not a surprise that the methods of autoethnographic writing shapes the way I write and deliver sermons from the pulpit. Moreover, I integrate autoethnographic scholarship and stories into my sermons, using published narratives in an unorthodox way, sharing them not with academics, or participants of a conference, but with ordinary people seeking comfort, inspiration, or a deeper understanding of what it means to be human.

What I am advocating through this presentation is to expand the territory or horizon of autoethnography and narrative inquiry. As Dr. Bochner stated in his article, *Suffering Happiness*, “in practice, autoethnography is not so much a methodology as a way of life. It is a way of life that acknowledges contingency, finitude, embeddedness in storied being, encounters with Otherness, an appraisal of ethical and moral commitments, and a desire to keep conversation going” (p. 225).

Indeed, for my congregants, as they attend church Sunday after Sunday, I believe their commitment to gather in a sacred space is rooted in a deep-seated desire to keep the conversation going, which also means to tend our connections and communion with one another.

And my autoethnographic, evocative homilies are indeed designed to keep “a conversation going.” To keep me connected and engaged with the people I serve. There were many occasions I shared Dr. Ellis's *Maternal Connections* with a congregant who found himself or herself in the role of a caregiver. I am also reading, rewriting, and organizing existing autoethnographies based on my congregation's needs so I can integrate these stories into the sacred liturgy.

And following the sermon, after the service, I am delighted that people want to continue or carry on the conversation, which rarely happened when I used a more traditional approach to crafting and delivering my sermons.

And these moments also bring back memories of taking classes from Dr. Ellis and Dr. Bochner, because what set aside their classes from the others I attended, is what happened after the lecture was over. I cherished those walks with other students from the classroom to the parking lot, continuing the conversation that we began during class. And some of the conversations are still in motion.

Indeed, it is important to state that my small ecumenical community has been transformed by autoethnography. And one of the most important questions for us who engage in autoethnographic writing is who reads our work and how they are transformed by it? As Ursula K. Le Guinn warns us, the unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live: a live thing, a story.

Though, I would add that autoethnographic writing has a therapeutical dimension and the act of writing, for me, is also a transformative and healing experience. Autoethnographic writing is also a powerful form of self-inquiry, and the slow, contemplative process of writing often leads to the discovery that I am not a fragmented, separate self, locked up in a body, lost and vulnerable in a hostile and alien world. Discovering our true nature, or inner beauty through self-inquiry has a tremendous value, though formal education rarely includes these objectives in the curriculum.

Thomas Merton eloquently writes about the value of discovering and seeing our true nature, when describing his experience crossing the street in Louisville Kentucky.

"Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the Divine. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other."

Indeed, composing and reading autoethnography help us to see more clearly, to see things as they really are. But sharing autoethnography, connecting through autoethnography is what makes this medium truly transformative and valuable.

It is also important that as a reader of autoethnography, I become a co-creator and transform someone else's writing into a segment for a sermon or even for a prayer. When I perform autoethnographies from the pulpit I am no longer just describing a past event, or another person's experience. I make the story immediate and present so we can enter the story, inhabit it, so there is no need for interpretation or explanation.

I also want to highlight as I conclude this talk, that sharing/performing autoethnographies in a liturgical way does not have to be "religious" or "spiritual." For example, the London based School of Life, is a secular community. They recognize the transformative power of religious technologies such as communal singing, aesthetic environment, rituals, teachings, and create gatherings aiming to nurture a community to meet the real needs of the people - without belief in a particular god or dogma. So, I invite you to explore the possibilities for a communal autoethnography or how autoethnography can function in groups or communities within and outside of academia.

Thank you.

Advancing Analytical Autoethnography in the Conflict Resolution Field

Yehuda Silverman (yehuda.silverman@gmail.com)

Abstract

Within the conflict resolution field, there is a lack of discourse and research on intrapersonal conflicts. Autoethnography as a methodology can provide advancements in analyzing inner conflicts and can even be a catalyst for conflict transformation. However, this methodology could be daunting for peacebuilders, and several strategies are provided to navigate the autoethnographic research process. Some critiques are also addressed to further support researchers and practitioners in the conflict resolution field. Peace first begins from within, and through further advancements of analytical autoethnography, endless possibilities can emerge.

Keywords

analytical autoethnography, intrapersonal conflict, conflict resolution

Connecting autoethnography to the conflict resolution field

Can we truly build peace in our world if we are not at peace within ourselves? As conflicts fulminate around our world, these challenges may impact individuals from various aspects. There are often macro-focused perspectives that do not explain or provide an understanding of the individual processes through micro-focused frameworks. Within the conflict resolution field, conflicts are usually discussed through interpersonal, community, and international contexts without a particular focus on the individual dynamics. Intrapersonal conflict (also known as intrapsychic or inner conflict) in the conflict resolution field is not generally a primary focus, and autoethnography can lead the way in further discourse and research (Silverman, 2020).

Intrapersonal conflict is an essential component to know because most conflicts begin from within and can then further expand into becoming an interpersonal conflict and beyond. Most qualitative research methodologies expect the researchers to interview participants, trying to understand their worlds and perhaps delve deeper into their own inner conflicts. However, many intrapersonal conflicts are usually kept private and thus inaccessible to external researchers (Riccioni & Zuczkowski, 2009). To delve deeper into the inner mechanisms of individuals, another research methodology is needed.

Autoethnography provides a way to take the time and energy to record inner conflicts and sit with these challenges for transformation with analysis through the theories and literature. Through focusing on the self (auto), culture (ethno), and writing (graphy), a deeper understanding of ourselves can emerge, which could also help us understand people from diverse backgrounds (Roth, 2005). The ability to have a deeper understanding of the self and a possible transformation through the research experience also closely aligns with the field of conflict transformation. Some autoethnographies (e.g. Abreu, 2021; McIntyre, 2016; Silverman, 2017) involve a deep analysis of inner conflicts which provides many illuminations that may not have been discovered without the reflexive and investigative approaches of autoethnography.

Conflict often emerges when the voices of individuals are not heard, acknowledged, and validated. Autoethnography therefore provides an opportunity for voices to be heard when they may have been silenced, marginalized, or excluded in society. Through engaging in autoethnography, researchers should be open to critiquing and making contributions to research and theory, while also embracing vulnerability through connecting with emotions and feelings to arrive at a deeper understanding of these internal dynamics and the layers behind them that incorporates the self. Through this exploration, there is a possibility to improve the researcher's life, and society as well. The journey of this autoethnographic process can also be supportive in finding the researcher's voice and for individuals who may read the research, which can be more accessible to a variety of fields and even external from academia (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

While there are different approaches to analytic autoethnography, Chang (2008) provides a rigorous and explanatory methodology specific to cultural analysis. Being able to analyze inner conflicts becomes even more possible through analytic autoethnography, as researchers are encouraged to incorporate analytical-interpretive writing, which provides a template to further question the internal dynamics. Analytical-interpretive writing is also a process where "analysis and interpretation are intimately intertwined... [to reveal] particular details [that] are highlighted and relationships among data fragments are explained" (Chang, 2008, p. 146). In conflict, there are often interconnected dynamics that may be hidden or overlooked. Through a rigorous analysis, there is a possibility to uncover further layers of conflict dimensions that may also have been inaccessible through any other methodology.

The investigation could also provide a recognition that there is more than one perspective or narrative within us, which connects to postmodern autoethnography in stipulating the rejection of "the idea that there is a single reality or truth; rather there are many realities and many truths" (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 15). The possibility of exploring and uncovering additional and alternative dimensions to conflicts could even be a catalyst in understanding humanity beyond the often-used "good versus evil" categorizations. We need to investigate and analyze this binary system that creates the "other" as an adversary and perpetuates an "us versus them" perspective. As we begin to uncover others' stories, we can learn about narratives we do not yet know, narratives that can also hold many truths.

Addressing some critiques of autoethnography in supporting the conflict resolution field

In the conflict resolution field, it is particularly important to be rigorous in the research due to the multiple and complex dimensions of conflict. People may perceive autoethnography research deficient of "rigorous and worthwhile social science" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 65). Therefore, autoethnography of high quality should have "authentic and trustworthy data, accountable research process, ethics towards others and self, sociocultural analysis, and interpretation, [and] scholarly contribution" (Chang, 2016, p. 448). There are also frameworks in which autoethnography can address qualitative research criteria, and these include dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability.

Dependability involves how reliable and consistent the study is, considering and addressing any changing concerns and documenting the research process (Sandelowski, 1986; Streubert, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Credibility is usually associated with trustworthiness and collecting the data from multiple sources, while also consulting with individuals who are experts in the selected field of study (Guba, 1981). Confirmability often focuses on the results of the data, which must be addressed, and how the findings are connected to the conclusions of the study. Some examples include extensive documentation of the data collection process, reflexive

statements, and having content experts who are familiar with the documented experiences reviewing the research (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams, & Blackman, 2016). Finally, transferability involves the potential theoretical application, implementation in practice, or through other potential research initiatives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As a practitioner in peacebuilding, the ability to implement the approaches that are documented in autoethnographies is crucial for transformation. Some scholars suggest that “perhaps the most significant question is the impact of intrapersonal conflict on social conflict” (Mack & Snyder, 1957, p. 219). Therefore, having a recognition of the internal elements and how they may lead to interpersonal and societal conflicts is imperative to addressing the push and pull factors within a conflict. Some scholars (e.g. Gopin, 2016; McIntyre, 2016; Redekop, 2015; Silverman, 2017; Ury, 2016) provide additional inquiries into understanding the self and the intrapersonal dynamics of conflict resolution, which may be helpful as primers before beginning the autoethnographic process. Peacebuilders are often connected to individuals, and autoethnography can thus provide a deeper understanding of how they can further incorporate conflict resolution techniques to continue building cohesion in society.

Recommended research strategies to include as a peacebuilding autoethnographer

When beginning an autoethnography, having an additional detailed reflexive journal and data record log supports the confirmability of the autoethnography. This further adds to the credibility of the research because self-reflexivity is vital, which “requires an awareness of the self in the process of creating knowledge” (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 17). During the research process, being mindful of the writing style is important in creating an inclusive tone for all readers and diverting away from “otherness [which] can produce alienation and social distance” (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012, p. 300). Understanding nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2015) can also inspire a journey of being more internally compassionate, which could also provide further healing for readers as well. Family and culture diagrams, known as “kingrams” and “culturegrams” (Chang, 2008) can additionally support the researcher’s self-analysis, which results in a visual display of the autoethnographer’s family and cultural context.

The culturegram is not a fixed template, and Chang (2008) encourages that the researcher investigates different elements to further understand the potential complexity of the self. In addition, the culturegram can also be a catalyst for the autoethnographic process, as Silverman (2017) connected various elements, including trauma:

The trauma of the Holocaust has had a long-lasting impact on our family. I recently decided to travel to Poland (at this time I am the only child of my parents to have done so) and honor my family who perished during the Holocaust. While I was in Poland, I felt lost and confused, and there was a moment where I stood in my hotel room alone, paralyzed. After all these years, I finally had built up the courage to face the past, which continuously haunted me. Many of my relatives left this world too soon, unable to tell their stories, as the Holocaust cut their lives short. (p. 99)

For Silverman (2017), connecting to the past was still very much in the present, particularly as the ancestral stories were lost, with a wish for them to be found. The unspoken trauma that surrounded his family continued to permeate, resulting in a deep need to investigate and honor his family origins. Adding this element within the culturegram provided additional context for elucidation, while also recognizing that who we are connects to our past, present, and future. Taking the time for reflection and incorporating analytical writing further expanded his

awareness. Without awareness, the potential for resolving and transforming inner conflicts is limited. For researchers who are new to qualitative inquiry, autoethnography can provide an integral foundation for reflexivity.

Throughout the autoethnographic process, a vital element also surrounds the meaning-making and connections with the people who are in our lives and the individuals we have yet to meet. While continuing to collect data, multiple people may emerge who are deeply intertwined with the recorded documents and self-reflexive observations. Throughout the entire process, it is necessary to recognize ethics and privacy, such as safeguarding the identities of the people included in the autoethnography. Writing the relationship of the person (sister, co-worker, friend, etc.) or giving them alternative names is essential for confidentiality. However, some people may also want their identities revealed in the autoethnography, so that their voices can be further heard. Therefore, having a conversation regarding informed consent with each person who may be included in the research is crucial as well.

While collecting data for the autoethnography, understanding what data to include can further support the research process. For example, utilizing a self-observational technique, the researcher can record and timestamp each intrapersonal conflict involving culture and identity via a portable device or notebook to enhance accessibility (Chang, 2008). The researcher can record data not only during solitary moments, though also through instances of social conflicts and the intrapersonal conflicts that may emerge during those particular occurrences. Having supplementary data collection sources consisting of self-reflection, such as daily journaling during the data collection process, and archival materials which may include photos and older documents, can be beneficial when trying to delve into the complex dynamics of inner conflicts.

Once all the data is collected, the recorded intrapersonal conflicts can be grouped through a process of fracturing and connecting, wherein the researcher examines the data and connects the fractured data (Chang, 2008). Categories are then created through coding and organizing the data, which allows the data to be rearranged into similar categories that lead to uncovering how the theoretical frameworks can connect with the data (Maxwell, 2005). Coding involves “assigning topical identifiers to different segments of data... [which are then] grouped by topical code [and then the] groups are again put together into a larger category” (Chang, 2008, pp. 128-129). Through this process, themes will emerge which can help piece together elements of a conflict that may not have been previously recognized. For example, Silverman (2017) recorded over 40 internal conflicts related to his Chasidic origins, which resulted in nine themes grouped into three categories: “cultural conundrums, portrayal problems, and desolation distresses” (p. 109). In addition, an internal transformation emerged within the researcher, where he recognized specific human needs that were not met. A rigorous analysis and connection of the root causes provides an opportunity to resolve and transform these complexities, as noted by Silverman (2017):

The ability to see the recorded intrapersonal conflicts that originated from my Chabad-Lubavitch cultural upbringing provided me the opportunity to analyze each individual internal conflict and organize them. Through seeing my own internal conflicts visually and eventually organized into themes, possible potentialities to reframe each internal conflict emerged... I [also] did notice that through recording and organizing my internal conflicts, I was able to understand more about myself. (p. 124)

Most conflicts are often due to unmet needs (Rosenberg, 2015) and connecting the data with the theories and literature can further illuminate these internal mechanisms. Sometimes the expectations we have about people, especially relatives and friends, can potentially generate

further intense emotions and possibilities for conflicts. However, through the autoethnographic process, the close connections we have are often vital links to the research.

Once the autoethnography is nearing completion, having at least three readers who may know you and the surrounding conflict(s) should then review the draft and assess if there is a certain bias and/or distortion from the data. The input from the readers enhances the trustworthiness and credibility of the research, as the readers can review whether the data collected has been noted within the researcher's past through previous experiences. When reviewing the draft, the readers may also have additional questions and comments, which could prompt the researcher to further investigate and analyze some elements that may not have been previously considered.

The future of autoethnography research for peacebuilding

Peace is an ongoing process and having a variety of perspectives can help humanity recognize that there is often much more than a single narrative. Through the journey of this research, the ability to have a bird's-eye view from beyond the individual self is also paramount in seeing multiple possibilities. Peace begins from within, and autoethnography can help lead the way in providing new mechanisms to cultivate international peace. As the autoethnography methodology continues to expand, there are exciting new possibilities that can emerge. Within the conflict resolution field, there are many ongoing conflicts that seem to have no timeline for a resolution. The field of autoethnography is a catalyst for a much-needed paradigm shift in bringing a deeper awareness to how individuals can break the cycle of violence. Taking the time for self-reflection should not be underestimated as society continues to advance in rapid directions. Autoethnography provides an opportunity to connect with the self, and in doing so, a deeper connection to our world will arise.

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Using Autoethnography to Explore Culture and Identity in Advanced Literary Studies

Marlen Harrison (m.harrison2@snhu.edu)
Jay Meadows (jacob.meadows@snhu.edu)
Shanita Mitchell (smitchel190@gmail.com)
Odessa Ogo (ms.odessaogo@gmail.com)

Abstract

Many student researchers approach the MA English thesis with an expectation to recapitulate an author-evacuated, pseudo-objective, literary analysis. We argue that while such an approach is key to the development of literary scholars and the hallmark of our field, introduction of additional methodologies, in this case autoethnography, can stimulate innovative work while supporting significant transdisciplinary and critical self-awareness. In this presentation, we will explore why and how an MA thesis director introduces autoethnography as an alternative research discourse to MA English thesis students and examine student responses. Pedagogical implications, teaching resources, and thesis examples will be presented in order to highlight the myriad creative possibilities for using autoethnography to both celebrate and interrogate literature, literacy, and language.

Keywords

English thesis, literary studies, power, identity

Many student researchers approach the M.A. English thesis with an expectation to recapitulate an author evacuated pseudo-objective literary analysis; it's what they've been taught. We argue that while such an approach is key to the development of literary scholars and the hallmark of our field. Introduction of additional methodologies in this case autoethnography can stimulate innovative work while supporting significant transdisciplinary and critical self-awareness.

I'm Marlen, a Ph.D. in English who has been supervising MA English theses since 2015 and advocating for more experience-centered research methods. During my Ph.D., I was introduced to autoethnography as a way of exploring cultural phenomenon via the lens of lived experience. I follow Holman-Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) who outlined 4 characteristics of autoethnography:

1. purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practice;
2. making contributions to existing research;
3. embracing vulnerability with purpose;
4. and creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response.

They also explain that autoethnography can serve 5 purposes as a method:

1. disrupting norms of research practice and representation;
2. working from insider knowledge;
3. maneuvering through pain confusion anger and uncertainty and making life better;
4. breaking silence reclaiming voice and writing to right;
5. and making work accessible;

Next, let's meet three M.A. thesis autoethnographers to learn how they used autoethnography to interrogate literature, power, and identity within the framework presented above. Marlen began this conversation by asking Jay, Shanita, and Odessa, "What was your initial expectation for the thesis project before learning autoethnography?"

Hi I'm Jay. I wanted to look at the way that women inside of an oppressive patriarchy perpetuate the state with their actions, a simple close analysis of literature.

I'm Shanita. I expected to do a traditional literary analysis using critical race and feminist theory on a post-modernist work of my choosing.

And I'm Odessa. I imagined a thesis-driven literary analysis that was heavily supported by the works of various scholars...what I had been doing in my previous courses.

What was your initial reaction when learning about autoethnography?

Shanita

I didn't trust the concept. I have been well conditioned by academia to form and express my opinion, but also, erase the identity and experiences that informed said opinion. I questioned whether the resulting piece would be a viable piece of writing that was worth the time investment particularly for me as a black academic. It was not playing by the rules and standards that have been clearly outlined for me. Did I need to gift the world of academia with one more reason to discount or discredit me?

Odessa

I was skeptical that the inclusion of my own personal experiences was valid and concerned that including them would make my writing appear less academic or scholarly. I spent a lot of time researching autoethnography, looking at its foundations, and reading examples from a variety of fields.

Jay

My advisor asked, "What if you were inside *The Handmaid's Tale*?" My immediate response was that as a gay man I would be dead. After pushing past that original thought, one phrase bounded through my head, "I am Offred." I knew immediately once I understood autoethnography that I would be able to not only explore Gilead but also the dystopia as myself and not only as a scholar.

How did you use autoethnography to explore culture and/or identity in your thesis?

Jay

I likened myself to a handmade and explored the mirrored relationships between my identity and that of Offred throughout the novel. I used autoethnography as a means of *textual intervention*, asking myself what pieces of my life were the most applicable to the story.

Odessa

I analyzed native Chamorro authors through the lens of post colonialism and then incorporated my own experiences as part of the Chamorro diaspora to explore identity and culture.

Shanita

I selected three texts that elicited a strong emotional response for me as a black female reader and explored some of the larger problematic themes, moments, and concepts within them. Once I discovered *black feminist autoethnography* I felt more comfortable stepping into the realm myself knowing I was in the company of my sisters.

How did your autoethnography offer opportunities to develop self-awareness?

Shanita

Autoethnography allowed me to reveal aspects of my identity that I wasn't encouraged to share using any traditional methodology. I was able to don two of the most defining elements of my identity openly as a reader and writer: being black and a woman. I never cease being a black woman when I read but I have felt that it has been in my best interest to set my observations under those two identities to the side. I walk into spaces feeling as if I need to prove that I can fit into the academic elitism of the literary world. Autoethnography felt like an invitation to be my authentic self, and in many ways, I wasn't all that prepared to unleash myself, especially at this late point in my MA journey.

Jay

My autoethnography led me to a greater understanding of myself, as a human and as a scholar. I became keenly aware of some of the traumas that had yet to heal. It is a psychoanalysis of myself and the people in my past, and a social experiment in comparing myself to a highly recognizable figure, Offred the Handmaid.

Odessa

I have been able to come to a deeper understanding of the experiences of my ancestors and how those experiences have shaped my own.

What was your auto ethnography journey like?

Shanita

Many times, I would end up deleting a word or a phrase because it was too truthful, too raw, or too dark (pun intended). I thought about how much safer it would have been to have written the traditional literary analysis. I would've barely been present, just a whisper of me buried under theory. I have been dying to break loose on the literary cannon and call the great works like I see them; it was nice to finally admit that these texts are grating to me. Writing out my feelings about those works as a black reader without having to be lectured by white

classmates and professors about how I missing the point was priceless. It centered me, but I couldn't have anticipated how much personal work it would demand. The process was empowering, and I was able to create a space for my voice.

Odessa

I entered the writing of my autoethnography timidly, afraid to dip my toes in the water. I spent a lot of time sifting through my memories and emotions, wondering what was “good enough” or “worthy” of being placed alongside established scholars and experts. My breakthrough moment came when I realized that I no longer had to push aside the personal connections I made as I researched. That instinct to connect my own experiences to the works of others no longer had to be tamped down. Autoethnography had given me permission to not only acknowledge that connection, but to work with it, to flip it upside down and turn it around and really, really, look at it in ways I never would have imagined. I felt free to explore my authentic self in the academic realm, something I had never felt comfortable to do before.

Jay

The most difficult part of the process was approaching a piece of my past that was not only traumatic, but elemental to my make up as a human. Tackling the broken pieces of yourself can lead to great healing. My process of writing autobiographical reflections and looking at Bible verses was *scriptotherapeutic*. I found healing in digging through my traumas. It was the healing that I experienced that was the most valuable and most interesting part of my maiden autoethnography voyage.

Moving forward into new arenas of performing autoethnography, it is of the upmost importance to remember that we can change the status quo of literary studies. By inserting our own lives into our research, we are emboldening audiences and allowing for greater connections to the literature that's changing the game of literary criticism.

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Arte y Autoetnografía en un Proyecto sobre Autocuidado, Género y Vida

Berenice Cortés Campos
otravezbere@hotmail.com

Resumen

Esta presentación hace referencia a un proyecto artístico de mi autoría, que tiene origen en vivencias y recuerdos vinculados con mi madre, su vida, su educación y el contexto en el cual creció; así como en la reflexión que esto me ha generado sobre el autocuidado, el género y el sentido de la vida.

Narro el cuidado que mi madre ha brindado a sus seres queridos relegando por muchos años sus deseos, intereses y necesidades individuales, hasta el momento en que decide pensar primero en sí misma, experiencia que retomo para bordar algunas frases empleando sus hilos de colores, rindiéndole homenaje y procurando compartir sus enseñanzas con otras mujeres.

Palabras clave

autoetnografía, arte, mujeres, cuidado

Abstract

This presentation refers to an artistic project of my authorship, which has its origin in experiences and memories linked to my mother, her life, her education and the context in which she grew up; as well as in the reflection that this has generated in me about self-care, gender and the meaning of life.

I narrate the care that my mother has given to her loved ones, relegating her individual desires, interests and needs for many years, until the moment she decides to think of herself first, an experience from which I embroider some phrases using her colored thread, paying tribute to her and trying to share her teachings with other women.

Keywords

autoethnography, art, women, care.

I

Ella nació en 1965 en una pequeña comunidad rural mexicana, siendo integrante de una familia campesina muy pobre y católica. Al tener dos hermanos mayores y tres menores que ella, fue por mucho tiempo la única hija (mujer), de manera que tenía hermanos pero no hermanas.

Como muchas otras niñas de esa época y región, fue educada desde muy pequeña para cuidar y servir a los otros, a su familia. De niña y adolescente cuidó a sus hermanos y a su padre, debido a las constantes enfermedades padecidas por su mamá. Ella era quien lavaba la ropa, torteaba, cocía los frijoles y preparaba el chile; calentaba las tortillas mientras los demás comían, limpiaba la casa y cuidaba a sus hermanos pequeños cuando su madre no podía hacerlo y, en las temporadas en que ésta se encontraba mejor de salud, todas esas actividades las hacían entre las dos.

Dejó de asistir a clases en los últimos meses del sexto grado de primaria, debido a que su madre enfermó y ella debió dedicarse a las labores domésticas y de cuidado.

Luego, cuando nació su única hermana, la menor de la familia, también la cuidó de pequeña. Entonces, de cierta manera, desde niña asumió el rol de madre cuidadora de sus hermanos y hermana, antes de convertirse en mi madre.

A los 18 años se casó y se dedicó a ser ama de casa, a atender a mi padre y posteriormente también a mí y a mis hermanos. Había aprendido de su entorno familiar, social y religioso que su responsabilidad era cuidar de la familia y realizar las labores domésticas; por eso intentaba atender las necesidades y deseos de sus seres queridos, así fuera preciso sacrificarse y relegar las propias necesidades e intereses.

II

Cuando yo era niña me ayudó a estudiar las tablas de multiplicar hasta que las memoricé. También leíamos juntas los cuentos y leyendas de mis libros de *Español lecturas*. A ella le gustaba leer y me transmitió ese gusto. Recuerdo cómo nos emocionábamos cada vez que iniciaba un ciclo escolar y yo recibía nuevos libros de texto.

Compartimos también el gusto por las plantas y salir al campo, el placer de tomar ponche de frutas en invierno y comer pastel de tres leches en las celebraciones de cumpleaños.

Aunque, también discutíamos de manera frecuente pues ella era la encargada de corregirme y educarme.

Como parte de mi educación, me enseñó a bordar en punto de cruz y me dijo que yo debía hacerme cargo de lavar mi ropa y limpiar mi cuarto, aunque es cierto que nunca me pidió que cuidara y atendiera a mis hermanos y a mi padre, como ella lo hizo desde pequeña. Aun así, esperaba que, mientras crecía, yo asumiera una actitud de servicio y cuidado, como las mujeres de mi alrededor.

No he cumplido esas expectativas y esto ha provocado desacuerdos entre nosotras.

Con nuestras coincidencias y diferencias, entre encuentros y desencuentros, hemos vivido muchos años juntas, pero, parecen tan pocos.

III

Hace tiempo me dijo: “Así como a ti te gusta pintar y dibujar, a mí me gusta bordar”. Es por eso que, en muchas ocasiones, al salir a hacer algunas compras, me ha pedido que le lleve hilo de algún color específico. De esta manera ha reunido muchos colores. La comprendo, pues esto permite bordar imágenes más matizadas. Y es que ambas hemos tenido la experiencia de pasar horas realizando una actividad que disfrutamos, dejando incluso de percibir el paso del tiempo. Ella bordar y yo, pintar y dibujar.

Tal vez, comprar hilos de colores y dedicar tiempo a bordar ha sido una manera de pensar en sí misma, satisfaciendo así una necesidad creativa y superando los retos implicados en cada imagen elegida, aún más siendo en punto de cruz y con el ingenio que se requiere para que al reverso de la tela todas las líneas queden en un mismo sentido. Ahora no puedo preguntarle, pero lo haré cuando tenga la oportunidad de conversar con ella sobre esto y muchos otros temas.



IV

He tenido una pesadilla, ella enferma y la veo muy triste. Así que, intentando animarla, le pregunto: “Oiga mamá, ¿qué le gustaría hacer una vez que se recupere?”

Congruente con la manera en que ha sido educada, me contesta: “Yo sólo quiero curarme para cumplir con mi obligación”. Esto significa cuidar y atender a mis hermanos y a mi papá, realizar labores domésticas, ser buena madre, buena esposa, buena hija, buena mujer.

Siento una mezcla de tristeza e impotencia. Me duele escucharla decir eso. Su respuesta es para mí una prueba fehaciente de que sus necesidades y aspiraciones quedan en segundo, tercero o último plano.

Solo le contesto: “Pues entonces, si quiere estar bien para atender a los demás, primero necesita estar bien usted. Primero piense en usted. Ahorita no se preocupe por los quehaceres de la casa, mejor visite a su amiga que vive aquí cerca, no se quede encerrada y triste mientras los demás no estamos. Cuídese lo más que pueda y avísenos cuando se sienta mal y necesite algo, porque así podrá mejorarse, así podrá estar bien y podrá, como usted dice, cumplir con su obligación”. Me responde que tengo razón, pero, unos segundos más tarde, comprendo que le estoy pidiendo algo muy complicado.

Poco después, ella pensará primero en sí misma.

Es 11 de mayo, ayer fue su cumpleaños y ahora intentamos convencerla de ir a un hospital distinto de aquel en donde la han desahuciado. Conscientemente toma la decisión de no ir, no acepta hacerlo ni siquiera por mi hermano pequeño y por mi abuelita, quienes tanto le preocupan. Se rehúsa y tiene todo el derecho de hacerlo, yo me siento tan devastada y tan orgullosa al mismo tiempo.

Esto no parece real, ¡tiene que ser una pesadilla!

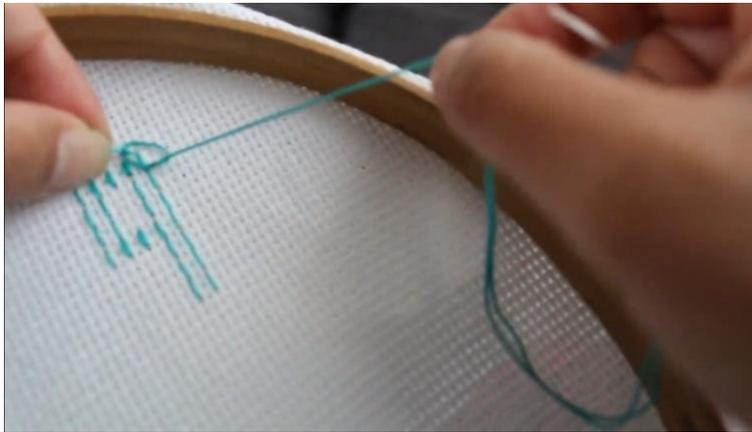
V

Han pasado unos días y he comenzado a pensar en utilizar de alguna manera los hilos de colores de mi mamá. Me parece buena idea bordar las frases “Primero pienso en mí”, “Primero piense en usted” y “Primero piensa en ti”.

Los días y las noches siguen pasando... Por fin, compro tela, agujas y aros de madera para compartir con las mujeres cercanas a mi mamá, a quienes les propongo bordar durante sesiones grupales. Tengo la intención de explicar con claridad la elección de las frases, pero, ya en las reuniones, siento que mi voz temblará y romperé en llanto. Así que solo soy capaz de decirles que es un homenaje a mi mamá.

Durante las sesiones se han integrado voluntariamente también algunos niños, varones. Me han sorprendido gratamente, no esperaba que algo así sucediera, pues el bordado es una actividad que, en el contexto en el que crecí, tradicionalmente ha sido realizada por mujeres. No obstante, ellos han elegido bordar, ya sea ayudando a sus madres o hermanas en los momentos en que ellas hacen pausas para descansar la vista o solicitándome lo necesario para hacer su bordado individualmente. Esto es posible debido al ambiente familiar en el que desarrollamos las sesiones y el interés mostrado por la mayoría de las participantes (sus madres, hermanas, abuelita y primas), de manera que esto les ha generado curiosidad, despertando su disposición de acercarse y experimentar de primera mano. Estamos en confianza y esto reduce la probabilidad de que alguien intente avergonzarlos por realizar una actividad que, en ese entorno, sigue considerándose propia del ámbito femenino y, entonces, repriman su deseo de participar. Además, a su edad no han interiorizado los roles de género con la misma intensidad que lo han hecho los jóvenes y adultos.

A mí me gusta que participen y que compartamos este tiempo. El autocuidado, el pensar en sí misma o sí mismo, no debe ser exclusivo de ningún género. El bordado o cualquier otra actividad, tampoco.

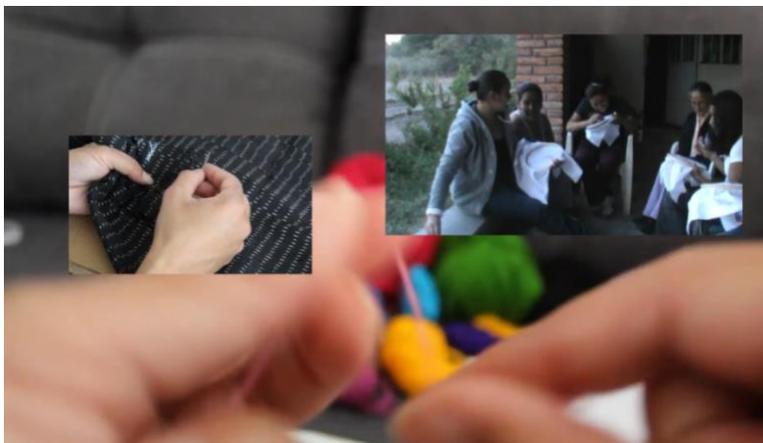


VI

Mi abuelita materna ha bordado varias servilletas a pesar de su deteriorada vista y, como la tela que les regalé tenía bocetada las frases pero no otra imagen, ha construido figuras de su propia imaginación para decorar las esquinas: canastitas, algunas flores y unos pajaritos. También me ha pedido muestras de otras figuras en punto de cruz para reproducirlas y ha mandado hacer la bastilla y los picos¹ a sus servilletas. Hemos intercambiado algunas: ella me ha regalado una bordada por sus manos y yo a ella una por las mías.

Considero que bordar y regalarle a alguien una servilleta con el texto “Primero piense en usted” o “Primero piensa en ti” podría ser una manera cariñosa de expresarle a esa persona que es importante para quien le hace el regalo y que ella también debe preocuparse por sí misma, manifestándole a la vez que quererse, cuidarse, atenderse a una misma, no es algo negativo. Me parece también que la frase “Primero pienso en mí”, tomada como detonante para la reflexión sobre el autocuidado y el amor propio, puede llevar a preguntarnos en qué medida nuestro contexto sociocultural ha determinado la forma en que nos pensamos a nosotras mismas y el cuidado que podemos recibir de nosotras o de otras personas.

¹ “Picos” es el nombre dado al tejido que rodea la orilla de las servilletas de tela.



VII

El tiempo sigue su curso..., el proyecto ha estado en pausa, pero no ha terminado. Creo que es importante continuarlo.

Sigo presenciando conflictos emocionales entre muchas mujeres de mi pueblo y de otros lugares que han sido educadas para servir a los demás y se les ha dicho que pensar en sí mismas es egoísmo. Las he escuchado decir que si ellas pusieran sus necesidades en primer lugar, se sentirían culpables.

Yo misma sigo intentando aprender a cuidar de mi cuerpo y mi salud emocional, también continúo buscando el equilibrio entre pensar en mí, pero no únicamente en mí. No es fácil identificar cuándo es necesario poner por encima las necesidades y deseos propios, cuándo los de nuestros seres queridos y cuándo es posible hacerlos converger, sobre todo teniendo en cuenta que como personas somos sujetos complejos, retomando la noción de Edgar Morin (1994) quien plantea que “ser sujeto es ponerse en el centro de su propio mundo, ocupar el lugar del «yo»” (p. 61). Además, agrega:

Bien entendida, la complejidad individual es tal que, al ponernos en el centro de nuestro mundo, ponemos también a los nuestros: es decir, a nuestros padres, nuestros hijos, nuestros conciudadanos, y somos incluso capaces de sacrificar nuestras vidas por los nuestros. Nuestro egocentrismo puede hallarse englobado en una subjetividad comunitaria más amplia; la concepción de sujeto debe ser compleja. (p. 61)

Bajo la interpretación que me gusta hacer de esta idea, los seres queridos pueden ser considerados, a causa del apego, como una especie de extensión de la persona. De esta manera se convierten en parte de uno mismo. Mis seres queridos son parte de mi identidad, pues en mis relaciones con ellos y ellas he formado mi autoconcepto. Mi historia contiene muchas de mis vivencias, pero también muchas de las suyas, de las vivencias que compartimos en pasado, presente y futuro; ellos y ellas son parte de mí, son simbólicamente “yo” y yo soy simbólicamente ellas y ellos.

VIII

Tengo la intención de continuar con las sesiones de bordado, aunque también he desarrollado ya otras piezas que forman parte de este proyecto, entre ellas la intervención de un viejo rebozo, mediante pintura y bordado con canas, formando nuevamente la frase “Primero pienso en mí”, pieza relacionada con la vida de mi madre, la mía, las de mis abuelas, bisabuelas y un par de mujeres de su edad, cercanas a mí.



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On Writing a Collaborative Autoethnography

Trude Klevan (tkl@usn.no)
Alec Grant (alecgrant32@yahoo.co.uk)

Abstract

This text is based on the prologue of our book *An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher: A Dialogic View of Academic Development* (2022). The text introduces the relational context of the book, describing Trude coming across Alec's work during her PhD research, which spoke directly to her need to find a home in academe. Our ensuing email exchange naturally set the scene for *dialogue* and *friendship* as the methodological bases of both our relationship and the book. We invite readers to participate in our open-ended conversation and to open up for possible inner and outer dialogues that the text may encourage.

Keywords:

Friendship – dialogue – becoming-knowledge – relational knowledge – academic development

What does writing dialogically entail? Over the past two years, the two of us have collaborated dialogically in crafting the book: *An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher: A Dialogic View of Academic Development* (2022). The following text is based on the prologue of the book and was presented at the international association of autoethnography and narrative inquiry conference in 2022 (ISAN 2022). The book is a story of academic development, but it also a book about how such development is relational and entangled within material and social contexts. As such, it is a story of many stories. While the actual writing of the book has been going on for the past two years, the processes and dialogues that sparked it off, and continue to nourish it, have been going on for much longer.

In our understanding, this is evident in our individual and shared stories. We have found that new understandings and knowledge can be developed through critical dialogic reflection. In related terms, we have also found that qualitative inquiry knowledge development, acquisition, collaboration and dialogue is best mediated by the epistemic resource of *friendship*. From this standpoint, we argue that qualitative postgraduate researchers and their supervisors – as *becoming*, embodied, relational selves – may also thrive on the carefully co-nurtured and co-evolving intersubjectivity that such friendship entails.

In this regard, we argue that writing dialogically based on an onto-epistemological understanding of friendship involves much more than a to-and-fro conversation exchange and an understanding of knowledge acquisition as an endpoint goal. Using selected dialogical excerpts from our email exchanges over the years, we show how writing together has enabled us both to grow in our respective and intersubjective *becoming* and, hence, in the development of *becoming-knowledge*.

The dialogic writing process has also allowed us to elaborate on our differences. In exploring and role modelling how dialogue can develop knowledge through processes of reaching shared and oppositional understandings, we hope to encourage critical questioning, and inner and outer dialogues, in our readers. By “outer dialogues”, we mean the words that are actually spoken in dialogic exchanges. “Inner dialogues” refer to the traces in our minds of previous experiences, which can be activated through encounters with others and other

voices. Through inviting such dialogues, we hope that this text and our dialogic book project may enable new connections, new friendships, and new beginnings.

In September 2015 Trude sent her first email to Alec. This correspondence began soon after Alec confirmed his willingness to Bengt, Trude's research supervisor, to host a visit by them to the University of Brighton in the Spring of 2016. The intended aim of the visit was to enable Trude – a Norwegian PhD student – and Bengt to immerse themselves in the qualitative inquiry environment there, including most importantly its evolving autoethnography and narrative inquiry cultures. In his university role of 'Reader in Narrative Mental Health,' Alec was prolific and well published in both these cultures.

In her email, Trude described her circumstances and troubling thoughts about shifting from a practice-based to an academic world, in relation to her lack of confidence in getting by convincingly in 'academic-speak' situations. Such tensions – around language games – are an enduring theme throughout our book. They extend to the difficulties faced by postgraduate students and their supervisors in the qualitative academy who wish to challenge the received conceptual wisdom to which they are constantly exposed. This issue is a broader one than simply learning a new language. What is invited, rather *needed*, is critical engagement with the language itself, with its cherished, 'sacred cow' concepts, and with the processes through which academics are socialized to all of this.

The brief email exchange marked the start of a strong exemplar relationship of our growth as qualitative researchers, in the wider context of our ongoing epistemic development. In the absence of our developing relationship, this text and the book that it is part of – an unfinalized and open-ended conversation – would not have been possible. Such a dialogical approach to writing and the development of knowledge marks a challenge to the rationality of the neoliberal academy.

We cordially invite you, dear reader, to join the conversation and to test out our beliefs in your own academic relationships.

*

Greetings from Norway reciprocated

From: Trude Klevan

Sent: 17 September 2015 17:15

To: Alec Grant

Subject: Greetings from Norway

Dear Dr. Alec Grant,

I was very happy to learn from my supervisor Bengt Karlsson that I am welcome to visit you and your colleagues at the School of Health Sciences, University of Brighton, next spring! As Bengt mentioned, I discovered your publications some months ago while conducting a literature search for my PhD project and was rather thrilled. You give words to some of my thoughts and frustrations and have also given me new reflections and perspectives.

I'm educated as a social worker and have worked in the field of mental health services for many years. Having received funding for my PhD project, I am currently doing research full-time. Hopefully, clinical experience and having lived for a while can add something to my research. My PhD project is so far called 'Helpful help in a mental health crisis.' It is a qualitative study aiming to describe and explore experiences of helpful help in mental health crisis from the perspectives of service users, carers and clinicians in crisis resolution teams (CRTs) in Norway. Though quite a lot has been written about whether or not CRTs actually serve as an alternative to hospitalizations, not so much has been written about the content of the help provided and whether it's experienced as helpful or unhelpful.

I have not published anything from the project yet, but I have recently submitted two articles, one focusing on the experiences of service users and the second one on the

experiences of carers. The first article uses a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, whereas in the second one I have used a narrative approach, trying to show how an idiographic, storied, and contextual presentation of data can open up for a different understanding than when presenting results in a more ‘horizontal,’ across the dataset, manner. The processes through which we co-create and construct meaning and knowledge has become of great interest to me.

I’m currently trying to analyse and make sense of my interviews with CRT clinicians and have just read your article ‘Demedicalizing misery,’¹ which I enjoyed very much. Your reflections concerning the possible distance between the teaching and promoting of the human paradigm in educational institutions and what students want and experience as a demand from the ‘outside world,’ is recognizable, both from my own clinical experience and from the interviews. Mental health workers seem to be in a squeeze between their own humanistic ideals and a wish to work holistically in a recovery-oriented way, and the culture at workplaces that demand diagnosis and medicalized language and practices in order for people to be taken seriously as a health professional.

As a nurse or social worker working in this part of the system, you would not want to be regarded as incompetent and unschooled, and so the technological language and culture become the dominant one. Perhaps the technological language can be regarded as the language of the ‘clever and well-educated’ ones, and in order for mental health workers to be accepted into the ‘high society’ (not sure if this is a common expression in English.) they adapt to it. It’s a pity and a loss, as other perspectives and important contributions to the field of mental health work are absorbed and silenced. These were just some thoughts.

Concerning what I would like to get out of my visit, I would very much like to have the opportunity to learn something on how you and your colleagues work with qualitative research and meaning-making in the field of mental health, focusing narratives and a narrative approach and also autoethnography. I am also interested in learning and discussing how we can expand our understanding on how meaning and knowledge can be created in qualitative research. Regarding that, I found your article on duoethnography² very interesting.

I was thinking about staying for 2–3 weeks, also planning to have some time to work and write on my project. Sometime in early spring 2016 would be good for me, but I am rather flexible concerning that. I don’t know how this sounds to you?

Best regards,

Trude

Trude Klevan

PhD Candidate

18.09.2015:

Dear Trude,

Lovely to hear from you. I’m a bit incapacitated right now with a minor infection. I’ll respond properly to your email below when I’m back at work next week. In the meantime, have a look at my CV, in particular pp. 11–19. If there’s anything you haven’t read yet that fancy having a look at, let me know and I’ll send you the pdf if this is possible (also check me on ResearchGate – lots of downloads of my papers on there).

What you want to get out of the visit, the duration, and the time period – early Spring 2016 – all sounds fine. I’ll start the ball rolling at my end next week.

¹ Grant, A. (2015) ‘Demedicalizing misery: Welcoming the human paradigm in mental health nurse education’, *Nurse Education Today*, 35(9), pp. e50–e53. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2015.05.022>

² Grant, A., and Radcliffe, M. (2015) ‘Resisting technical rationality in mental health nurse higher education: A duoethnography’, *The Qualitative Report (TQR)*, 20(6), Article 6, pp. 815–825. www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR20/6/grant6.pdf

Very much looking forward to it!
Best,
Alec
Dr Alec Grant
Reader in Narrative Mental Health

Alec, 12th January 2021

Looking back at its beginnings, before our relationship took off, Trude, my academic life was in a rut. Bored much of the time, having led a postgraduate module on qualitative inquiry for many years, I was unhappy with many aspects of it as a research paradigm. I was also unhappy about the state of scholarship in the neoliberal academic environment generally, and in particular at my university. Along with a small group of other, simpatico, colleagues, I had to work very hard to get autoethnography taken at all seriously in my academic school. Moreover, an administrative infrastructure had almost totally eclipsed anything that could be remotely described as ‘scholarly’, with many so-called ‘academics’ seeming happy to occupy solely clerical-administrative-managerial roles.³ As a result, there was little opportunity to share and develop ideas in a community context, little creative intellectual space.

And then you came along, Trude, and over the years I’ve come to appreciate what a true dialogic academic relationship feels and looks like, and what benefits it can bestow. Our relationship has also enabled me to more explicitly conjoin autoethnography with my long-standing interest in philosophy. From my postgraduate studies in the latter discipline, I’ve got to the point where I understand philosophy as an empowering dialogue that constantly tries to uncover, question, and challenge its own epistemic assumptions (Bortoletti and Stammers, 2021). To the extent that autoethnography is in the business of critically scrutinizing culture, developing more of an explicit philosophical dimension to it seems to me now to be a logical necessity. Doing so will enable us as autoethnographers to constantly combat our reliance on ‘assumed and unquestioned frames of knowledge’ (Brincker, 2021, p. 25).

*And, as Maria Brincker argues, philosophy, like autoethnography, is, or should be, situated, caring practice. In her seminal manifesto paper from 1988, **Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective**, the philosopher Donna Haraway places situated inquiry centre stage in explicating the meaning of ‘objectivity.’ She eschews the traditional understanding of ‘objectivity’ as a disembodied phenomenon. In her terms, ‘meanings and bodies get made . . . in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life’ (p. 580). From Haraway’s perspective ‘objectivity’ rests on **situated knowledges**, which entail particular and specific embodiment rather than disembodied, transcendent vision, since ‘The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular’ (p. 590).*

*The objectivity of situated knowledge depends in turn on **objective vision**. In Haraway’s terms, this amounts to always partial, and limited but developing, perspectives on located, situated knowledge. There is an ethical dimension implicit here, since situated knowledge development entails accountability and a refusal of all-powerful, omniscient, gods-eye vision. It should be stressed that this does not signal an escape into relativism, where all views are considered equal. Haraway contends that relativism is as morally dubious as gods-*

³ This included administrative ‘professors,’ some of whom were awarded this title on the basis of managerial and committee performance rather than scholarship. I describe this in graphic detail in my speech, accepting from Trude and her conference organizing committee colleagues the International Conference of Autoethnography (ICAE) Inaugural Lifetime Contribution Award, ‘In recognition of making a significant contribution to the development and nurturance of the field of autoethnography and those working within it’ (presented at the 7th conference, on the 21st July 2020). www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXqCw-Tyq0E

eye vision, to the extent that both serve to smooth out irregularities and silence dissenting voices. In contrast:

The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conventions in epistemology. (p. 584)

Haraway argues that such ‘webs of connections,’ emerging from incomplete, limited, situated epistemic vision, weaken an over-investment and over-confidence in the power of critical self-reflexivity since

We are not immediately present to ourselves. Self-knowledge requires a semiotic-material technology to link meanings and bodies. (p. 585)

*Humans are never identical with their imagined selves. However, even the ‘split and contradictory self . . . can join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history’ (p. 586). In this regard, Haraway is clear that what counts as rational accounts of the world reflect a struggle over **how** to see. An important aspect of this struggle is between ‘god trick’ vision – the all knowing, all seeing, view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity, from disembodiment – and (to recapitulate, by default limited and partial) views from bodies which are ‘complex (and) contradictory’ (p. 589, my brackets).*

I believe that our situated knowledges, explored throughout this book, are a good basis for open-ended conversation, resonances and, in Haraway’s terms, ‘web connections’ with our readers, in spite of us never measuring up to our critically reflexive pretensions. You and I, Trude, are located, vulnerable, unfinalized voices. Although our voices are flawed, I think it’s to our credit that we are insatiably curious about the webs of our differential positionings, to draw on Haraway’s turn of phrase. I hope our words allow for ‘the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible’ (p. 590). Haraway argues that situated knowledges require that objects of knowledge – what is known, what is epistemically discussed – have agency, and are not assumed as static, frozen, or background phenomena. In this sense, as we argue over the course of this book, knowledges are made and shaped rather than found.

Trude, 27th January 2021

Knowledges

Are

Made and shaped

Rather than found.

To me, those words have an almost magical sound, opening up new worlds, new possibilities and, to use Haraway’s words, new webs of connections. The idea of how situated thoughts and knowledges can provide connections and, furthermore, enable ongoing *becomings* is captivating. As unfinalized beings, we always have that inherent possibility of being on the move to something and somewhere else – we are never standing still, and neither are the worlds we are entangled with. To me, this is easy to lose sight of, in a world where knowledge is commonly being taught as something that *just is*. The idea seems to be that if we define and build on pre-existing knowledge, striving to fill all the little knowledge gaps we carefully address, we will eventually ‘know it all.’ This is of course fraudulent. Once we have uncovered what we do not know and used the knowledge we have revealed to fill the gaps – the gaps and the knowledge already belong to ‘back then.’ This suggestion is not, as you write Alec, a support for relativism and ‘anything goes.’ It is based on a basic assumption that knowledge, people, and the world are situated and unfinalized.

Hans Børli is perhaps one of Norway's most treasured poets. He is often referred to as the 'poet of the forest,' his rather modestly expressed, low-key poetry expressing a deep connection with nature and specifically the deep woods of eastern Norway where he lived and worked as a lumberjack. In one of his poems, he writes (my translation):

Who can tether a bird migration?
The whole eternity around us. And yet
Always this empty hand
Which was too late in the grip.
One second only: a tick of the clock,
A heartbeat
And it is already THEN.
(Børli, 1984)

Relating Børli's poem to my understanding of knowledge, on the one hand, knowledge is temporary. We always appear to be too late when trying to grasp it. On the other hand, though, in terms of how it is connected to us and our worlds and webs of connections to others and their worlds, knowledge could also be argued to be perpetually becoming and part of ever-evolving entanglements. Through its intangibility, it could also be argued that it can never really be lost. Traces and hints of it are always there. They point backwards and forwards simultaneously, as becoming-connections and connecting-becomings.

At the time when I first contacted you Alec, I was at a place in my development as a becoming-researcher, where the 'schemes' and truths I was offered about how to develop and understand knowledge no longer made sense to me. At some point, I realized that making clear distinctions between the research and myself as a researcher was neither possible nor desirable. I believe I was searching for some new connections, or more precisely, becoming-connections. Through initially reading your work, and then through meeting up with you and some of your colleagues, I was introduced to autoethnography and other critical approaches to qualitative inquiry. To me, these encounters were a profound experience. It was like coming home and being on an everlasting journey at the same time. It still is.

In that first meeting with you and your autoethnographic colleagues, my knowledge about autoethnography was relatively scarce. I recall being somewhat flabbergasted when someone in the meeting suggested that 'We are doing autoethnography right now.' The idea of actually being invited into *doing* autoethnography, rather than being told what it *was*, provided a basic distinction. What enabled this 'doing?' I believe that the friendly atmosphere and our shared and critical sense of curiosity enabled dialogues and exploration, and, through this, connections to other voices, understandings, and worlds within and between us. Through friendship-based connections, inner and outer voices are set into play. According to Seikkula (2008), this myriad of inner and outer voices can be understood as polyphony. This term refers to the words that are actually spoken in the dialogues and to the activating of inner dialogues. The inner voices that each of us carries can be described in terms of traces in our minds and elements of previous experiences. Through encounters with others and other voices, these traces can be activated and become part of our becoming webs of connections. Or, using the words of Hans Børli, our 'already THEN' also becomes part of our now and futures.

In our first co-authored autoethnographic paper (Klevan et al., 2018, p. 2009), we wrote that:

People can connect with each other in myriad ways. Maybe the important thing is simply to start talking. And even more so, to start listening, and being willing to

change as a result of listening. Perhaps Keith Richards actually nailed it in his statement ‘The important thing is what comes next, and are you ready for it?’ I hope that this text and that book that it is part of can serve as an invitation to open up for possible connections and a curiosity of what comes next. I know that writing it has.

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Secular and Religious Pilgrimage: A Collaborative, Autoethnographic Journey to Meaningful Destinations

Elizabeth Lloyd-Parkes (Elizabeth.lloyd-parkes@southwales.ac.uk)

Jason Wragg
Alexander Boswell
Simon Thomas
Kevin Ellis
Jonathan Deacon
Tina Thomas

Abstract

This sequential community autoethnography draws upon the stories of seven academics and becoming academics related to their pilgrimage, either secular or religious. The auto ethnographic contributions were written sequentially, with authors having sight of each autoethnography as they were written. It is worth mentioning that all participants are either Welsh, or have completed their pilgrimages within Wales, which gives a particular socio-cultural context to the journeys. The diversity of the journeys allows us to consider the contemporary nature of pilgrimage.

Keywords

community autoethnography; pilgrimage; secular pilgrimage; liminality; communitas

Presentation available on YouTube

<https://youtu.be/hZDr-rwRCPk>

This sequential community autoethnography draws upon the stories of seven academics and becoming academics related to their pilgrimage, either secular or religious. The auto ethnographic contributions were written sequentially, with authors having sight of each autoethnography as they were written. It is worth mentioning that all participants are either Welsh, or have completed their pilgrimages within Wales, which gives a particular socio-cultural context to the journeys.

The first contribution, Jason's, relates to a kayaking trip within the liminal space that is neither sea nor land off the coast of Anglesey - an island off the North Wales coast in the UK. This account is countered by an Anglican priest, Kevin, living in the same area of Wales. The third, Alex's relates to a post-Catholic, inner journey that consisted of an expedition to a beauty spot with Hare Krishna devotees, and fourth, Simon's, a long dreamed of pilgrimage to the grave of a musical hero. The fifth, Tina's and sixth Jonathan's contributions deal respectively, with the pilgrimage of extreme athletes to the Ironman event held in Tenby, a coastal town in South Wales, and a marathon cycling event from London to Paris. The final autoethnography Lizzie's, (mine), relates to a long awaited non-religious pilgrimage to a religious place, a monastic island off the coast of South Wales.

The diversity of the journeys allows us to consider the contemporary nature of pilgrimage.

Jason's Pilgrimage

At sea in my kayak as it moves rhythmically along with the swell and fall of the waves, I listen to the sound of the gentle troughs slapping the bottom of the boat and the smell of the fresh sea air, my paddles resting across the cockpit as I scan the coastline and the group of students traveling along it.

A wave kicks up over the bow of my kayak and across the spray deck, pushing the salty spray into my mouth. The students are traveling as small clusters, this journey an integral part of their outdoor adventure leadership degree. Sea kayaking, after all, at its very core, is adventurous. Being here and now off the coast of Wales in a sea kayak is a particularly dangerous undertaking.

Campbell's monolith, or the adventurer's journey is often employed to give meaning and structure to these journeys that we undertake. The leaving the shoreline symbolizes that departure from the ordinary world, heading out to face the trials and challenges before making it home. The wild, unpredictable environment is a key part of the journey and its reward. Out here, even the temporal dimensions are at odds as we plan our journey along the coast in relation to tides and weather conditions - natural time, rather than of a watch.

Staying safe whilst on this journey by sea kayak may be seen as liminoid, much as being along the coastal waters can be neither at sea nor land. Safe passage is less easily taken for granted in these settings than when traveling by land and therefore providing new insights to oneself.

This is much an adventure as a pilgrimage, not one to a symbolic, geographical location - more of a wandering pilgrimage - one to an internal destination. After all, this is a circular route where we finish where we started, geographically, and departure sees us both traveling further from home and towards home, simultaneously.

So maybe the destination is not geographical, but metaphorical, and the destination is inside of us, as Campbell's monolith may suggest. Being at sea here and now is a liminal state between pilgrim and adventurer.

Alex's Pilgrimage

My journey refers to a walk I took in Brecon exploring the Hare Krishna movement with a group of Hare Krishna devotees. Driving up to Brecon we were all sat in the car and discussing our lives and choices we made that brought us to this moment, but in a twist of irony the journey actually started - the walking leg of the journey - started at Brecon Cathedral. This was ironic for me because I'd grown up attending a Roman Catholic church back in a city, and I didn't have great experiences there, given my queer identity. And it was interesting to be on this journey exploring our spiritual selves even though after my experience in the Catholic Church, I'd built up an identity of atheism. But during the walk we came across this river and the lead devotee gave an analogy that has since stuck with me. He pointed at the river and said 'this is the river' but that part of the river I was just pointing to has moved on. The river is constantly changing, but in essence it always remains a river, and similarly, our bodies and our lives are always changing and shifting, but there is continuity, which is the soul.

This analogy, as well as the whole walk itself, is akin to the liminality described by Kevin and Jason already But I felt conflicted in this experience, trying to reconcile my post-Catholic atheism and my growing affinity for Hinduism and the Hare Krishna community, but after the experience I'm wondering what a simple walk can do to change me so much and so little at the same time.

Simon's Pilgrimage

Hi, my name is Simon Thomas, and I'm a researcher in pilgrimage. My story is called a stairway to the past.

Many, many years ago when I was ten, I read a story in a paper about a drummer with a rock band who had died. It was just a few days later that it suddenly struck me that this was the band that I'd heard in the background and had started to become aware of.

This was 1980, and the drummer's name was John Bonham, and he played with the band called Led Zeppelin. From that point on, I became a huge fan of Led Zeppelin as I'd stand in my bedroom playing my guitar, pretending to be on some stage in some far flung part of the world. Like every young lad, I suppose.

Over the years it did occur to me on many occasions where John Bonham's grave may be, and if it indeed had become a site of a more secularized form of pilgrimage.

I on many occasions came close to visiting. This person meant a lot to me, and had meant a lot to me as I grew up, but I never actually got there.

Just a couple of years ago, I arrived at John Bonham's grave in the small village of Rushock to the west of Birmingham, to be hit by a sense of finally arriving at this place that had, over the years, meant so much to me and became something which I'd always wanted to visit, but had always had some fear about visiting. This was a man who had played a major and important part in my young life.

On arriving, I found a sense of completeness - a sense of completeness tinged with these ideas of liminality. I'd arrived. I was out of my zone. I was in a different place. Here I was. This was a great day.

Tina's Pilgrimage

Simon's mention of Led Zeppelin took me back to a crisp September morning in 2019 with AC DC and the song Thunderstruck roaring out across Tenby's North Beach at the break of dawn. The steep descent from the cliff top to the beach, known as the dragon's fang, filled to capacity with thousands of wetsuit-clad athletes. The fizz of emotion in the air, anticipation, fear, excitement and even relief gave me goose bumps.

There's a sense of place on the beach, the only time and place in the entire day where everyone is congregated and rituals are performed in unison - as Simon highlighted in his work - a feeling as though you've arrived. But for me, this beach in this moment is a liminal space, one of three mandatory waypoints along the journey. It's still an impossibly long way from the final destination, drawing us with the potential for both moral and spiritual transformation. An impassioned and disciplined year in the making just to be able to stand on the threshold between land and water in this very moment.

For some, Tenby may conjure images of quaint seaside towns and fish and chips, but others are drawn here for an entirely different reason. The morning I describe is the start of Ironman Wales, legendary among the triathlon community, considered one of the toughest - a place of pain and suffering, but also great reward, a rite of passage into the world of long distance triathlon and the accolades that come with it if you cross the finish line.

I have finished Ironman races before, but not this one. Not ever. On this day, I'm merely an observer of fleeting moments of thousands of others as they perform their rituals and begin their traverse through the Pembrokeshire countryside, testing the limits of body and mind.

Are these pilgrims? I think they are, especially when drawing parallels between religion and sport. I see a religiosity associated with the Ironman triathlon: commitment and devotion to the journey to reach the sacred red carpet in Tenby. The devotion not only of the athletes, but also of the supporters, believers, if you will, willing athletes to defy the limits of human endurance.

For some the finish line may be the end of the journey. Transformation complete. However, for those that don't make it, I would argue this leaves them in a liminal space neither here nor there, until their next pilgrimage to Tenby.

Thank you.

Kevin's Pilgrimage

Kevin - Vicar in the church in Wales, on the Llŷn Peninsula in the north of Wales, and many of my churches are actually on the Pilgrim Trail. And just this morning I found a couple of pilgrims sheltering from the rain.

So pilgrimage is definitely not quite secular for me. In fact, I find some secular notions of pilgrimage quite interesting. Previously, I used to be a vicar on Anglesey, and the two famous saints, as it were, Cybi and Seriol,, There is a walk often reenacted and my one of my churches was reputedly near the well, which they met. There have been many attempts to revive that walk, but seemingly without reference to the faith that the two saints shared.

So it's a real puzzle. It's not that I don't get the need for people to be spiritual without faith, but sometimes the airbrushing out of, say, traditional Christian beliefs from pilgrimage remains something that is beyond me, I'm afraid.

Nevertheless, I hope my places of pilgrimage are places of welcome where anybody can go at any time. I hope that there are places that are open, that there are places where questions can be asked and answered, and actually places where questions dare not to be asked too.

Jonathan's Pilgrimage

Never meet your heroes, they say. So I decided to ride in their tyre-tracks instead.

It's the third day and thus the third stage of our ride to Paris. I can't believe that just two days ago we were in London and chatting nervously about the ride. Hours of training in the gym and on the road and on my own, just getting in the miles, just getting in shape.

I didn't want to let the team down on the ride, and the ride has taken me from the center of London and brought me to the outskirts of Paris. We traversed as a peloton through the back streets of the suburbs and then along the West Bank of the Seine, heading to the crossing that will take us to the Bois de Boulogne.

We're close on 100 riders who await the final ride into the city. We are told by the organizers that we are the second largest Peloton in Paris that year, second only to the Tour de France. We will enter the city with gendarmes on on motorbikes as outriders, full sirens blazing.

This is the stuff of boyhood dreams. I'm following in the footsteps of my heroes, gods one and all: Induráin, Coppi, Fignon, and yes, even Pantani and Armstrong. I'm on the same streets of Paris in the Peloton, with my sons riding in my team with me. It's powerful stuff.

The brief given by the organizer was short and to the point. 'Stay close and don't fall off', he said. And then he turned to me and very quietly he took my shoulder and he said, 'This is the dream for people like us. It will be emotional.'

Just as the ride into Paris on the final stage of the tour is a processional one, so was ours. We rolled off heading towards Avenue Foch. Upping the speed to 35kph, I looked up and saw the Arc, and then it hit me - whatever it was - full on emotion. I'd made the grade, made the ride. I had my sons close, my mother in my heart and my heroes in my head.

The sprint along the Champs-Élysées was a blur of pavements - of pavements, of people of faces. My liminal space. It was like a silent, out-of-body experience. I saw everything, felt my tears on my face and I heard nothing.

Then it was all over, done and dusted. Grouping with the team cars under the Eiffel, emotion exorcised, pilgrimage made, memories cast.

Lizzie's Pilgrimage

I'd longed to visit Caldey Island - home to Cistercian monks for over 15 hundred years, a tranquil and peaceful place off the South Pembrokeshire coast of Wales. I had imagined hooded monks wandering around, hands clasped in prayer, and tourists buying the lavender soap and chocolate made and sold on the island. This then, was my pilgrimage, a journey for non-religious purposes to a religious place, with friends.

We traveled on a small boat, disembarked, and made our way up a wooded path with green tinted shade, wildflowers and the occasional bench for weary travelers.

We were aware of being in a religious space because the atmosphere seemed to demand a respectful quietude. We split up into couples to walk the island, and when we met for lunch, we talked about what we'd seen. We spent some quiet, reflective time in the Priory, yomped across fields to get to the lighthouse with magnificent sea views, laughed at the mischievous red squirrels and enjoyed a convivial lunch under the shade of an oak tree.

The visit typified liminality. I was not in my own natural environment, but neither was I part of the monastic community that I was visiting. I was, however, calmed and nurtured by the quiet beauty of the island and the vastness of the surrounding sea. I always find watching the sea therapeutic; it makes me appreciate my insignificance and lets me tap into a sense of innate spirituality. This was neither a religious nor a secular experience, but one which sat on very blurred boundaries, combining the two elements without being positively one or the other.

Our pilgrimage complete, my friends and I often talk about our visit, and I believe, in the spirit of *communitas*, that our shared experiences have brought us closer, just like pilgrims of old.

Conclusion

We find that the themes of anticipation and awakening emerge in these contributions alongside a strong focus on liminality - the occupation of a position on both sides of a boundary, whether physical or virtual. The theme of travel - in some cases, strenuous - has parallels with tourism activities, although there also appears to be a spiritual dimension to the experiences described. Liminality is described reflexively and is therefore multi-layered, and stratified through time, emotion and anticipation.

We note that some of the contributions relate to a pilgrimage of the mind, with some of the more strenuous, endorphin-fueled activities bringing an internal liminality related to physical exhaustion.

We find that both the journey and the destination become a stage-gate for reflection and meditation and this further extends the theme of liminality. Furthermore, we see the emerging theme of *communitas*, and the social nature of pilgrimage and the importance of companionship on the pilgrim's journey.

Finally, but outside of this submission, we consider collectively the journey that each of us has made in the writing of these autoethnographies, and the way in which we have collaborated with and been influenced, each by the others.

Thank you for watching - diolch am wylio.

A Queer, Partial Collaborative Autoethnography with Rural Public School Teachers: Is Such a Thing Possible?

Darren Cummings (dranyork@yorku.ca)

Abstract

This paper explores the methodology of a partial collaborative autoethnographic writing and discussion group consisting of myself and four rural LGBTQ+ teachers in two provinces in Canada. Group members composed evocative vignettes about “home” and belonging in our rural communities and schools. Over six sessions, group members shared their narratives and discussed how the pieces resonated or did not resonate with each other’s experiences, demonstrating how our queerness was negatively affected by dominant culture, and the ways we subverted such encroachments. I examine the methodological considerations and benefits of using partial collaborative autoethnography outside of the academy with marginalized participants.

Keywords

Rural Educators, LGBTQ+, Collaborative Autoethnography

This paper explores the methodological underpinnings of what I am naming a partial collaborative autoethnographic writing and discussion group as part of my doctoral dissertation. This online collective was made up of myself and four other rural queer-identified teachers in two provinces in Canada. Over six weekly sessions, group members composed remembered evocative vignettes about “home” and belonging in our rural communities and schools. In each session, group members shared their narratives and discussed how the pieces resonated or did not resonate with each other’s experiences, demonstrating how our queerness was negatively affected by dominant culture, and the ways we subverted such encroachments. For the final session, each member composed a summative piece of writing which explored the main themes and reflected upon the impact of the group experience.

The methodology for this project was informed by my own queer autoethnography which explored my experiences of living and teaching in the rural. Queer autoethnographies work to uncover cultural norms that stifle queer people, while celebrating queer identities (Adams & Bolen, 2017; Adams & Holman Jones, 2008). Aware of the therapeutic nature of queer autoethnographic writing, and the desire to create a community of rural queer teachers, I began to read collaborative autoethnographic/collective biographic studies. Collaborative autoethnography is a research method where multiple researchers compose evocatively written autobiographical vignettes of past experiences, which become the data that is discussed and analyzed by the collective. The autobiographical is placed in conversation with the cultural to put sociocultural phenomenon on display (Chang et al., 2013; Davies & Gannon, 2013, Haug et al., 1999; Wyatt et al., 2014).

However, as I was reading work that used collaborative autoethnography as the methodology, it became clear to me that the majority were composed by academic researchers within the academy. Therefore, I questioned whether this study could be named as such, given

that the participants were all public school teachers. Although I was a participant, I was also the sole researcher. Chang et al., note that partial collaborative autoethnography can be employed, where all group members may not be researchers. However, in these instances, they stress that the research environment should be egalitarian, and researchers must be aware of power imbalances (Chang et al., 2013). Therefore, as the primary researcher, I must reflect upon the ways that I influenced the workings of the group. I arrived with a research question to be answered, as well as a theoretical framework to the study design, which would influence group members. However, in the introductory session I sought to have group members understand what the autoethnographic process was, along with their roles within the study as collaborators. I began by explaining that I had written a queer autoethnography for my master's thesis and defined autoethnography as both the study of the self and the study of the culture that the self emerges within. I conveyed that my goal was for us to think about moments from our past and to write those moments in a way that the listener was taken back in time, where the listener was able to sit in that moment and understand it, and then, hopefully, together we might analyze the vignettes through our discussion. I stressed to my group members that I wanted them to assist me in analysis, rather than it just be my analysis of their stories. I then provided two narrative excerpts from Tony E. Adams' and Stacey Holman Jones' (2008) writing on queer autoethnography so they had a sense of how one might write an evocative vignette. At the same time, I noted that they were not held to any kind of writing structure and the writing could encompass any genre.

After this introductory session, we then had five writing sessions where I had three writing prompts already prepared and we co-constructed the final two. Every session each group member, including myself, would share their vignette and we would discuss it afterwards. Noting the importance of reflexivity in autoethnography, participants were asked to write a response or add to their vignettes after the session ended (Ellis & Bochner, 2016). We then shared these responses at the beginning of the subsequent meeting. This storying produced 55 rich and evocative vignettes and pages of discussion responding to each other. The collaboration here was in the shared storying, bringing each other to new stories that might not have been told without the input of others. It was in the discussion of stories, of making individual cultural meaning that resonated with group members' experiences. It was in the collective analysis that was offered throughout the discussions, and the final group session, as we searched for themes.

As the sole researcher, I must also recognize that the application of queer theory and analysis were, in the end, my own. With that said, however, collaboration also occurred here. Queer theoretical constructs were utilized by group members throughout our discussion and analysis. Members discussed: interrogating cisheteronormativity and gender norms; the idea of visibility/coming out in rural communities; Sarah Ahmed's (2010) feminist/queer killjoys; disrupting binaries; queer teachers as activists; and teachers' queering effects in schools and communities. Group members were undoubtedly informed by any theoretical perspectives that I brought forward, along with a group member who had quite an extensive background in queer theory. She wrote an honors thesis where, in her own words, she "spent hours laboring over queer theory, parsing out Judith Butler, and analyzing various media products and their representation of lesbian identity, gender, and heteronormativity." She also explored LGBTQ+ identities in young adult literature in graduate school. Another participant had completed a post-Baccalaureate where they composed a critical analysis of their district's gender and sexuality policy. Additionally, some group members may have had access to queer theoretical constructs that trickled down outside of the academy, such as through professional development activities.

This enabled us to apply some queer theoretical analysis in our discussion, which further informed the theory I used to speak to our experiences. Group members were also aware that I would be conducting analysis and writing the dissertation, but that through member checking they would be able to give feedback throughout the writing process.

As mentioned, Chang et al., (2013) do note that collaborative autoethnography can entail partial collaboration, where all researchers produce autobiographical data and participate in data analysis but may not participate during the writing stage. Mulvihill & Swaminathan (2017) also explain how there is not one comprehensive method to life writing and state, "...scholars have continued to experiment and push the methodological boundaries of autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, autobiography, and collective biography in ways that move away from the idea of a singular or correct mode of life writing" (p. 34). Indeed, Denzin (2014) discusses how all of these methodological terms "flow together, intermingle; a montage of overlapping projects, images, voices, techniques," (p. 413) which together showcase "voices seeking a home" (p. 413); a quite fitting analogy for my project. As a scholar who wrote a queer autoethnography about teaching and living in a rural space, it seemed appropriate that I should seek out other queer-identified teachers to explore our collective experiences of "home" together, which does push the methodological boundaries of collaborative autoethnography in positive ways, for both the researcher(s) and the participants.

Indeed, Chang et al., explore the many benefits of collaborative autoethnography for group members. "Collaborative autoethnographers work together, building on each other's stories, gaining insight from group sharing, and providing various levels of support as they interrogate topics of interest for a common purpose" (p. 23). In a final discussion about the writing and discussion group all of my group members spoke about how we created a community together. They enjoyed the writing and sharing of stories, noting how the experiences resonated amongst group members. They spoke about the healing and therapeutic nature of being involved in such a group and how we could be vulnerable with each other. One participant noted that I made this vulnerability possible because I was not an outside researcher "making them feel like lab rats" but a member of the group who also shared many similar experiences. Indeed, Ngunjiri (2014) discusses how using collaborative autoethnography outside academic communities can reduce power differentials and become a democratizing practice. Thus, to return to my initial point concerning how researchers need to be aware of power imbalances in collaborative autoethnography, it may be that such partial collaborative research projects are more democratizing than other types of research where the researcher and participant subjectivities are more clearly separate and defined.

It must also be noted that this kind of writing and discussion group serves to support a minoritized population that is not often able to come together to share their experiences in their communities and schools, particularly through the public school system. One participant noted that districts might look into creating such support groups for marginalized people and that being together as a group made her "feel a lot better about herself" and her experiences. However, such a group supported by districts would likely be problematic given that the intent of such work is to interrogate cisheterosexism within the education system, which, remembering my Union's warning to "not speak ill of your employer", might be difficult to do, thereby endangering the livelihoods of participating group members.

To that end, collaborative autoethnography can be used in university-community partnerships, such as with school stakeholders and educators. This speaks to the utility of partial collaborative autoethnographic projects, as collaboration with a university researcher may enable

a safer space for marginalized participants to openly discuss their experiences under the safeguards of confidentiality and pseudonyms.

This has led me to conclude that the autoethnographic oeuvre may be further expanded by such partial collaborative studies with ‘researchers’ who are not academics. Indeed, as an academic who has written a queer autoethnography, my own conceptualizations of the rural queer experience have both been confirmed, as well as expanded, because of my participation within this group. Thus, for both myself, and I believe for the participants, composing the autoethnographic vignettes and the subsequent discussion, was a powerful way for us to generate fugitive knowledge that we all knew and understood. We were able to have conversations that we do not get to have enough in our everyday lives; conversations that lead to interrogation, that changed us as individuals, but also empowered group members through a collective understanding that we were not alone. And like every good autoethnography should demonstrate, the incompleteness of any one account was put on display, as various stories intermingled – queer stories, experienced by many in the group, and if not experienced, certainly understood, by all of us.

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The Pandemic Nature Project Autoethnography, Incongruity, and Environment

David S. Heineman (dheinema@bloomu.edu)

Abstract

This presentation stems from my work on an autoethnographic film entitled “The Pandemic Nature Project,” a 35-minute short that was created between March 2020 and March 2021. Through the use of evocative and experimental imagery, narrative and non-narrative techniques, and original instrumental music, the film traces a series of personal experiences and critical and emotional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the role of nature and the environment in forming a useful “perspective by incongruity” for coming to terms with the social ruptures and global traumas it fostered. The presentation featured an overview of the film (with clips) and a discussion of the relationship between its reliance on emergent methodologies in autoethnography and the film’s critical claims.

Keywords

autoethnography, COVID-19, rhetoric, Baudrillard, Burke

Overview

In this presentation I am going to discuss a creative research project that I worked on last year entitled *The Pandemic Nature Project*, which eventually culminated in the creation of a 35-minute short film about my experiences during the first year of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Following an overview, I will briefly discuss the film’s critical framework and methodological considerations.

Following opening titles, the film begins with this:

Transcript of opening segment [voiceover by the author]:

[Footage of pandemic news coverage]

In the early months of 2020, humanity became paralyzed by a natural phenomenon. The COVID-19 Coronavirus swept across the globe, hitting especially hard in the United States, where it would claim almost 400,000 lives by the end of what felt like the longest year in memory. Because the virus was spread through airborne transmission, COVID limited our ability to safely be with one another. We were unable to safely gather inside other homes, to share meals at a restaurant, to venture out to enjoy a stage production or a film, to attend concerts, to take vacations at popular destinations, or to do most of the kinds of things that enliven our free time and enrich our lives. COVID-19 made close friends feel like distant strangers, and it turned going out in public into a game of constant total awareness. In watching the news it became increasingly clear that poor leadership and a strained healthcare system had led to an untenable situation, one that would get much worse before it would get better. All of this was scary. It was depressing. There had to be a better way to endure a lengthy pandemic.

[Footage of headlines about crowded parks]

For millions of Americans, the key to enduring the pandemic was to escape to the great outdoors, to embrace the wide-open spaces where fresh air was plentiful and social distancing was the norm. The response was an unprecedented number of visitors flocking to campgrounds, forests, parks, and hiking trails. This exodus to the outdoors was especially true in Pennsylvania, where I live. And this was the same impulse that I felt, when I tried to approach the pandemic as an opportunity to reignite my love of the outdoors.

[Footage of me in the woods]

I spent a lot of time in the woods playing and exploring as a child, but had thus far spent comparatively precious little of my adulthood in those spaces. I'd always enjoyed the way a forest lights up my senses – when I am there I can hear things better, I notice smaller details in the landscape, I feel the crunch of leaves under my feet, and I feel reconnected to something primal and pure. Hiking seemed like the perfect antidote to the stillness and isolation that had been imposed by the pandemic. It could be a chance to unplug, a chance to escape. So, with some new gear and a backpack full of high hopes set me up to embark on new adventures in the wilderness, a place where I could shake off the dread of COVID, the clatter of the news feed, and quarantine's heavy inertia.



Here, I could reconnect and relax. And it worked...for a while. I found a measure of solace in nature, I enjoyed a new sense of exploration and discovery as I hiked longer and longer trails, and I felt improvements in both my physical and mental health. But it was an uneasy escape. It turns out one can't easily shut out a life-altering event like a global pandemic and, despite my best intentions, my mind increasingly turned to thoughts about the virus. And so my escape...wasn't really an escape at all. Instead, trips to the forest became a sort of "strange lens" through which I would come to think about the pandemic: a juxtaposition of nature's visible beauty against its invisible horrors. And the more I thought about these juxtapositions, the more I wanted to find ways to document them. The more I thought about documenting them, the more creative inspiration the forest provided.

[Footage of me working on “The Pandemic Nature Project”]

So I set to work on this project. Much of the time, when I wasn't hiking, I was at home indulging some of my other interests: amateur photography and film making, playing analogue synthesizers, reading postmodern theory, and writing. I used all of this to document what was going on in both my own life and the world during 2020, but to do so in a way that could more holistically capture my experiences than I could with writing, film, or music alone. I decided to call it The Pandemic Nature Project. You're about to see 20 short vignettes that, collectively, capture much of how I experienced and thought about the year 2020. Together I feel like they create a kind of impressionistic story, a sort of visual autoethnography that highlights a year defined by stark contrasts: the beauty of the nature around me against the horrors being caused by the virus, the chosen isolation found in the woods against the forced isolation of quarantine, the physical improvement from hours of hiking against the mental decline from hours doom-scrolling. I hope that, in these juxtapositions, you can find a place to situate your own pandemic experience.

That clip should give you a general sense of what the film is set up to do. Let me say a little bit more about how I developed the idea for creating an autoethnographic film.

Critical Framework

My academic scholarship has almost always focused on the application of rhetorical and critical theories to new media technologies. My work is often informed by postmodern and deconstructionist approaches to contemporary life – I find that scholars like Paul Virilio, Stuart Hall, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, or Angela Davis often provide theoretical concepts that explain the relationship of where we've been to where we're going. Especially when their ideas are applied to media criticism, much of their work offers a useful understanding of the rhetorical underpinnings of contemporary communication.

Because of this, when the pandemic first “hit” in full force in March of 2020, I found the writing of scholars like Jean Baudrillard especially useful for contextualizing what I saw taking place globally, and especially in the United States.

Baudrillard (1988) offers that American life is one best defined by movement and sprawl, hypocrisy and myth, mediation and confusion. After spending time touring and observing life in the United States in the late Twentieth Century, Baudrillard determined that America could be understood only as a “prodigious confusion of effects”, a “whirl of things and events” that “de[fi]es judgment” (66). Baudrillard found that, due to both its sprawling geography and its increasingly mediated, hyperreal modes of representation, the country always already resisted any kind of simple categorization; it was hard to get a fix on meaning in a culture that was constantly moving. Analysis of the country, he implies, requires a perspective that develops while in motion: “Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together” (55).

Accordingly, any critical project that might attempt to come to terms with the discourses surrounding a significant public event (such as the pandemic) while it unfolds would require an approach that can poke at these dimensions of meaning while deferring any kind of totalizing, fixed understanding of what that event might mean.

Therefore, Communication scholars interested in developing critical perspectives about an event while it unfolds must adopt research methodologies that foster an awareness of shifting perspectives and that attends to the polysemic nature of hyperreal public communication.



Methodological Considerations

Because this is how I saw the pandemic, and because I wanted to produce accessible and engaging scholarship about this event that met a wide range of audiences both inside and outside of academia, I turned my attention to rhetorical autoethnography. Explaining the concept, Condit and Bates tell us that “To be considered rhetorical, scholarship should examine a text, be guided by theory, engage in evaluation, and strive to produce change in the world” (Condit & Bates in Smithberger, 2018, 76). Furthermore, “To be considered rigorous, it should be honest, well written, engaging, reflexive, and ethical” (Lunceford, 2015; see also Tracy, 2010) and, “For scholars wishing to speak to audiences both within and outside of academia simultaneously, a prism approach (Lunceford, 2015; Senda-Cook, 2013) or crystallization approach (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson, 2000) can be useful since more traditional methods of analysis can be combined with field methods, autoethnography, or other creative analytic processes that might be more accessible to a lay audience” (ibid., 76-78).

Autoethnography is a method that is especially well-suited to the sedimentation of critical concepts – concepts that can shape both perception of the self and analysis of the social and enrich the quality and rigor of qualitative research. More importantly, the multimeditated and multimodal dimensions afforded to autoethnography can help to facilitate the circulation of critical insights and theoretical perspectives not only across disciplines, but also across publics.

In the film, I use this understanding of “rhetorical autoethnography,” to track how my own critical perspectives on American life shifted, mutated, and otherwise transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic. I found that incorporating audiovisual and digital media into autoethnographic practice is especially useful for emphasizing the tenuous relationships between the researcher, the critical/rhetorical insights they can offer, and the confusing “whirl” of ongoing current events that Baudrillard describes. Specifically, visual autoethnography is useful in highlighting the role of juxtapositions in contemporary meaning making, and the end of the film ultimately argues that a perspective developed through juxtaposition – a process similar to Kenneth Burke’s notion of “perspective by incongruity” – is key for understanding the relationship between the pandemic and its natural and environmental causes.

Transcript of segment 03 “Lake/Fear” [voiceover by the author]:

[Footage of a lake in autumn with superimposed intubation animation]

The claims we make about the significance of a particular event, or of a particular time period in history (such as “the year 2020”) are at best contingent, grounded in what we know at the time, in what our present needs for those recollections are. Accordingly, our analysis comes after, from a removed perspective. Autoethnography is fascinating as a method, in part, because of its ability to try and do the kind of “post-event” analysis that most methods rely on...but in real time. This is why the visual/descriptive becomes so essential to good autoethnography – it must document why it made its claims. It is why I find especially “creative” or “artistic” autoethnography to be analytically provocative and critically productive. This also gives autoethnographic practices a kind of impressionistic veneer, one that can be frustrating for a reader looking for “the take away” but a place to “stay and think” for those who value a project that might create that space. And it is from this space that one might “enter with empathy” into the lives of others.



These vignettes are typical of those in much of the film – it offers experimental imagery, narrative and non-narrative techniques and original instrumental music to trace a series of personal experiences and critical and emotional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the role of nature and the environment in forming a useful perspective for coming to terms with the social ruptures and global traumas it fostered.

Bochner and Ellis (2000) have highlighted that “autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (739). Likewise, Evans and Blair (2016) tell us that “autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the self within the social context and has the capacity to provoke viewers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on experiences, enter empathetically into the lives of others, and actively participate in dialogue regarding the social implications of the encountered.” Similarly, Poulos (2016) has suggested that the effectiveness of an autoethnography is especially indebted to the participation of those who encounter it: “I send it out to you, and you read it, and something in you starts to change, and together, we create [a] call and response, of writing and reading, of listening and responding, of writing and writing back, of co-authoring a new relational being” (6). The work of autoethnography can take different forms: journaling, structured documentation of experiences, systematic analysis of internal responses to

external stimuli, free-from responsiveness to unfolding events, etc. Visual rhetorical autoethnography, a method that allows for many conceptual, visual, or personal points of entry and departure within a single work, can invite just this kind of response from audiences.

So these were the initial methodological underpinnings of this project – a film that is designed, through autoethnography, to foster empathy through the use of Kenneth Burke’s (1984) concept of “perspective by incongruity”. The film, in fact, ends on this note – highlighting Burke’s argument that the technique is especially useful “merging things which common sense had divided and dividing things which common sense had merged” (113). And so while the film is academic in its design, it is also meant to reflect the potential for creative methodology to connect with interested publics and help them to create their own new perspectives on the pandemic.

I have thus enjoyed screening *The Pandemic Nature Project* at public film festivals, sharing it with students and other researchers at various universities, and otherwise talking about the value of a method that fosters those very mechanisms that the pandemic sometimes seemed to rob us of: critical reflection, empathic identification with the perspective of others, and a recognition of the value of juxtaposition in moments of confusion and crises.

Thanks for your time, and enjoy the rest of the conference!

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**“It really was a good thing we were virtual.”
Poetic Inquiry about Teaching During the Pandemic**

Leanna Hartsough
University of Kentucky
lhartsough@uky.edu

Abstract

There were challenges instructors and students faced in their classes during the pandemic. However, students and instructors learned and grew throughout the process. This poem reflects on my own realistic positive aspects of having class in virtual formats. In this poem, I reflect on my personal experiences of how virtual classes helped instructors and students play their part in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Keywords: Poetic inquiry; Teaching; Virtual classes; COVID-19 pandemic

The week our classes switched to virtual format,
March 2020 and I felt sick.
“Ignore it, I’ll be fine.”
“Am I sick from...”
“No, don’t even think about it. I just have a cold.”

I was secretly glad we didn’t have to teach in-person then.
Teaching online when sick is best for all of us.

Whatever that was, it ended. I taught fine online.
I had been using Zoom for the past year.

Yet engagement was frustrating.
My normal talkative students were quiet in open discussion.
No one wanted to unmute.

I learned more about breakout rooms.
Students got more out of smaller room discussions.
At least I hoped.
They could be just doing nothing.
I checked in once in a while.
Some students benefited from the small groups or partners.
Some students “benefited” from being able to do less in class.

Classes ended up being virtual for the rest of the semester.
In April, I got sick again.

I taught and pretended everything was ok.
It was not. It really was not.

I was abnormally sick. It was not just a cold.
“Do I have a low immune system or am I hitting the second wave?”
The first wave was just some water on the shore.
This wave was a tidal wave.

“Do I tell my students?”
“But why would I tell my students?”
“I don’t want to make anyone worried.”
“But I’m having trouble breathing.”

There was not much left of the semester, so I powered through it.
There weren’t COVID-19 tests available then.
I just stayed at home and taught.
Zoom classes and meetings slowed the spread.
It really was a good thing we were virtual.

The next semester, I chose hybrid.
My students could have a say.
We tried one class in person.
One class, then one student said they tested positive two days later.
They likely had COVID-19 in class.
Again, it really was a good thing we were virtual.

Even before finding out about this student’s case,
My students voiced their vote to stay on Zoom.

Zoom it is. Zoom it was.
And zoom, we were lucky to have.
More and more students tested positive.
About six that semester.
We could have saved others from getting sick too.
The virtual format slowed the spread.
Once again, it really was a good thing we were virtual.

One breakout room, we all happen to have experienced COVID-19.
We talked about it.
We bonded over it.
My students and I could relate to the feeling, and I could relate to theirs.
I didn’t have to be quiet about it.
I could be supportive and understanding.
We are living in a pandemic, and we are feeling the effects.
That is not something to hide.

Had I known that before, openness could have been human.
Teachers can be human.
Teachers are human.

We CAN bond online.
We CAN reflect and remember
How it really was a good thing we were virtual.

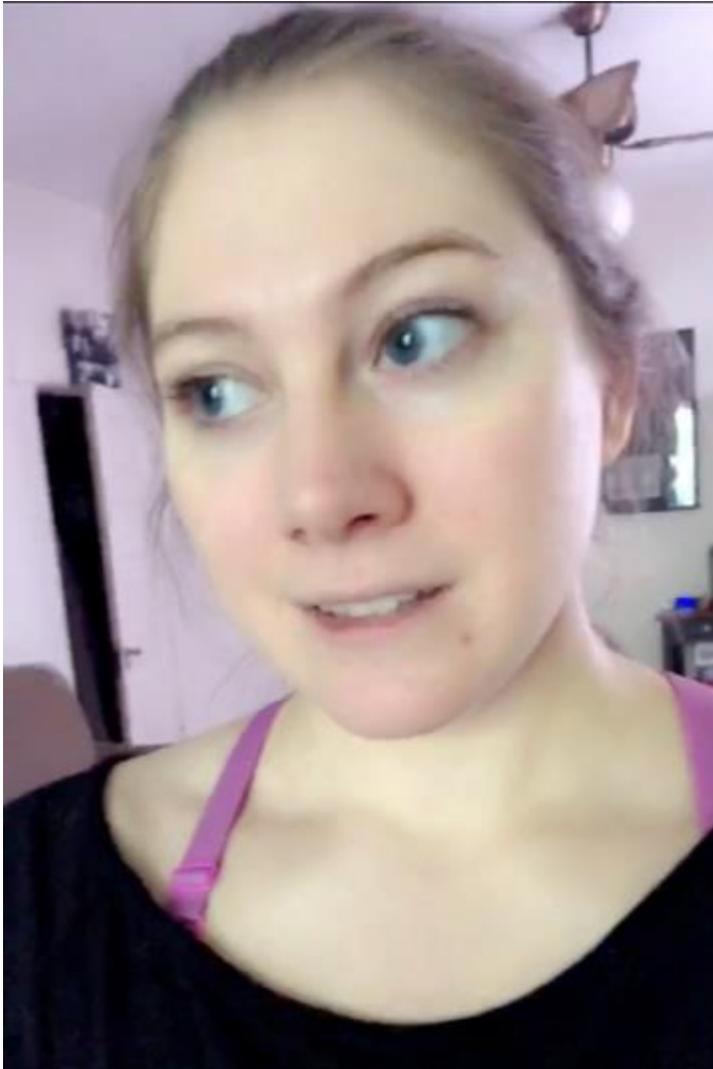


Photo of Leanna Hartsough taken when she was sick and instructing courses on Zoom in Lexington, KY

Searching for a Sense of Belonging A Journey Through our Family Secrets¹

Silvia M. Bénard Calva (smbenardc@gmail.com)
Estefanía Díaz (estefania.di812@gmail.com)

Abstract

We discuss the difficulties in trying to find a sense of belonging when coping with the impact of problematic consumption of addictive substances by family members. Using collaborative autoethnography, we seek to highlight the nuances and similarities between two journeys that coincided, first, in academia, and later in Al-Anon (a fellowship of family and friends of alcoholics). The intent to fill the void of such a sense of belonging within university life, was one of the parallels between both journeys. Lastly, it is argued that the practice of collaborative autoethnography can also facilitate the construction of a sense of belonging.

Keywords

sense of belonging, family, substance abuse, academia, collaborative autoethnography

The Starting Point

Estefanía

One ordinary day, I arrived at the appointed time at the home of Silvia Bénard, who at that time was my master's thesis advisor. When I arrived, she invited me in, we sat down in the living room and I left my backpack on the couch so I could greet Tomas, her huge and sweet German Shepherd, who immediately came over to sniff me and ask for affection.

I opened my backpack to grab my laptop and took out, for a few seconds, the book *Courage to Change* (1992). She saw it and asked me what book it was and, although I sensed that she already knew it, I hesitated for a few seconds whether to answer the question or not. In the end, I decided to show it to her. "I have it too, but mine is already much more worn out" — she told me, and that was the only thing we said on the matter. I had just arrived in Al-Anon, a twelve-step group for family members of alcoholics, a few months before, and I used to carry that book, which contained experiences written by its members in my bag or backpack to read it whenever I could.

(Not) Belonging in our Family of Origin

Silvia

Yesterday I was talking with my daughter about this sense I have of always being a stranger.

You know, I hardly ever feel like I am part of something. Not even when I was a child I felt part of my family. Back then, I even came to fear that I could've been adopted. I didn't feel either like my parents and I were part of our extended family. On my dad's side, because we weren't German or European enough, and on my mom's because we didn't mingle like my

¹ A complete version of this text has been submitted for publication to the Journal of Autoethnography.

cousins' families. For example, when going to my grandma's house on Sundays, we first ate at home, and then we went to hers. I remember that when we got there, I used to see leftovers at the table, of dishes that my family normally didn't eat. There were also empty bottles of beer, something we never had at home.

Estefanía

My mom and I moved a lot during my childhood, from one country to another, from one city to another, and from one house to another. The first time it happened I was three months old, and it was from Aguascalientes to Durango, from the city where I was born to the city where she was born and where some relatives still lived. I don't have any brothers or sisters and my father decided not to be present in my life, so, it was just me and my mom.

The next time we moved I was six years old. Mom and I boarded a bus that took us from Durango to the border city of Tijuana, the longest bus ride I've taken so far (24 hours on the road), crossing mostly desert and arid terrain. I try to picture us on that trip. I was six, so mom must've been 30, about the age I am today, which seems crazy to me. She was alone, with me, but alone, with a six-year-old, sitting on a bus on the way to an unknown city. I have had to experience first-hand the loneliness and fear of new beginnings to imagine how scared and alone she must've felt.

An Oasis

Silvia

It was 1983, I had gotten my degree in sociology, had been living alone for two years, and had just ended a five-year relationship. I had left my family home after concluding that my mental health was in danger if I continued living there. Parallel to that process, I had begun to make arrangements to enroll in graduate school at the University of Texas.

At the beginning of the year, I decided to visit Austin. I found myself sitting outside the Benson Latin American Collection, on the edge of a huge circle of blooming pansies of all colors planted under old walnut trees, watching the rest of the University of Texas campus below that hill. Of course, I am going to study here, I have nothing more to decide—I told myself.

Estefanía

It is the first photograph I have of myself at the Autonomous University of Aguascalientes. It was only a short visit. I am sitting on the green grass, with my knees between my arms and with my back against a giant tree. The gardens at the university are my favorite part of it. I am smiling, I am excited, I can picture myself walking every day through these gardens. The student I asked to take the photo for me probably doesn't know why I'm this excited. Maybe he finds it absurd that someone would want to take a picture of the gardens where he walks every day as if they were something special. Surely, he doesn't know that I had just been in the graduate students' office, where I asked for information about master's programs in social research and the application process. He takes my picture, but he doesn't know that while I am smiling, waiting for the "click" from the camera, I am thinking about leaving my family home and my stable job, he doesn't know that I am beginning to feel a tingling in my stomach, the tingling of change.

A Place to Escape

Estefanía

In the summer of 2016, I packed my clothes, a few books, and my tv and crammed it all in the back seat of my Chevy; I climbed into the driver's seat and drove the 400 km of highway that separates Durango from Aguascalientes. The university, for me, more than a dream, was also an escape route, a way of leaving home and searching for what I thought I would find somewhere else. What other excuse can a 22-year-old woman have to justify living in another city by herself? Especially a woman born in a small, conservative, provincial Mexican city. There was no plan for later, no desire to be a researcher, to publish, to earn a university teaching position. Instead, there was a desire to continue learning and, above all, to get to know other places, to live away from home. I did not know that the tendency to look for something repeatedly, from one place to another, I had learned it well from my childhood years.

Silvia

I reread Art's texts on academic life (Bochner, 1997). I just found something that strongly relates to what I have been thinking for years: "...I was stunned to learn how tame the academic world is in comparison to the wilderness of lived experience" (p.99).

Academic life is impersonal, not intimate. It provides a web of distractions. The web protects us against the invasion of helplessness, anxiety, and isolation we would feel if we faced the human condition honestly. (Bochner, 1997, p.99)

And I think about how my life within academia has helped me block my feelings. If it is true that blocking my feelings relates to being affected by alcoholism, university life has certainly helped me (not to) deal with my emotions, keep them out of my sight. It has been through a long journey of growing out of my traditional training as a sociologist and connecting autoethnographic writing with acknowledging and feeling my feelings, that I have been able to slowly move out of the numbing in which I was installed for decades.

A Place to Stay

Estefanía

The first time I attended an Al-Anon session, I went up the stairs (it was on the third floor), with a tingly feeling in my stomach and my legs. I didn't know what I would find, and I was nervous. How many people would there be? (I have always felt more comfortable in small groups), what would they say to me? And as my doubts became louder in my mind, I walked slower. Finally, I arrived at the door. There were three women about my age inside, they smiled at me and asked me to come and sit down; they asked for my name. The expressions on their faces were soft and gentle, and they seemed genuinely happy to see me, which made me blush lightly. Robin Boylorn (2016) argues that home is a place of vulnerability, a place where there is no surveillance and we can be ourselves, where we can show our humanity and flaws; I didn't expect to find a home there, nonetheless I kept attending, three times a week, to that small room with white walls located on the third floor of a building with a pink façade. I kept on listening to others, and I kept talking and revealing secrets, one by one.

I don't know if I will leave here someday, I don't know if maybe my challenge, given my life story, is to stay, at least until I understand that the emptiness that I have felt my whole life will follow me wherever I go, but so will the capability to build community with others and to build a home within me. Just as Boylorn (2016) so beautifully writes:

Being at home with oneself requires that you take home wherever you go, that you carry it on your skin like the aroma of sweet perfume. You hold it on your tongue like a poem you fear will disappear when you speak. When you are at home with yourself you feel at home even at somebody else's house. (p.45)

Silvia

I now see light through the cracks again with Art and Carolyn's writing as they refer to retirement. Art affirms that:

What I want to do, what I find meaningful, is making people feel stuff, continuing my quest to put into circulation self-clarity, evocative, and transforming stories; and keep alive the conversation in the human sciences about what can make life good (Bochner, 2019).

And Carolyn (2019) writes: "Together, we create a new chapter where talk is still the kiss of life" (p.248).

One more time, thanks to Art and Carolyn for being there.

Regarding the relevance of the Al-Anon program in my search for a sense of belonging, I can say that without the guidelines it has given me, I would lack a reference point from which to feel a part of something in ways that are meaningful to me.

A few weeks after writing the previous paragraphs, and after months of working on this text and reflecting on what my professional life might be like now that I am close to retirement, I realize that I have been somewhat depressed and doubtful about what I might do if I decide to leave the university. I continue to feel unwilling to stay due to the highly bureaucratized procedures associated with what is called neoliberal universities². I also realized how excessive I find those efforts to write papers, particularly when doing it in English, as I simultaneously find myself questioning if my writing has any impact. Finally, being torn between writing in the two languages, English and Spanish, challenges me not only regarding my linguistic limitations, but it again leads me to position myself as an outsider in both, the Anglo-Saxon or the Latin American worlds.

Thus, as I begin to detect light flashers out of my isolation due to the pandemic, I return reinvigorated to the issue of belonging. I realize that for me to feel like part of something, there are three major components: 1. A place of professional activity in which I recognize myself. 2. Positive leadership within my work team. And 3. Contributing, albeit in limited ways, to building a better world. I can achieve the above from a place of power and privilege. My naive self, if I am not alert, leads me to fall into the pattern demanding me to divest myself from the power and privilege that done adequately, contribute for me to develop a sense of belonging, and instead multitask to the extent of draining out all my energy and then prepare to escape from it all, and lose a sense of meaning.

I want to survive academia, whether it means to remain within the university or to retire, without losing the impetus to continue writing and living an autoethnographic life. This way, I wish I can continue to be a part of and to expand the autoethnographer's large family beyond languages and borders. If I do this humbly and acknowledging myself as a common human being, I will be satisfied³.

² The term *neoliberal universities* has been discussed by numerous authors; for more sources you can read: Bénard, Padilla & Padilla (2018); Grediaga & Rodríguez (2014); Padilla, Villaseñor & Moreno (2012).

³ I have read and reread Kafar (2021) as he refers to his relationship with Art and Carolyn, and how he entered the autoethnographic family... I look forward to becoming more and more part of that family

Collaborative Autoethnography

But “if anyone intends to study the self, why would he or she want to do so in the company of others?” (Chang, et al. 2013, p.17). Anonymity is one of the fundamental tenets of twelve-step groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Al-Anon, precisely because of the difficulty of sharing experiences and revealing something about ourselves to others. So why write about the effects of addictive substance abuse on family and friends, in company? Chang, et al. (2013) identify several benefits of writing collaboratively, among which we would like to highlight, precisely, the possibility of building community. According to the authors, the process of using collaborative autoethnography as a method of inquiry, by itself, promotes community building among the research participants, since a high level of trust and honesty is needed to share our life stories, and it is through this mutual sharing that communities are built. By writing this paper we were able to discover similarities in our stories and our healing journeys that go beyond the apparent differences among us, like our age, place of birth and even the differences among our families of origin. It was quite surprising to find out that, as an only child of a single parent, and a member of a biparental home with two brothers and five sisters, we had both struggled to find a place to feel at home and a part of our family of origin, we both chose moving from one city to another, and engaged in academic life.

After several attempts, we had both realized that perhaps moving and academia were not the solution. But beyond the similarities in our stories, writing collaboratively shed a light on our shared emotions and feelings. Writing with, instead of writing about, as normally happens in academia, has allowed us to feel connected and hopeful, following what Diversi et al. (2021) affirm, “writing with allows us here, with different persons, trying to unsay, unwrite, the neoliberal system (the colonial forces), in the academia and elsewhere” (p.30). In this point, the practice of such method of inquiry finds a coincidence with that of twelve-step groups, as it allows the development of a sense of belonging through identification with others, their experiences, and their emotions. In turn, our previous experience in Al-Anon groups gave us the trust needed to begin this text as well as the guidelines to share openly and listen to others, as equals. Beyond having coincided in the work environment (academia), it was the fact that we had coincided in twelve-step groups for family members of people with problematic consumption of addictive substances, what brought us close enough to feel safe sharing our vulnerabilities.

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“I am not okay”: Reclaiming my Voice as a Black Woman in Higher Education

Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez (khernand@eastern.edu)

Abstract: In this paper, I make transparent the journey I embarked on to access my long silenced poetic voice as a way of dealing with the confluence of emotions I experienced after the death of George Floyd. I illustrate how adopting an evocative autoethnographic lens to navigate this troubled reality provided the necessary space and perspective I needed to reclaim my scholarly voice. The paper ends with a recommendation for use of a transformative autoethnography model for individuals and groups intent on effecting self-healing and meaningful change.

Key words: autoethnography, transformative, racial battle fatigue

After George Floyd died on May 25, 2020, I found myself unable to speak or write about the issues that were salient to me professionally and personally. I am a professor and co-chair of a PhD program in organizational leadership. I lead an active research agenda with a strong research focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, the leadership development of Black women, and spiritual leadership. I have also devoted much time to being an activist for issues around inequities, specifically prison education, mentorship and sponsorship for women and girls, and faith-based education.

I am also a foreign-born woman of African and Hispanic ancestry. I was born in the twin island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and migrated to the United States to pursue doctoral studies. It was here that I met my husband, an African American male born and raised in West Philadelphia. Consequently, I am a wife and a mother of two Black daughters. I am also CEO of Nexe Consulting and a founder and content creator of a life leadership brand -- *Value What Matters*.

At the nexus of my professional and personal identities, the death of another Black man exhaling his last breath on the streets of Minneapolis at the hands of a White police officer was too much for me to bear. I could not watch the video footage, and I still have not watched it. Nonetheless, this death triggered an avalanche of thoughts and emotions that left me in crisis. I was totally unprepared for how it was affecting me as a scholar, as a wife to an African American man, and as the mother of two Black daughters. The combined weight of this strange concoction of emotions left me feeling powerless to engage my scholarly voice.

At the same time, I felt the burden of my academic positionality. “You need to write about this! Write something! Anything!” my scholarly voice demanded. But I could not. Many days I sat in front of my computer searching for the words that would not come. I thought about writing a piece on *Medium* or about doing a short post on social media. But my emotions were holding my words captive. I could not think about what had happened without tearing up. And as I sat in this space for quite some time, I realized that I was not okay.

The many and multiplicative effects of racial trauma had become a metaphoric knee on my neck. Scholars have defined racial trauma as a form of race-based stress ignited “from

dangerous events and real or perceived experiences of racial discrimination.... It involves ongoing individual and collective injuries due to exposure and re-exposure to race-based stress” (Comas-Diaz, Hall & Neville, 2019, p. 1). When these experiences become chronic, they can coalesce into what William Smith (2004), an education scholar, has identified as racial battle fatigue. Racial battle fatigue (RBF) often comes about through the cumulative effects of everyday occurrences of racial trauma experienced by those who belong to racial ethnic minority groups (I.e. Latinx, Asian Americans, Indigenous peoples, Black Americans etc.). Symptoms associated with RBF can include tension headaches, insomnia and ulcers, difficulty thinking or speaking, mood swings, and even social withdrawal (Smith 2004; Smith, Yosso & Solorzano, 2006).

There is convincing evidence that Black Americans are particularly susceptible to experiencing discrimination in US society (Chou, Asnaani, & Hofmann, 2012) and by extension RBF. What is more? Because Black women simultaneously occupy two historically marginalized groupings in US society on account of their race and gender, they are especially vulnerable to experiencing racial trauma and its attendant RBF (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2010). This dubious positioning at the nexus of our identities affects our ability to flourish.

As I reviewed the literature about RBF, I began to recognize the very symptoms I read about in myself. In particular, I wanted to withdraw socially. I did not want to talk to anybody who could not understand at a visceral level what it was like to exist in this space at this pivotal time. I was tired in a way that I had never been tired before; I was tired at the intersections of my whole being. It was not just weariness. It was a soul-drenching kind of fatigue. In sum, racial trauma associated with who I was and the scholarship and activism I was involved in doing had taken a toll on my overall sense of well-being. I was in crisis.

The full realization of what this impasse meant for me was troubling. What was I to do? What could I do? I am a scholar. I write to process, and I engage in work against injustice that adds to my sense of empowerment. And yet, in this instance, I could not find the words to speak or write. In this space of inertia, I found thoughts coming to me in fragments-- in snippets. They would not lend themselves to the structure of a well-crafted academic piece. They were unruly, metaphorically graphic and extremely personal thoughts. How could I tame them? I did not quite know how to do it, but I found myself engaged in a fierce internal battle to break out of this unwelcome silence and reclaim my voice.

In hindsight, I have been able to retrace the steps I took to get there, but at the time, I was not coherent in how I approached the process of healing myself. There were three steps in this initial process: preparation, exploration, and discovery. The first step of preparation had actually been done for me given the work that I have done over the last several years in autoethnography (Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang, 2014). My experience and exposure with autoethnography had convinced me of its transformative potential (Hernandez & Murray-Johnson, 2015; Hernandez & Longman, 2020). In a forthcoming co-authored book (Hernandez, Chang & Bilgen, 2022), which is one of the products that came out of this process, we define the transformative work that autoethnography can do in participants in this way:

It is a substantial and potentially sustainable change in knowledge, insights, and/or behaviors that can take place in individuals, communities, and organizations through the process of autoethnographic inquiry. It is any change, whether slow and incremental or sudden and full-bodied, that is felt, seen, embodied, and acted upon at various levels.

(p. 15)

I recognized that I needed to get back into the space of doing this kind of work to heal myself by cornering this *thing* that I was experiencing.

Next, I began to explore my feelings in a very vulnerable way. It was clear that my traditional analytical approach to autoethnography would not work here. I needed space to think and write in a less formal way, so I returned to the genre of writing that I first fell in love with—creative writing. There were several critical elements in this exploratory process. First, I spent many hours in nature walking along a naturally wooded trail close to my home. On these walks, I often reflected on my academic journey, my positioning in the academy as a Black scholar and the current space in which I found myself. Second, I turned to my circle of trust—a group of Black “Sista” scholars with whom I could be transparent. It was therapeutic to talk through and find commonality in our shared experiences. These talks helped me realize that I was not alone. Through critical dialogue, I was able to triage my emotions long enough to capture my thoughts and give them life on the page in poetic form. Finally, I used the self-reflexive skills I had developed through autoethnography to dig deeper and discover the insights to be gained from these experiences. Through an iterative process of going back and forth, reflecting, sharing, processing my feelings, and writing, I discovered several things about myself and I was able to write again.

Several products and processes came out of this kind of autoethnographic exploration, but it all began with my return to creative writing. In reclaiming my poetic voice, I had found the path to capturing my unruly and brutal voice. I was glad for the advice from Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks (1997):

In writing your poem, tell the truth as you know it. Tell *your* truth. Don't try to sugar it up. Don't force your poem to be nice or proper or normal or happy if it does not want to be. Remember that poetry is life distilled and that life is not always nice or proper or normal or happy or smooth or even-edged.

Poetry was the medium in which I was able to express myself in the raw. I wrote the poem “About Yesterday” as a unfiltered expression of the pain I felt over the passing of George Floyd and others like him (Hernandez, 2020). The first view lines captured these emotions well:

Yesterday, I grieved alone.

I said the name George Floyd out loud, but not his name alone.

I grieved at this death memorial to those who had gone before,

Yesterday, I grieved alone.

The second product of my autoethnographic processing was a book chapter. This was not something I planned to write at all especially since I felt immobilized to do my usual academic writing. However, when I saw the call for book chapters for a forthcoming book, *We Are Not Ok: Black Faculty Experiences and Higher Education Strategies*, I knew it was a piece that I had to write as an autoethnography. And even though I was overwhelmed with too many things to do during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and homeschooling my daughters, I began writing the chapter, *Bearing a Black Woman's Burden: Autoethnography for Provoking Perspective Taking and Action in Predominantly White Academic Spaces*. Writing this chapter was cathartic. It was just what I needed to further process my feelings.

Finally, I was able to infuse much of what I was learning about the transformative element of autoethnography into a book that I was writing with Heewon Chang and Wendy Bilgen. In this book, we adopt a very pragmatic approach to doing autoethnography for the specific purpose of experiencing transformation.

We turned the spotlight on autoethnography as a tool for practitioners where the primary goal is to solve real-world problems by facilitating transformational change at the individual group and/or organizational levels through the use of a transformative autoethnography model. (Hernandez, Chang & Bilgen, p. xvi)

To this end we provide a transformative autoethnography model (TAM) to effect transformational change similar to what I experienced in the process of interrogating my racial battle fatigue. TAM consists of two iterative cycles: the transformative learning cycle (TLC) and the transformative action cycle (TAC). TLC involves three phases: preparation, exploration, and discovery. Insights gained from this first cycle are used in the next cycle. TAC includes three phases as well: planning, implementation, and evaluation. Together these cycles within the TAM offers a step-by-step process for experiencing transformation through autoethnographic exploration.

Through the process of embarking on a personal examination of my racial battle fatigue employing the TAM, I was able to discover the sources of my discontent and take practical steps for rest, recalibration, and healing. I was also able to reposition myself for action. I decided to create a curriculum to teach my daughters about injustice, inequality and racism in the United States. I began to create more content with a realigned focus for praxis and action. In returning to a poetic voice that I had long silenced, I was able to find hope and energy to continue with a call the action:

There is important work to do! There is important work to do!
To join the gathering crowd, to rebuild, restore, and re-craft
a Black anthology that burns away at poplar roots
and plants instead baobab trunks
stately tales of a people beautiful, resilient, and strong whose lives do matter.
Yesterday, I grieved alone,
But today, we rise up! (Hernandez, 2020).

My experience employing a transformative autoethnography model of exploration, discovery and action, provided evidence of the potent impact of this method for effecting personal change. As previously mentioned in this paper, the transformative impact of autoethnographic explorations has also been documented for groups as well (Hernandez & Murray-Johnson, 2015; Hernandez & Longman, 2020). In sum, use of a transformative autoethnography approach holds great potential for individuals and groups intent on effecting self-healing and meaningful change.

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Welcome to MashJar

Tess M. Waggoner
(tmw8644@nyu.edu, tess.waggoner@gmail.com)

Abstract

For the 2022 International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative, I performed my poem "Welcome to MashJar." Taking up poetics as method and mode, I offer the portmanteau "MashJar" as an articulation of transnational and post-national SWANA+ (South West Asia and North Africa) transmigrant lived experiences as a spacetime assemblage. By deploying wordplay and utilizing poetics as the modality of examination, I engage the lineage with which I personally identify most strongly: transmigrants with origins in the *Mashriq* writing from the *Mahjar*.

Keywords

Poetry, Identity, Arab-American, Transnational, Assemblage

For the 2022 International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative, I performed my poem "Welcome to MashJar." Taking up poetics as method and mode, I offer the portmanteau "MashJar" as an articulation of transnational and post-national SWANA+ (South West Asia and North Africa) transmigrant lived experiences as a spacetime assemblage.

Continents and their residents do not shift apart and combine in equal measure. The forces at play and the mobilities enacted have been and remain unequal. They compound. My truest lived existence and intellectual engagement as a genderqueer 'Arab American' ethnographer of contemporary Anatolia occurs in a space/place which, in my estimation, neither cartography nor taxonomy have yet captured. Not (just) Coptic, not Arab, not white, not MENA not WAPA not SWANA not MENAT not MENAPA; not *Mashriq*, not *Mahjar*, not hyphen. Furthermore, technology is such that reality, spacetime and geography have collapsed. Thus, I coined a referent of this lived spacetime which does the same.

Mashriq and *Mahjar* are essentially Arabic geographical terms, though their meaning has extended in scope through historical processes of diaspora. Stemming from the root word for "East," *Mashriq* references a, "geographic region extending from the western border of Egypt to the eastern border of Iraq. It includes the modern states of Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq."¹ Elizabeth Claire Saylor provides an expansive definition of Mahjar which I utilize here: "The term mahjar, which is derived from the Arabic word hijra, meaning migration, is used to describe both the destinations of migration in the Arab diaspora and a modern literary movement developed by Arab emigrants living in North and South America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."²

¹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Mashriq." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 16, 2014. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mashriq>.

² Saylor, Elizabeth Claire. "A Bridge Too Soon: The Life and Works of 'Afifa Karam: The First Arab American Woman Novelist." 2016. *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global* 3 (3).

MashJar,³ I propose, is the spacetime assemblage in which we collectively operate yet henceforth remains “not quite”⁴ named, just as we from Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA+) are perpetually “not quite” categorized in official statistics. Which is to say, not “properly” at all.

By deploying wordplay and utilizing poetics as the modality of examination, I engage the lineage/s with which I identify most strongly: transmigrants with origins in the *Mashriq* writing from the *Mahjar*. MashJar pushes past the attempts to interpellate these geographic boundaries by collapsing Mashriq and Mahjar, yes, but that is not it, or all. To be blunt: MashJar is something past a container (jar) for the intermixture (mash) wrought of the lived experiences of transmigrants.⁵ It contains all of Appadurai’s scapes,⁶ the assemblages transforming across history. MashJar attempts to resist the (re)erasures of imperial, colonial and homogenizing national projects, coloring back in the erasures of WENA⁷ domination. MashJar is the mediated space of ongoing struggle, imbricated and articulated with/by/through transmobilities.

MashJar collapses *Mashriq* and *Mahjar*, yes, but that is not it, or all. To be blunt: MashJar is not simply or merely a container (jar) for the intermixture (mash) wrought of the lived experiences of transmigrants. It contains all of Appadurai’s scapes, the whole damn assemblage across “history.” By beginning with acknowledgement of “OngoColonial” I attempt to push past the historical legacy of false dichotomies to invite Power’s disrobing. The hope is for MashJar to amplify speech from the borderlands⁸ of uneven development and [never could be] stilted storytelling. MashJar accepts neither a definite nor indefinite article. Just is.

³ Two options for pronouncing this term include long vowel “a”s and each consonant evoking the Arabic terms “*Mashriq*” and “*Mahjar*” from which the portmanteau derives itself. Or, you can lean in to the Toledo, Ohio articulation: with a wide “a” like what you do in ‘American English’ to a potato, or the show M*A*S*H; “jar” like Mason, or as in can. An aside, but M*A*S*H, a TV show which portrayed the lives of U.S. soldiers deployed in Korea, starred the ‘Syrian’ American Jamie Farr (born Jameel Joseph Farah; 1934) who grew up in Toledo Ohio, the birthplace and hometown of the author.

⁴ “‘Not Quite’ White: Race Classification and the Arab American Experience” was a groundbreaking article by Helen Samhan that explored the legal and political machinations of Arab American identity negotiations vis-a-vis “whiteness.” Helen Hatab Samhan, “‘Not Quite’ White: Race Classification and the Arab American Experience” in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, Michael W. Suleiman, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999) 209–26.

⁵ Basch, Linda G., Nina Glick. Schiller, and Blanc Cristina. Szanton. Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-states. [S.I.]: Gordon and Breach, 1994. Transmigrants: “Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political—that span borders.”

⁶ Appadurai A. Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 1990;7(2-3): 295-310.

⁷ In its manifesto, Mangal Media states: “We, who are directly affected by, and the subject of, the stories on international news, will now be the ones to write them. Our voices will no longer go through the intermediary of blue eyed children from Western Europe and North America (WENA). Our talented sisters and brothers who can and do write, who can and do paint, who can and do make music, will no longer be valued at less than WENA’s children, because we are destroying the WENA brand. When WENA watches over our wars and our struggles, it does so with an impartial eye. Untainted by five hundred years of colonialism.”

<https://www.mangalmedia.net/manifesto>

⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa *Borderlands La Frontera The New Mestiza*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999.

Welcome to MashJar⁹

NADISCLAIMER:

*MashJar may be clarified in
Retrospect of OngoColonial¹⁰
but that is precisely the point.
MashJar must be articulated
treatment to cure be honored
and thus so enacted....*

step into MashJar where
citations are swords and
goodbyes smiling hellos¹¹

Reader, we already caught in
significant webs¹² MashJar hath spun

Rhizomes¹³ Invasives¹⁴
 MashJar
Spores SpaceTime

Awake! Arise! Observe! splaces
where heart, feet, oven and pen articulate
polyrhythms and spasms of ecstasy
embodied sacred inheritances
there is no binary anything here
He tripped and stumbled on the way
over fertility goddesses left by Native
reminder: world we envision once was
and Future- shall She bless us-
comes about only through cycles

MashJar interconnections to Each Other
constellations lighting a path forward

MashJar smells of immolation and cayenne

⁹ The video-poem of “Welcome to MashJar” as prepared for ISAN ‘22 is available on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTcahxyrJps>

¹⁰ OngoColonial is an original portmanteau of “ongoing” and “colonial,” participating in a rejection of the assumptions of “post” colonial.

¹¹ One way to bid farewell to someone in Turkish is to say, “güle güle,” literally, “smile, smile.”

¹² “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun....” Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.

¹³ Following Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987)

¹⁴ Marwa Helal *Invasive Species* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2019)

MashJar smells of jasmine and gasoline
and khibiz and ashes and rosemary and
thyme and lemon and orange blossoms
blooming tomes of tradition carried in
throats strangle tyranny and hypocrisy

fluid has power static can't fathom
not a solid, not a liquid, not a gas
contours of MashJar shores and seas
set only by limits of our (r)existences

MashJar is the mirror into which
colonized and colonizer look back
to see each one a/n/Other clearly
to trace tangled genealogies back
that only half translate back
to the ineffable roots that bind

MashJar improvises toward liberation with
varying levels of concern for structure and propriety,
notes it hits uncapturable via WENA AI notation
drums here are loud, the languages many
refusing distinctions where they do not exist:
popping conflation balloons with earring posts
competitive vernacular obscenity my asil
mother tongue discarded, covered over

even MashJar is misnomer, for
They cannot be contained
let them: breathe out, breathe in
relerase¹⁵ all ego,
Recite!¹⁶ the Many stories

*"...navigating the multiplicity can be maddening
and yet i believe it also can be liberating."¹⁷*

in the MashJar
when tongue and tan
point to female pharaohs
who led me there
the church door opens
forgiven, saved, i am
bathed in a chorus familiar

¹⁵ Release + Erase

¹⁶ Referencing the command received by the Prophet Muhammed at the start of his revelations of what would become the Qu'ran.

¹⁷ Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics and Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 247.

path can't be fully decipher

in MashJar when that dish is cooked
it's not to say it's mine it's that
ingredients traversed splacetime
such that it was shared with me
how precious
how holy

in MashJar ifwhen i shriek
*Hey Onbesli Onbesli*¹⁸
please do not misread
this as a canon aimed
all mirrors are illusions
hear the heartbeat
across all lamentations
know how *axis mundi*¹⁹
years of origin tick
thymbombs
shredding punk
in all kinds of
DIY garages
across MashJar

come work the fields with me:
see what the plancestors²⁰ and
siblings are sprouting forth in
backyards & alleyways

MashJar is
wires crossing and
feedback loops and
shared breakfast tables
the next morning

MashJar contains all Appadurai's scapes²¹
the whole studios precarious assemblage²²

¹⁸ "Hey Born in '15" here invokes a folk song popular in Turkey. Commonly understood to be related to the Battle of Canakkale, I here employ the reference to 1915 as a masked double meaning to reference the genocide of Armenians and other Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire in this period.

¹⁹ A term coined by Mirceda Eliade.

²⁰ Layla Kristy Feghali, "What does Plancestor Mean?" *SWANA Ancestral Hub*. March 11, 2015.
<https://www.swanaancestralhub.org/what-does-plantcestor-mean>

²¹ Appadurai A. Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 1990;7(2-3):295-310.

²² Gilles Deleuze Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, London, 1987) 4.

nafamily calendar pages overflowing in
Teta's cursive– reminders, sticky notes

MashJar is homeland of
unending ghurub²³ +
eternal mahboob²⁴
charting their own (r)evolution
MashJar lives StonewallNOW
never stopped dancing
never could
MashJar codes
Thems own Future...

Come sway in the Under and Beyond with me;
in the fields and planes and 1001 plateaus²⁵ of MashJar

Mash-Jar-i-Stan: land of
too many ghosts to name
too many stones unturned
bulldozed razed
concrete poured
spray painted over
on a livestream

MashJar: it's more
beautiful *when you*
*are here by my side*²⁶
Home drawn
on a napkin
with my pen
with my *dem*²⁷
following
shared01qalbbeat010101²⁸

revolutions never pause
none of it ever has

²³ *Ghurub* is an Arabic term referencing exile and is etymologically related to the word for strange. The formulation “unending ghurub” is not unrelated to the OngoColonial; it is inspired by the Palestinian popular formulation, *Al nakba mistimara*, or ongoing Nakba (catastrophe), which situates settler colonialism as iterative and ongoing.

²⁴ “Eternal beloveds” or Martyrs; a formulation combining the iterative slogan [name of victim of political violence]+ *olumsuzdur* (immortal) in Turkish, and a gerund form of “beloved” in Arabic.

²⁵ Homaging and collapsing so-called Arabian Nights and Deleuze and Guattari's 1000 Plateaus.

²⁶ Lyrics excerpted from “By My Side” from *Godspell the Musical*.

²⁷ Translated from Arabic, this word means blood. Translated from Turkish, “dem” is richly polyvalent, with possible translations including blood, breath, moment, time, or the ritual beverages consumed in Alevi ritual.

²⁸ A reference to the language of binary code and the Arabic word for heart to evoke the sound of a heart beating.

Immersive Autoethnography: Using Virtual Reality as a Tool and Medium for Autoethnographic Storytelling

Csaba Osvath (csabaosvath@usf.edu)

Abstract

As an emerging technology, Virtual Reality (VR) is already shaping fundamental aspects of human existence - ranging from communication, relationships, social presence, embodied experiences, etc. It is also a new and promising frontier for qualitative researchers and autoethnographers. Through this presentation I explore questions, such as A.) In what ways Virtual Reality can be utilized as a tool to conduct and present autoethnographic research? B.) How may this new technology deepen the experience of or communion with autoethnographic narratives as “readers” or the “audience” are immersed in stories as participants with the possibility of embodied interactions?

Keywords

Immersive storytelling, virtual reality, technology, immersion, VR

“We depend on stories almost as much as we depend on the air we breathe...One of the main goals of autoethnography is to put meanings into motion, and the best way to do that is to tell stories.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 76)

But how do we tell stories as autoethnographers? How do we tell stories in a way that meanings can advance with a dynamic motion, or to use the metaphor of breathing and air, how do we harness the life sustaining force of a story we read?

Since the invention of writing stories are presented in a rectangular frame. The stories we encounter in books, journals, in the cinema, or on the screens of our many devices - they all enclose the story in a frame. Even in the theatre, a play is performed within the frame of the stage. So, there is always a separation, a physical divide between the audience or readers and the story. Indeed, we usually witness stories as they unfold in front of us.

This is the first time in our history when we can experience a story without a frame. Through virtual reality it is now possible to enter a story. To live through a character, to move through his or her body and interact with the environment. Experiencing stories in virtual reality is a life-transforming experience.

But being transformed by a story is dependent on the quality of immersion. The quality of immersion or the depth of our ability to identify with the story is key when the aim is to commune with a narrative. When I want to experience it, inhabit it, to live it, or to think with and through a story.

As an early adopter of virtual reality, I see a tremendous potential in this medium in the context of storytelling and the future of autoethnography. VR is already a mainstream technology, and it is the best time for us to explore what virtual reality can offer to autoethnographers, or to qualitative research in general. Virtual Reality already plays a key role in my life and work. I like to hang out in my virtual apartment to take a break from my messy basement. I can invite over some friends who may live on another continent, and thanks to VR we can talk, make eye contact, play games, since we have a functioning virtual body.

Every day, especially during the pandemic, I exercise in virtual reality. I have some amazing coaches who help me to burn a few hundred calories as I move my body surrounded by the most amazing sites. My meditation practice in VR has also been impactful, and I appreciate the opportunity of the singular, immersive experience these virtual worlds can offer, with a teacher whose voice and teachings are helping me to relax. Virtual reality was also instrumental for my dissertation project, as I used a virtual mind mapping program to visualize my ideas and give a unique form to my thinking.

But what makes me most excited about this technology is its potentials for storytelling. Through VR autoethnography can be experienced. Through VR one can interact with a story. Through VR one can step inside a story and live through it. Through VR people can experience a story from multiple perspective or through the different characters of the story.

Writers and storytellers in VR are no longer limited to textual features or the printed page. In VR one can share voices, sounds, recreate environments, interact with objects and artifacts. In virtual reality one can even simulate sensations and new VR headsets and haptic technology will be able to generate other sensations such as smell, taste, and touch.

For example, in the VR documentary, *The Last Goodbye* you can accompany a holocaust survivor in his final return to Majdanek, Poland. VR allows you to walk alongside him, seeing what he sees, hearing what he hears. You can explore the digital recreations of the camp as a three-dimensional space.

In *Queerskins: A love story*. You get to know a young gay man, Sebastian by sitting in his parents' car, interacting with his personal belonging, while unaware of the fact that his parents are driving to the cemetery to his gravesite. You witness his parents emotionally charged conversation about their son as the father argues that he was a disgrace while his mother believes that he was a good man.

The VR experience *Dementia/First Hand* allows you to experience what it is like to live with early stages of dementia through embodying an elderly gentleman living in an apartment alone.

Dan Carlin's War Remains, lets you experience what it was like to live through the nightmarish hellscape of the Western Front during the First World War. Being in a body of a young soldier you get to live through a few hours of his life seeing with his eyes, listening through his ears and moving through his body.

In *Lone Echo*, one of the most powerful VR experiences I ever had, you become an android on a space station orbiting Saturn working with an empathetic human, Olivia. You learn to live and move in zero gravity, so if you want to experience what would it be like to live and work at a space station in a mechanical body, this is a great place to start.

In *Phone of the Wind*, you learn about the story of the infamous phonebooth in Japan, placed in a garden without being connected to any network. Still, this is the phonebooth where people go to when they lost someone, and they want to talk to connect with their loved ones. But again, the experience doesn't end with you just witnessing people's grief and their conversations. At the end you also find yourself in this garden, alone with this phonebooth, inviting you pick up the receiver and to talk.

The "I AM A Man VR Experience" allows you to walk in the streets of Memphis during the Sanitation Worker's strike in 1968 in the shoes of the people who fought for freedom and equality. You can witness the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and what it was like to interact with police. This experience also incorporates historical film footage and

photographs, revealing the powers and potentials of interactive storytelling and digitized historical artifacts.

There are many more Virtual Stories I would like to talk about, and hopefully next year I can offer a workshop to experience these stories, as it is almost futile to talk about VR without experiencing it. But I would like to mention one more virtual experience, *The Book of Distance*, because it reveals how autoethnography could function in virtual reality or how autoethnographers may share their stories in VR.

This autoethnographic story is told by the artist, Randall Okita, who is trying to uncover the history of his family. The experience first takes you to a household in Hiroshima, Japan. It is 1935. Randall's grandfather is still a young boy, but he is leaving Japan to start a new life in Canada.

However, due to the war and state-sanctioned racism, everything changes, and he suddenly becomes an enemy. You can witness what it was like to be separated from your family, losing your home, living in an internment camp. This VR production blends techniques from mechanical sculpture, film, and stage to redefine personal storytelling in virtual reality. When you enter the story, you can interact with historical artifacts and even lend your hand to help with chores or assist the characters in need. The evocative character design and seamless choreography combined with user interaction can be viewed as a model for presenting autoethnographic research in virtual reality.

I am also aware of the fact that creating these experiences require a unique skillset and specific tools. However, more and more universities train game designers and I believe collaboration between digital artists and autoethnographers could manifest in new ways of creating, presenting, and experiencing autoethnographies. It is also important that the software and hardware requirements for creating virtual experiences are affordable. The game engines to create these experiences are available for free and stand-alone VR headsets like the Oculus Quest are less than 400 dollars. There are hundreds of free tutorials with passionate instructors whom you can learn the basics of designing virtual stories.

In addition, if you have access to a 360-degree camera you can capture sites and conversations, sounds, and then offer your readers or audience the opportunity to enter these places through virtual reality as an added dimension to your story.

For example, the cinematic VR experience, *traveling while black* skillfully uses this technology and even without interactive features, it is still a powerful to step inside the story and witness the unfolding conversations, being at historic sites and locations. And 360-degree videos are powerful data sources since you are capturing the full environment. During the pandemic I used the virtual reality version of Google Earth to travel back to my hometown, to visit my great grandmother's gravesite. Being present in those environments helped me to remember and write about my experiences linked to those sites. Even though I couldn't interact with the environment, being immersed in these spaces through a 360-video footage, was transformative and rewarding.

I hope this brief presentation will ignite interest in virtual reality, marking the beginning of future collaborations and opportunities for autoethnographers and their audiences to create and interact with stories. Thank you.

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Excavating the Self through Others: Personal Narrative and Pregnancy Loss in Digital Space

Samira Rajabi
University of Colorado
samira.rajabi@colorado.edu

Abstract

This work-in-progress explores what it is to deal with a traumatic loss and cope with that loss through qualitative research. In the auto-ethnographic analysis of my research on celebrity pregnancy loss I explore the way I engaged with my research topic – celebrity pregnancy loss narratives – in order to create a scholarly conversation but also to negotiate myself as both researcher and suffering subject.

Keywords

auto-ethnography, narrative, digital media, ambiguous loss, pregnancy loss, social media

In this project I examine the process of narrating my own pregnancy loss through research of celebrity pregnancy loss and through public scholarship and writing. I examine my own writing on Medium as well as the social media posts and Medium article from Chrissy Teigen who experienced pregnancy loss in September of 2020, as well as the New York Times Op Ed from Meghan Markle about her pregnancy loss from November of 2020. My aim in this project is to understand how personal narratives intertwine in digital spaces and on social media to create coping spaces for disparate sufferers. Within this, I hope to examine how my own intersecting identities are interpolated as I examine testimony from women of color as they engage with broad, diverse communities online. This work builds upon previous work I've done on digital media and trauma but brings my own testimony of suffering into the work and also examines my scholarship as a coping space that exists alongside the coping spaces fostered through digital interactions between stories of suffering.

On September 20, 2020, model and actress Chrissy Teigen and her husband, singer John Legend suffered a pregnancy loss at around 20 weeks gestation. Teigen, who had shared a good deal of her pregnancy journey on her social media, specifically Instagram and Twitter, posted an image of her crying on the edge of a hospital bed alongside a message to her deceased son, Jack. The post read as follows:

We are shocked and in the kind of deep pain you only hear about, the kind of pain we've never felt before. We were never able to stop the bleeding and give our baby the fluids he needed, despite bags and bags of blood transfusions. It just wasn't enough.

We never decide on our babies' names until the last possible moment after they're born, just before we leave the hospital. But we, for some reason, had started to call this little guy in my belly Jack. So he will always be Jack to us. Jack worked so hard to be a part of our little family, and he will be, forever.

To our Jack – I’m so sorry that the first few moments of your life were met with so many complications, that we couldn’t give you the home you needed to survive. We will always love you.

Thank you to everyone who has been sending us positive energy, thoughts and prayers. We feel all of your love and truly appreciate you. We are so grateful for the life we have, for our wonderful babies Luna and Miles, for all the amazing things we’ve been able to experience. But everyday can’t be full of sunshine. On this darkest of days, we will grieve, we will cry our eyes out. But we will hug and love each other harder and get through it (Teigen, 2020).

This expression of grief and narration of loss was quickly followed by a short tweet, “Driving home from the hospital with no baby. How can this be real” (Teigen, 2020).

According to the CDC, “about one pregnancy in 100 at 20 weeks of pregnancy and later is affected by stillbirth, and each year about 24,000 babies are stillborn in the United States” (CDC, 2020). This differs from what medical communities call miscarriage, which is the “spontaneous loss of pregnancy before the 20th week” which the Mayo Clinic estimates to occur in somewhere from 10 percent to 20 percent of pregnancies (Staff, 2019).

Situated against this backdrop, this research examines the way commenters on Twitter and Instagram engaged with Teigen’s grief as well as how Teigen’s post functions as a form of meaning making online for someone who has experienced a trauma. Preliminary analysis of tweet replies/comments and comments on Teigen’s Instagram post highlight that users offered several responses to Teigen’s grief, from the articulation of their own grief, patrolling the boundaries of Teigen’s grief (most often through the lens of celebrity), as well as expressions of resilience or overcoming. This work in progress then examines these mediations through the lens of gender and grief to try to understand how, in popular culture, gender, grief, loss and digital media intersect in powerful and interesting ways.

In sharing her journey of loss, Teigen articulated her grief alongside a growing number of women who opt to share losses of this kind. In fact, October was named Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month by Ronald Reagan and October 15, 2020 was named Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day (“National Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day”). This day, like many such holidays that are symbolic in nature, is celebrated online through various hashtags such as #PregnancyAndInfantLossRemembranceDay and #PregnancyLossAwareness. These posts create awareness through challenging representations of miscarriages and stillbirths, attempting to dismantle stigmas related to sharing stories of miscarriage or pregnancy loss, as well as invoking narratives of hope, faith or the symbol of the rainbow as coping mechanisms and metaphors for loss and grief.

When I saw the visceral images captured on screen, I began a qualitative study that examined two identical tweets and Instagram posts (she posted the same content to both sites) from Chrissy Teigen on September 20, 2020 and a randomly selected subset of replies/comments to them between September 20, 2020 and October 20, 2020. These tweets (300 tweets gathered by hand using screengrabs) were then coded based on themes that emerged.

It was in the labor of this research that I found myself simultaneously drawn to some of the testimonies that shared grief with Teigen and repulsed by others. I had experienced my own

pregnancy loss just week's earlier and my grief was raw and palpable. I found it was slowly merging with the online narratives I read in complex ways.

I argue that Chrissy Teigen seized on a symbolic repertoire and remade it. This is made possible by her position as a celebrity, as she has an extensive reach because of her television, modeling, and cooking careers as well as through her marriage to a Grammy award winning artist. I also argue, however, that her grief cannot be articulated outside of her race/ethnicity and gender, the intersections of which combine with her celebrity in responses to her grief. Hall (2005) notes that the popular is a site of struggle over meanings (p. 64). The remainder of this paper examines this struggle from two main sites of analysis. The first site of analysis is the public responses to her grief and the themes that emerged. These responses demonstrate the complicated terrain of grief online while also illuminating the way grief of the ambiguous is simultaneously legible and illegible in social media spaces. The second site of analysis is the expression of grief that came from Teigen as it is understood through media, gender, trauma and grief.

I thematically categorized the narratives I saw being shared as follows:

- Sharing Experiences
- Overcoming/narratives of hope
- Correcting narratives (i.e. don't let anyone tell you not to grieve miscarriage; things not to say)
- Medical Information
- Politics
- Religious ideologies (about conception, abortion, perinatal loss)
- Conspiracies
- Gendered/Racialized expressions
- Condolences from strangers/fans
- Condolences from friends
- Prayers/Religious ideology (i.e. you are in my prayers)
- Permission to Grieve or Dismissal of Grief (i.e. why post a picture of a sad moment; why did you take a picture; or everyone grieves differently)

There is a perceived closeness to our grief for Teigen as her followers and fans. As Foss identifies in her study of parasocial grief for fictional characters, our affinity for real celebrities functions in a similar way; we feel a sense of affinity and obligation to these celebrities and use our social media to widen our interactive experiences with them, as though we are friends. And perhaps it is due to the visceral nature of the testimony in Teigen's case but it was in witnessing these narratives that I felt compelled to share my own in a Medium article I wrote shortly after suffering a miscarriage.

Another case that factors into this work is that of Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex, who is an American member of the British royal family and a former actress. Markle was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She has been a controversial figure in the British Royal family as she and her spouse Prince Harry resigned from their formal royal duties, in part highlighting racism towards Meghan as one of the many reasons. I had already shared my own story online when I saw Meghan Markle's op-ed in the New York Times. I received a text message the morning of November 25th of last year, "did you see what Meghan Markle wrote in the NYT?"

I had seen it, I had read it, I'd been enthralled by it and hadn't yet realized that in sharing my own narrative, for my small community, her story was intertwined with my own.

In the article Markle writes,

I knew, as I clutched my firstborn child, that I was losing my second. . . . "Are you OK?" a journalist asked me. I answered him honestly, not knowing that what I said would resonate with so many — new moms and older ones, and anyone who had, in their own way, been silently suffering. My off-the-cuff reply seemed to give people permission to speak their truth. But it wasn't responding honestly that helped me most, it was the question itself.

"Thank you for asking," I said. "Not many people have asked if I'm OK."

Sitting in a hospital bed, watching my husband's heart break as he tried to hold the shattered pieces of mine, I realized that the only way to begin to heal is to first ask, "Are you OK?"

Are we?

The responses to both Teigen and Markle were complex and nuanced. Much of what was seen was marked by discourses around race as it intersects with gender. Sharing in these spaces is not benign. There are various people policing the borders of these spaces and with this labor determining who is eligible to grieve. — It is important to acknowledge the way in social media, as before, black women's pain is silenced and dismissed as Broussard and others identify. As Taylor and Glowacki (2020) note, there is a "a mystification of women's pain, which leads not only to a lack of agency for women in pain, but also an articulation gap between pain expression and pain perception. Such a communication gap has led to misdiagnoses and delayed treatment for women whose expressions of pain are misunderstood or overlooked" (1). This is most pronounced for Black women, their pain is dismissed. Scarry (1985) has long noted that pain is the most difficult of the emotions to articulate, but even when that pain is put into words, what does it mean when huge swaths of our communities refuse to make it legible? I don't have a clean answer to this, but I think it is important for us to contend with as we examine how meaning is produced through narratives of the self and offering testimony online.

Beyond examinations of race and celebrity, this interdisciplinary work builds from media studies, gender studies, disability studies and studies of trauma to examine how the struggle over meaning around grief, what is deemed allowable by users in social media spaces, and the production of gender interconnect in a digital space that is also structured through market logics. Building from Couldry and Van Dijck (2015) who urge media research to account for the social as "a site of necessary, and necessarily contested, representation of whatever it is that binds large domains of human interaction together" (p. 1), I examine the circulations of media around Teigen's loss with a focus on the construction of and struggle over authentic, appropriate, and legible forms of grief online. This gesture must account for intersectional identities of those posting and responding, the platform affordances of the spaces through which people post, as well as the way grief is mediation in digital space.

The second opening in this research was made through my own writing and subsequent scholarship around digital mediations and testimonies of pregnancy loss. The research itself thus

becomes a form of personal narrative so to uncover research insights I must excavate my self as a digital, social media user, a suffering body, as well as through the lens of myself as a scholar. This interdisciplinary work builds from media studies, gender studies, disability studies and studies of trauma to examine how the struggle over meaning around grief, what is deemed allowable by users in social media spaces, and the production of gender and race interconnect in a digital space that is also structured through market logics. Within this, I seek to discover how I situate my own embodied suffering alongside and through the suffering of strangers in digital space.

I took advantage of the affordances of the flexible, negotiable, as-if space of digital media to articulate the ambiguity of the grief I found myself trapped in. I wanted to articulate a demedicalized resilience that left room for grief, I did this through narrating myself: Medicalized understandings of resilience must be complicated by the fact that subjects, according to a feminist poststructural positioning, are “ambiguously conceived, being imbued with agency, but equally constrained, subjected to broader discourses or forces from elsewhere” (Aranda et al., 2012, p. 554). Bodies, particularly non-conforming bodies, are standardized by medical and disability discourses, as well as discourses around resilience in the way that individuals are urged to ply themselves to conform to a set of standards that make up the “normal” (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 12). Deegan (2005) notes that concepts of resilience can “shift clinicians’ attention away from disease processes and onto the whole person in the life context” but also identifies resilience as an “innate self-righting potential” (p. 30). Aranda et al. (2012) advocate for a resilience they term “unfinished” that allows individuals to position themselves politically according to social structures and discourses and their personal biographies. An unfinished resilience is “always in a process of remaking or becoming” (Aranda et al., 2012, p. 555) thus allowing resilience to be about process more than outcome, and look and be resistive, to account for social interests and values, and for it to capture the way individuals misrecognize themselves in relations to systems while still expressing themselves authentically and positioning themselves against those same systems.

Performing this autoethnography, a rereading of my writing on miscarriage highlights that I was positioning myself in this type of resilience.

I wrote about Teigen’s miscarriage as it related to my own just 8 weeks after my experience of pregnancy loss, I started researching Markle’s just one month later. It was in my experiences of an ambiguous loss, a loss that was so psychologically present and yet physically absent that I saw digital mediation to cope or at least narrate my suffering in a way that enabled me to feel less alone.

I will end with a passage from the Medium piece I wrote in October of 2021: “We post when we have something to say, from the trivial, to the joyful, to the devastating, we are posting in order to express our voice. We are trying to assert our story in the big circulation of stories that matter in this world, trying to express that our voice matters. Media scholar Nick Couldry goes so far as to say that “giving an account of oneself and what affects one’s life — is an irreducible part of what it means to be human” and that effectively having your voice heard is a “human good.” This process is complicated enough during times of relative stability, but in times of trauma, the ability to narrate your reality and to make meaning from your suffering is crucial.” (Author, 2020).

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Storying Itinerant Childhoods by Weaving a Sense of Belonging through Collaborative Artmaking: An Audio-visual Family (Auto)ethnography

Alys Mendus (Alysme@gmail.com)
Ginny Connelly-Mendus

Abstract

Storying Itinerant childhoods explores belonging through creating an audio-visual family (auto)ethnography of our time travelling through Queensland, Australia in the Winter of 2021. Ginny, is a white Australian/British child, born on Bundjalung Country but no longer living there, where does she belong? This film and artist's statement share images, sounds and recordings from our da(r)ta (Coleman, 2021) of collaborative artmaking between parent (Alys) and child (Ginny) and Alys' weaving of baskets from natural materials in each Country through which we travelled.

Keywords

Audio-visual autoethnography, Performative Autoethnography, Collaborative Artmaking, Belonging, Family (auto)ethnography

Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge and pay respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples past, present and emerging. I recognise that the sovereignty of the land that I am on was never ceded and that it remains Aboriginal Land. I am writing this Artist's statement from Darumbal Country, Queensland, Australia.

Performance piece available on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLeuLbEdb3Y>

Artist's statement

2-year-old, Ginny's favourite book is *Baby Business* by Jasmine Seymour (2019) which we read and re-read, lapping up the images, embodying the actions of the Indigenous baby's smoking ceremony. This book means something to Ginny. This book means something to our family. Through an awareness of the wisdom and vision of Jasmine Seymour who explained that her book "Baby Business is a book that is for everyone who lives in Australia, over time I have heard many Elders generously say that if you are born on Country then you belong to Country" (in CBCA, 2019, para.3). I am learning about the importance of belonging, leaving questions about itinerant childhoods, defined as young people growing up in multiple locations. I wonder if you can sense belonging if you are always on the move? For Ginny, a white Australian/British child born on Bundjalung Country but no longer living there, where does she belong? The YouTube link takes you to the audio-visual autoethnography which explores this space of "tangled belongings" (Bunda et al., 2019, p. 176) through storying (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) our family's journey (our family [auto]ethnography) in Australia, by troubling place, sense-making and identity.

The outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020 prevented us returning from Australia to live with family in the UK. Our world turned upside down as our flights were cancelled and borders closed whilst we sat in an empty flat in Northern New South Wales, our flight bags packed and the rest of our belongings already in storage. Ginny was 10 months old and fast

asleep in the other room. We fled over the border to Queensland as our flights were from Brisbane and we hoped to return to the UK asap, it was just that asap never happened. We moved from Airbnb to Airbnb, to short term rentals around Brisbane until May 2021. At the end of May 2021, we found ourselves on the move again, realising that we were not getting back to the UK for a while and not really settling around Brisbane as we were too far from the sea, we knew it was time to explore Queensland. This time we put our belongings into a storage unit on Yuggera Country (Brisbane) and kitted out our old van for a long-term camping trip and headed north towards the Tropics.

Ginny and I wake early and spend time outside observing birds, crafting and finding natural treasures.

As we journeyed, we created a collaborative art-journal, similar to Knight (2013) and Knight et al.'s (2015) work on intergenerational art, where adults and children draw together on the same blank page. I set out for us to create this art-journal as a memory book, of things-made, things-collected, drawing on the wide scholarship on affect and 'thing-thought' (Harris & Holman Jones, 2019) by including the photos, drawings, pressed flowers, made objects, some kept and some let go of to create a sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), enjoying the impermanence and transience of what is created.

The video shares images from the art-journal that Ginny and I created as well as video footage of me weaving a basket from grasses from each Indigenous Country in which we were based for some time. I hope that the video is a sensory experience, a patchwork quilt of the multiple layers and understandings that occur as an adult and a child, both settler-colonial, move through and spend time on the stolen land of Australia. The video was created by me (Alys) but the focus of the research was on the relationship between Alys and Ginny, parent and child, and Ginny's voice will be heard through the collaborative art-making and audios of her speaking from the videos taken of our journeys.

Throughout this paper Ginny is not seen as the 'future' (Lee, 2013) but seen as having her own direct agency, storying of place, totem, and journey. It is important to note that I am aware that I share this presentation of our family [auto]ethnography with an ethic of care and an awareness of the autoethnographic research by Tamas (2011) and Tamas & Tamas (2021) on writing about/with your daughter. Observing and accurately recording how Ginny engages with each place, environment we are in and the use and value that she gives to the objects made was essential in how I directed the film. Major themes emerged influencing our conversations, play and art, such as the birth of a new cousin, Baby Anya, far away in England and the weekly rhythm of getting up early wherever we lived to watch the "Dustbin Lorry!" (Rubbish Truck). Picture books play a very important role in our family life and in this film I focus on a favourite book called Baby Business (Seymour, 2019), weaving images, words and the key message of respect for Country into the film.

I see the audio-visual family(auto)ethnography as an entanglement (Braidotti, 2019) of a lived experience travelling through Queensland, Australia as a family in 2021. Using iMovie I created collages of photos and videos from our travels, our art making, the places we stayed and the day-to-day events of everyday life with a 2-year-old. I added audio by recording poems and journaling I had written about the experiences at different times in our travels as well as layering the recorded sounds of places, the human and natural sounds as well as captured conversations between Ginny and I. As I was making this audio-visual paper, I was aware that I was not writing a traditional conference paper but a performative autoethnography, something which as Spry (2011) would argue has an affect beyond the original performer and the original audience. I had the chance to invite others to join me, the non-human and more than human world within a relational encounter (Massumi, 2015).

This film was made as a way of understanding my “da(r)ta” (Coleman, 2021). Following Coleman’s (2021) important addition of the (r) into data, allowing for a reconsideration of “how data can be understood as art, in particular, as visual and digital autoethnographies da[r]ta” (p. 193). From this film, a theoretical positioning of itinerant childhoods is being written for a paper for a Special Edition of Children’s Geographies (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles et al., 2021) on Climate Country. In that paper I will explore the role of the film, as a visual and digital, audio-visual (family)autoethnography has on the understanding of childhoodnature (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles et al., 2020; Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles & Rousell, 2020) as well as the connection between itinerant childhoods and Climate Country.

For now, just like at the conference, I invite you to click on the YouTube link and watch my thirteen-minute presentation to join Ginny and I in the visceral experiences of itinerant childhoods and family collaborative artmaking.

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Portals to Trauma in Writing Autoethnography/Memoir

Catherine Becker
University of Hawaii, Hilo
beckerc@hawaii.edu

Patricia Geist-Martin
San Diego State University
pgeist@sdsu.edu

Abstract

The processes for writing autoethnography and memoir are very similar in their focus on reflexivity, writing as a form of inquiry, and connecting the personal to the universal for readers. For writers of both genres, writing and rewriting may offer insights into the complexities of trauma experienced in the past. Through crafting layered accounts, we gain an understanding of the multidimensionality of trauma and the avenues for integrating the embodied and emotional aspects of trauma into our lives.

Keywords

trauma, motherhood, adoption, grief, secrets, embodiment

You have thrown snow at the wall, written and written and written, getting everything that occurs to you down on paper. You have followed this thread and that. Seemingly unrelated thoughts occurred. You put them in. . . . What a mess. No pattern at all. You keep looking at it, reading it over, feeling into it. Why the hell did I write this stuff? But you feel something in there, no matter how diffused or unclear it is, so you keep looking it over. Then suddenly, one day, as if a light were switched on, the pattern reveals itself. . . . And this perceptual understanding you now have can only be found by writing the book. You literally have written yourself to the truth of it. (Bunher, 2010, pp. 180-181)

The truth of it for so many writers is that writing and rewriting is a process of inquiry—of finding out something they didn't know when they wrote that first draft. Months or years later, they write into the mystery of the selves they were and have become with each new sentence, new paragraph, and new draft. This is what happened to us. If you asked us years ago the focus of our memoirs, it wouldn't be the same as it is now. Writing into the layers of the selves that we were at different ages, places, times, and with people long gone, we discover nuances and layers of joy, shame, happiness, fear, hope, guilt, and a bundle of other emotions. But what startled us most was the depth of trauma we both carried. Only through writing and rewriting did we understand our trauma in all its complexities and impacts.

This essay begins by describing the memoirs we have written. As autoethnographers, we have applied our knowledge and skills to the writing of our memoirs. Next, we elaborate on the process of writing and rewriting that unearthed the layers of trauma and its unexpected

reverberations. Through the writing process and our subsequent dialogue about it, we explore what emerges when we excavate our lives and who we become by doing so.

Memoir Chooses You

Memoir, like autoethnography, typically focuses on a topic centered on one aspect of someone's life, not the whole of it like autobiographies. Importantly, researchers/writers systematically reflect intensively about this portion of their life, situating their story within a particular context and revealing how their personal experience is universally relevant to almost any reader. Often, researchers/writers are drawn to and haunted by some aspect of their lives, so the topic chooses them.

Both of our memoirs center around our relationships with our mothers and mothering our children to adulthood. Unexpectedly, both memoirs ended up excavating, investigating, and considering traumas we experienced and carry with us, even today. Over time, we began to see how the "blessing was next to the wound" (Aristizábal & Lefer, 2010) in terms of gaining new understandings and moving forward with the grief that accompanied our wounds.

The Mother Road begins with Catherine's search for her origins after discovering she was a black-market adoptee. The memoir reveals how becoming a mother enabled her to empathize with both mothers' choices based on their position as women in Buffalo, New York, in the 1960s. It is about coming to terms with the trauma of abandonment, betrayal, the longing for authenticity and acceptance, and breaking free from the recessed repressed industrial hell hole of white working-class Buffalo by becoming an academic.

The trauma from her original abandonment intensified due to the lies she was repeatedly told by her adoptive mother and the guilt she felt for not feeling the gratitude that adoptees are frequently told they should feel. This form of gaslighting only intensifies the original trauma of being severed from one's family of origin and deepens, what Verrier (1993) calls the primal wound.

When Catherine became a single mother and experienced the exhaustion and vulnerability that her birth mother might have felt had she kept her at age 42, she gained a new understanding of why she decided to give Catherine up for adoption. By raising her child, Catherine was also able to understand how a fierce desire to protect one's child may have led her adoptive mother to lie to her about adoption. As she wrote her memoir and began to delve deeper into research about adoption, she found numerous studies showing that adoptees are overrepresented among those in treatment for mental health issues (Dennis, 2014). Catherine also discovered that she was one of the four million babies adopted by non-relatives during the baby scoop era that began at the end of WWII and continued until 1972 (Maza, 1984), including two million in the 1960s when she was born (Glaser, 2021). During the Baby Scoop Era, extreme pressure was placed on women to give up their babies and adoptive parents were told that babies were "blank slates" that should be told as little as possible about their origins (Dennis, 2014).

Haunted and Forgiven is a memoir about the trauma Patricia experienced at age nine when, at 40, her mother was diagnosed with brain cancer. For eight long years, the family lived with uncertainty about her mother's illness and the prospect of her certain death. At seventeen, in her senior year of high school right before Christmas, her mother died. For Patricia, the trauma of losing her mother at seventeen was intensified by the regret and guilt embodied in her identity of not being the daughter she thought she should have been when her mother was sick and dying.

While composing her memoir and reading letters her mother wrote her sister, Patricia learned of the trauma and suffering her mother was going through but did not talk about. Every

letter offered a plea to her sister to help her understand what was happening and her fear of leaving her children motherless. Reading the letters led to a deeper reflection about her teenage years with her mother before she died that initially intensified Patricia's struggle with guilt, grief, and loneliness. She began to see how her younger self repressed the memories of her mother to enable her to move on without her.

It was the birth of her one and only child, a daughter, that offered Patricia a portal to her trauma and blocked memories. In raising her daughter, Patricia experienced profound moments of *déjà vu* that helped her to locate and reflect on the anger, disappointment, and grief that she carried. The year her daughter turned 17, Patricia looked at her and said “Oh my god, she's so little, she's so young, she's so confused, she's so resistant—all the things a teenager is. For the first time, Patricia understood how very young and vulnerable she was when her mother died. This revelation enabled her to begin to forgive herself and rewrite the story of her role and responsibilities related to her mother's death.

Patricia then embarked on research that revealed that losing a mother as a teenager is the most difficult time for such a devastating loss (Osterweis et al., 1984). Many teens between the ages of 14-18, experience feelings of being lost and confused (The New York Life Foundation, 2018). They struggle with their identity, puberty, transitions, between independence and dependence, and in some cases first love. There seems to be more resilience when mother loss occurs in childhood or later as an adult, more established in relationships, professions, or in life. Patricia was none of that. Patricia subtitled her memoir “the daughter I was and the mother I've become” because in writing the memoir she was able to forgive the daughter that she was and realize the mother she had become was possible by moving forward and integrating understandings of trauma, grief, and hopefulness. The trauma she experienced from losing her mother isn't gone, but by locating that trauma in her body and naming what it is, Patricia became the mother for her daughter in ways her mother never could.

The Multidimensionality of Trauma

In writing our memoirs, both of us excavated buried memories of trauma and grief. Through writing about, uncovering, and analyzing trauma in our own lives, we were able to explore the ways our personal stories fit within a larger context. For Catherine, that context was the culture that surrounds adoption, specifically the ways that trauma impacted her identity and her ability to accept the uncertainty surrounding her birth mother and father, and the questions she raised about her adoptive parent's communication. For Patricia, it was the intersection of illness, death, grief, and the trauma surrounding her family's inability to speak about her mother's illness and death. The silence became an impediment to her moving forward with the trauma and integrating it into understanding and forgiveness for what was not talked about.

Memoir and autoethnography allow us to explore the ways that trauma manifests in our flawed and troubled lives in an imperfect world as social forces bear down on individuals, often causing them to bury rather than acknowledge trauma. Research by Levine (2010) suggests that those who experience trauma must call upon the wisdom of their bodies, mind, and emotions to transform and integrate trauma into their lives—to let our bodies speak. He points out that trauma responses are natural and self-protective, not something we should block. By writing our way into understanding trauma—our bodily response to fear, helplessness, loss, and other experiences—allowed us to begin the process of uncovering and integrating embodied and emotional responses to trauma. Both memoir and autoethnography have the potential to shine a glimmer of light upon trauma's mystery and reveal its multidimensionality—in the past and the

present. Autoethnographic researchers and writers of memoirs embark on journeys of inquiry and forms of expression that evoke meaning, reconfigure narrative, and lead to new conceptions of our bodies and body politic through the altered identities represented in our writing.

We use the words acknowledged or uncovered to talk about trauma instead of “healing” because we suspect that the word healing does not adequately allow people to address the fact that trauma is not something to heal or come to an endpoint. But rather, it is woven into the fabric of our life stories and is an essential part of our identities. Trauma that resides in our bodies may be awakened or emerge as a result of a memory, a moment, a movement. We have also learned that it may activate, shift, or transform into new revelations when it is witnessed by another with empathy or when we witness it in others. When that happens, the meanings of our trauma can be discovered and integrated.

Transcending and Integrating Trauma

Based on the writing of our memoirs, we agree that we need a new word for these points in our lives when we move forward with trauma. It’s not healing. It’s not recovery. It’s not resilience. It’s something else. People have a lifetime of these punctuated moments where they experience more closely in their body and emotions of trauma (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Through awareness, we search for avenues to acknowledge, transcend, and integrate trauma into our knowingness and appreciation of life (Wolynn, 2016). We accomplish this not only through the process of writing, reflection, and revising, but also through sharing our stories with others. As we continue this conversation, we search for ways of describing what we know to be true for those of us who carry and share these traumas with others. When through our autoethnographic and memoir writing we dig down underneath the surface, within our bodies, the multidimensionality of trauma, we may encounter secrets and new insights about ourselves and those around us. By acknowledging and understanding how trauma shaped us, along with its related secrets and social context, what we know and talk about begins to shift.

When others respond with empathy, recognition, or compassionate witnessing, we experience moments of recognition, connection, and relief. Perhaps this is our pathway for gaining new perspectives and relationships to trauma, that enable us to move forward, away from the stale stories of the past. It becomes some sort of lifeblood that continues to flow through our bodies offering instructions on living differently into the future.

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The Unexpected Effects of Autoethnographic Embodied Texts and Performances

Cali Prince
Western Sydney University
Cali.Prince@westernsydney.edu.au
creativityconnections@gmail.com

Abstract

As a doctoral student, I undertook a practice-led research inquiry, intersecting narrative inquiry combined with experiments in autoethnography and ethnography. I encountered gatekeepers (in the form of powerful institutions). Beneath appearances, I discovered a hidden war. I discovered how hidden power and larger agendas can be masked in what are often claimed to be ‘empowering’ processes. I found a ‘dangerous’ collective story from artists working with communities, one that largely was not evident in the institutional narratives. One of the unexpected effects of the research was the birthing of an autoethnographic and site-specific performance, which has birthed further embodied poetic texts and emerging autoethnographic performances.

Keywords

hidden narratives, performance autoethnography, transformation, care

Acknowledgements

This research inquiry has been undertaken on Dharug Country, and further written on Worimi Country and Dharug Country. I acknowledge and honour the Dharug and Worimi Elders and communities past, present and emerging generations.

Authors Note

This work was developed and presented in my role as a Doctoral Candidate at the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS), at Western Sydney University on an aspect of the research and findings of my doctoral research portfolio titled ‘Unmasking the 4th Space: Collaborative Creativity in Praxis at the Intersection of Artists, People with their Communities, and Institutions’ (Prince, 2021a). This includes the embodied text and performance works of ‘Bone Poems’ (Prince 2018, 2021b). Chronologically, this research inquiry pre-dated my role and full time employment in the time period when this paper was written. Consequently my doctoral research bears no relationship to my employment, and was created in my personal time.

Introduction

“...there are several stories that, like Matrióchka dolls, fit one inside the other...” – Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1993, p.1)

As a doctoral candidate and student of cultural research, I undertook practice-led research intersecting narrative inquiry, combined with experiments in ethnography and autoethnography. My doctoral research inquired into what transformations were occurring in

the shared spaces between artists, people with their communities and institutions when all were engaged in collaborative creativity (also referred to as complex creative collaborations). Early on, I applied metaphors from chaos science and complexity to better understand how small iterative changes could have unpredictable, non-linear, and significant effects (Prince, 2016). I have previously asserted that in these ‘postnormal times’ (Sardar, 2010) with the complexity of issues we as human beings collectively face, we need to find more inclusive ways of working with complexity, ways of cultivating dialogic, narrative, critically reflexive and performative spaces, to open up and engage with a multiplicity of perspectives and resulting personal and collective transformations. Within my earlier established complexity frame, I experimented with methodological approaches that explored layering and intersecting hand-made mapping of both research participants and my own autoethnographic experiences of the relationships on collaborative creative projects. This experimental mix developed into combined sensory relationship mapping, with explorations of narrative and metaphor, sensory ethnography, autoethnographic vignettes, ethnographically based poetry and later performance autoethnography. These experiments birthed a new innovation in methodology that I call Sensory Poetic Relationship Mapping or SPRM (Prince, 2022), a multisensory, multimodal and performative methodological approach.

In this paper, I share the unexpected effects that were generated as a result of this process, in the form of newly emerging embodied poetic texts and autoethnographic performances. This has opened an emergent ongoing ‘dialogic space’ (Hodge, 1993, p.62) with research participants. This continues to deepen my personal and professional transformation in praxis. Further, this has resulted in the emergence of more research participant stories, thereby further deepening these relationships and generating possible future actions with artists and communities.

To glean insight into the research journey and the newly emerging learnings, I look at some of the current emerging poetic works in development. These works are generated from research participant feedback on my earlier autoethnographic performances (see podcast of Bone Poems, Prince, 2021b) and are interwoven with my narrative, poetic and autoethnographic reflections.

Interconnecting Story Threads

Before progressing any further, I want to acknowledge the iterative meaning-making, the often mysterious, and the generative power of narrative and story by returning to the quote that opens this paper. Estés (1993) ¹ brings attention to the ways that a multitude of stories can co-exist, and live “...one inside the other’ (Ibid., p.1). She elaborates that ‘the first story almost always evokes another, which summons another, until the question has become several stories long’ (Ibid., p.1). The revealing of one story can reveal more stories that interconnect and hold a space for further stories (and questions) to emerge. As a dual arts practitioner and researcher who is examining one’s own professional practice, this was my experience. Each research participant narrative uncovered further narratives, sometimes interconnecting with another research participant’s narrative, and my own autoethnographic reflections. Any one of these narratives could potentially invite a small degree of change in our own experience and perspectives as the researcher, and thereby the lens through which we retell the story of the research.

These interconnected threads of research participant narratives had unexpected effects on my own narrative and altered my perspective as a practitioner- researcher. Particular narratives and relational maps by research participants shed new light on what I thought I

¹ In my own story, I wish to acknowledge the significant meaning and impact having directly received Dr Clarissa Pinkola Estés’ teachings in the Original Voice™ in Colorado in 2017, and the ways these teachings continue to weave through my body, heart and mind as a human being, practitioner and researcher.

knew about the art and cultural projects, places, institutions, and various communities I had previously been immersed in. Indeed, this extended further to encompass new perspectives on what had occurred in these places from the perspectives of research participants that reoriented hidden narratives and countered the dominant narrative into the centre of the research inquiry and generated, as I have discussed in my earlier work, a new ‘ethnographic place’ (Pink 2015; Prince 2018).

In this process, often hidden and hierarchical relational dynamics playing out in creative collaborations between institutions with artists, people with their communities became illuminated. Furthermore, these relational dynamics with artists and communities were often not confined to one institution but were dynamics playing out between interconnected institutions of power (Prince, 2022).

As I encountered research participant narratives that had been largely ignored, pushed to the periphery or even silenced, I as a practitioner-researcher often felt uncomfortable, disorientated and disturbed. I found myself deep in the forest, and in the unknown: I was lost. These profoundly disorienting and ‘out of equilibrium’ moments brought me face to face with questioning what I thought I knew, what I had now come to learn and did not know before. At the same time, I found myself reclaiming another aspect of self, previously lost long ago that now was coming forward, interwoven with the voices of my peers and research participants.

In an intuitive process of making and creating in response to these research difficulties, as demonstrated in figures 1-3, I found myself hand-making masks. I would wear and perform embodied poetic texts in mask. These practices interwoven in my research process, began to reveal other aspects of my own experiences as well as the experiences of others that existed yet ordinarily were hidden, silent, obscured, disregarded, not visible or not seen. While the mask-making process as one aspect of this multilayered and multimodal methodological approach requires a separate dedicated article, the key point is that in my explorations I found that the mask began to reveal research discoveries that otherwise had been concealed.

The mask as it meets embodied texts, such as performing ‘Bone Poems’ (see podcast, Prince, 2021b) reveals what was formerly hidden, as it makes the performance turn enabling these interconnected stories, as they are woven through my body as the researcher, to be enacted front and centre. Thus, the process becomes a powerful and public way to shift narratives from the periphery to centre stage, and in that process not only provides a space for, but enacts a multiplicity of alternative voices to the dominant narratives. As I came to learn what I now know, my courage and empathy deepened, my practice as an artist was awakened, as well as a deepening in my relationships with my artistic peers (who were simultaneously also research participants).





Figures 1-3 (left to right): Creating, wearing and performing embodied texts in hand-made masks and other forms of mask, began to reveal what previously had been concealed. Photographs copyright of the author in collaboration with R. Prince, 2020; the author and R. Prince, 2022; the author and L. Prince, 2021.

Encountering Hidden Narratives

“..the interconnections between the stories of the artists, were revealing...”
author’s autoethnographic journal, 1.3.18

In the research inquiry, I encountered gatekeepers in the form of key institutions.² In time beneath the dominant narratives and appearances, I discovered a hidden war. As a way to find my way through this complex and difficult terrain, as already outlined, I engaged experimental and emergent methodological approaches and methods that I called SPRM and generated a poetic ‘embodied text’ titled ‘Bone Poems’ (Prince, 2018). The act of combining found poetry generated from research participant transcripts generated and shared a most significant research finding: that the narratives of research participants had been sidelined to the periphery, hidden or suppressed by various key institutions of power relating to the artists and people in these places and their interconnected communities.

At this point the research began to reveal how collaborative creative processes and their emergent spaces can be used to either increase the diversity of voices and open up a multiplicity of perspectives and lived experience, or alternatively how they can be used by the powerful to close down, censor, control or establish master narratives. Disturbingly, I discovered how hidden powers and larger agendas can be masked in what may seem to be offered as or may claimed to be, ‘empowering’ processes. Here, I found a ‘dangerous’

² Names and places have been de identified for confidentiality reasons.

collective story from artists working with communities, one that largely was not evident in the institutional narratives.

Research participant narratives illuminated a significant contaminated land site that had been used to store nuclear and radioactive waste as well as other significant contaminants, for example, TNT, lead, organochlorines, asbestos, explosives and more. This was validated by formal government reports (some held offshore) and historical archives. Further, research participant narratives connected this specific site and place in Western Sydney (now transformed into new housing) to Woomera (Australia's premier nuclear storage site), highlighting how both sites had in fact stored some of the same radioactive waste. Disturbingly, the women's stories interrelated and interwoven through my lived and embodied experience as a practitioner in this same place I had formerly worked in and around for more than seven years, and ultimately forced me to see what had not been visible before. Now apparent, I could not unsee it. The embodied text (Prince, 2018) became the seed that generated an autoethnographic performance in the place of research participant stories, first performed and shared as a public podcast of 'Bone Poems' (2021b). This podcast has enacted the discoveries of the research to a wider public audience as well as within the community of research participants.

New possibilities emerged as poetic imagery and spoken word performance of research participants' and my own practitioner reflections and narratives were woven and enacted in the place of this story. Research participants offered their feedback on this performance, some of them sharing further stories of the personal significance and meaning of this work to them and the impact on their lives. Consequently, this action leads to future actions as well as the unexpected effects of the research. Research participant feedback is continuing to birth a series of interconnecting found and autoethnographic poems and works (currently in development).

If we return to the insight by Estés (1991) we can begin to see how one story when told or enacted can evoke a further thread of interconnecting stories. In this case the action of performing the embodied text from the research inquiry shares a key research finding, and has continued to reveal new insights and ongoing dialogue. However most significantly, it has led to the development of new embodied poetic texts with research participants and communities.

New Found Poems: 'Bone Speak'

I have developed a series of new poems 'Bone Speak' in response to my earlier work 'Bone Poems' (2018, 2021b). In Bone Speak I am developing accompanying autoethnographic performance poetic imagery (specifically see figure 3). Found poems were generated from transcribed conversations with key research participants (who I will here-on refer to also as the story keepers), with as few amendments made as possible to their original words. This process involved generating field and research texts that were rechecked with research participants for their feedback and any changes. Importantly, as Madison (2019) and Barbour (2011) discuss, this kind of work with autoethnography and performance autoethnography requires a commitment to self-reflexivity in relational ethics in our processes.

In receiving this feedback from key story keepers on earlier drafts of the poem, the work unexpectedly changed in form. By way of example, a research participant whose story is retold in the poem wanted the place visible rather than blurred out or made insignificant. Critically, the aesthetic that was developing out of this dialogue was a key part of my commitment first to care, where form then followed. Included is a short vignette of my autoethnographic poetic response in the second 'found' poem that captures one participant's

feedback on ‘Bone Poems’. The final poem, I share reflects on the ethics of care as being central to this process and at the very essence of the work.

Readers note (prior to reading ‘Bone Speak’ poems)

1. The word **SILENCE** is emphasised in red in the Bone Speak series and has replaced identifying people, institutions, organisations and place names to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants. Yet this word is also deliberately used to highlight the ongoing censorship and silencing that story keepers say continues, due to the overriding power, authority and dominance of a myriad of interconnected institutions of power.
2. The phrase ‘old site’ appears in the poem and refers to a former munitions factory site that existed in this unidentified place in Western Sydney, Australia, as was revealed through the original narratives shared by key story keepers, and also documented in the historical archives.
3. The poems can be read with the accompanying poetic imagery also titled ‘Bone Speak’ (currently in development). These images were photographed at the site of the key findings of the research, furthermore the place of the original interconnecting stories between key story keepers and myself as the researcher.

See ‘Bone Speak’ imagery YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/gKrGxossxYY>

Found Poem 1: Bone Speak with Nena Maria Cruz: Hope

Nena Maria Cruz

was she -
who told me
of the theatre project
she had worked on
with the women
who worked
at the factory
on the “old site”
and how their project
was shut down

My heart is in my throat
as I open her message:

“It was a gut-wrenching read
for me
brought back
the old trauma
from that theatre project
with **SILENCE**

Despite it,
it lifted mine and Astrid’s spirits
she is a very close friend
who was traumatised with me

then as she also
worked in that project
with the
SILENCE Theatre
in **SILENCE**
then.

The good thing – you provided HOPE
from the cracks
the day of reckoning has come.
then I believed, one day an
“Australian person” who
has a BIG heart
will discover
this secret
and unravel it.”

Poem 2: Bone Speak with Nena Maria Cruz - SILENCE

Then “Finally, the butterfly effect,
1991-1997
when there was a fight
over the Mother’s Place
was when they
SILENCE
Shut down our project

The same period me and Astrid
(as investigative jourmos)
simultaneously
manhandled by
SILENCE
and dragged Stella
to jail
and I was thrown out
to the highway
when we were also
doing a story about
SILENCE
arms exhibition
in **SILENCE**
where purchasers
including **SILENCE** attended
to buy weapons
we were paid reporters
but that didn’t matter.

We knew too much about
SILENCE
And [the] “Mother’s Place”.”

Care is not some kind of add on
Or tick box
Or even step at the end of the process

It is not just that you care
But for what do you care?
And where do you care?
And for who do you care?
Why do you care?
And do you put
CARE
In the centre?

Conclusion

One of the unexpected effects of my research into complex creative collaborations was the birthing of autoethnographic performances. These performances have prompted ongoing dialogue with key research participants (the story keepers) who originally shared with me their interlinking stories. Their interconnecting narratives have opened the door for more stories to emerge. Ongoing dialogue, new embodied texts and autoethnographic performances reweave and enact hidden narratives at the centre. One of the results is the generative effect of this dialogue opens further sites of potential autoethnographic, co-creative or collaborative performance as well as a myriad of other potential future transformations.

In the times that we live in, we need new ways of learning and understanding and to cultivate dialogic, narrative and performative spaces that facilitate critical reflections in praxis, both personally and collectively towards innovation and transformation. What is most important is that we facilitate spaces that safely allow a multitude of narratives to come forward and to be enacted with care, particularly for those that have been ignored or relegated to the periphery. In doing so we create new sites of inquiry, new conversations, we open new ways of seeing the way that things are, or may be experienced by another, and ultimately these processes can alter or shift our ways of being and knowing. At the heart of this approach is not only innovation, vitally, care is cultivated at the centre.

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Alice in Dunderland: Truth-telling & Consequences

Karen Adler (karenadler222@gmail.com)

Video editor: Jennifer Dias (sereia.fotographia@gmail.com)

Abstract

Truth-telling & Consequences is a series of filmed conversations with people speaking about their personal experiences in regard to creativity and mental health, psych meds and suicide, plus advocacy for change. These are the three central themes of an exhibition entitled, Alice in Dunderland : Creativity & Mental Health. Alice looks at the role of the arts, creativity, visual storytelling in bringing about cultural change and raising public awareness. The individuals have been chosen to present different perspectives on these matters. The aim is to show a group of people with diverse philosophies and beliefs who use their life experiences to look at matters which have profound impacts on our lives, particularly in these days of climate change and Covid-19, which have brought immense stress to many people.

Keywords

storytelling, change, advocacy, mental health, suicide

Karen Adler

The Alice in Dunderland project was born from my personal and professional experience where the arts function as a powerful tool. The arts enable us to know ourselves, to discover inner resources that help us survive the very worst times of our lives - grief, overwhelming stress, hopelessness. A pivotal point in my career as an art therapist was working with an 11 year old boy in foster care who told me he'd been re-diagnosed with ADHD, prescribed Ritalin and was self-harming. I knew that there was no mention of self-harm in his previous case records. I knew that ADHD is a debatable diagnosis and that the diagnostic criteria could fit any one of us.

I took my concerns to the foster care agency and included research to support my concerns. I knew from both my own experience and research and listening to the stories of many people around the globe that psych medications, particularly in young children, could have very grave consequences including suicide and homicide. I knew that a Google Scholar search of the terms medication-induced suicide/homicide yields about eighteen thousand four hundred results. I knew that some kids end up selling their Ritalin in the schoolyard. I knew that Ritalin can become a gateway drug. I knew that medicating emotions in a child is unlikely to teach them to learn to handle their emotions. I knew from my own experience of taking antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications after the death of my mother - my very best friend in the world - how horrendous the side effects could be. And I knew that at the time I experienced these side effects, I had no inkling whatsoever that they were medication-induced. I believed, as do most people, that the exacerbation of my symptoms meant that my depression and anxiety were getting worse.

I tried to imagine a little eleven-year-old boy with a background of trauma experiencing the deep level of dread and constant anxiety every single day that was my experience of

depression and anxiety that I now know were exacerbated by the medications. Ultimately, huge body tremors and a sensation of microbes crawling under my skin, were the physical sensations that made me think I was going mad. I knew that part of this young boy felt unloved - because he told me and showed me with his drawings and storytelling and he didn't care if he lived or died. I knew that the mental health system and education system provides more money for support if a child has a diagnosis. I knew that not all foster care parents foster children for money but that some do. I knew that all the information I had was readily available to anyone who could use the internet - including an 11 year old boy.

In bringing together the following six speakers through the Alice in Dunderland : Truthtelling and Consequences looking glass, it's a reflection and a reminder that this story happens to so many people and can happen to any of us. In sharing these stories we aim to raise awareness in hope of preventing any further unnecessary damage.

David Carmichael

Arguably, the pharmaceutical industry is the most powerful industry in the world. So it's very hard to take on that type of giant - it's really difficult so we all have to work together collaboratively, and share our stories. I believe there's power in the stories, I really do. There are many people who have lost children [and] when you start to realise that maybe the suicide was drug-induced - that's where a lot of the powerful advocates come from [and] is one of the reasons why i'm speaking out probably more now than ever before.

My role is just to share my story because when I was distressed, I crashed very quickly, I lost weight and was prescribed Paxil. My doctor really didn't know anything about how to ween someone off of a drug. You get a prescription, they don't tell you of the possibility that you can become suicidal and that warning has been out in Canada since 2004. Just before I took my son's life those warnings were starting to come out, yet the drug companies knew about this in the 90s when they were doing their clinical trials. They just hid the data to get the drugs approved.

My case is a homicide and it's excruciating. I can't think of much more heinous than taking your own child's life. You never recover, you never recover. I just blindly trusted my doctor - you know, most of what they learn is from the pharmaceutical sales reps and we know there's a high percentage of doctors that are consultants. [This] is still happening now where they do get some funds from the pharmaceutical industry.

If you're depressed or you have a rough time, we know that yes some people become suicidal. So if the drug makes you suicidal, it's very easy for the doctor to say no, it's part of the condition. Or if you suddenly become really agitated, irritated - here, take this drug, this will help calm you down. This leads towards polypharmacy and this leads towards lifelong issues.

I think there are too many people on too many drugs and I do really think there's an awakening about these issues. Medical professionals have had the courage to speak out. I think many people have stepped back and wondered if maybe their drugs are doing more harm than good. I broke my silence in July 2006 as a forensic inpatient in a psychiatric hospital. What I had found was a purpose - a purpose that would keep me alive, a purpose that would hopefully help prevent other family tragedies like ours.

Know Your Drugs is a global awareness campaign. In the presentation, I deliver 'Preventing Another Opioid Crisis'. We talk about a study called Study 329. Our main message in this campaign is, 'You've got to research the side effects so you can understand if the side effects might be caused by the drug.' I hope we create some healthy skepticism about the

pharmaceutical industry. This is where we're aligned with an organization called RsX.org - we can find out maybe this is a side effect, maybe this isn't, you know, your condition or your illness. or if that's the case really clear case of causality and the way that the pharmaceutical industry works is they will say there's no scientific evidence that for example Paxil or cause psychosis that's one of the things you've said or homicide well that scientific evidence is just based on their clinical trials it's not science so all of our reports what they call post-marketing experiences they almost considered to be anecdotal but to me that's better science than their own clinical trial but we need to report them really build the scientific of the evidence base and then we need to hold the government regulators are accountable so I think we just have to stop blindly trusting our doctors you know people have to start asking questions because too many people are just fighting out about the harm these drugs can do after they've lost a loved one or been hard themselves and you know we really have to move towards a lot of people that make informed choices about prescription drug use.

Tracie Shoobert

Some of my art seems to have this very hard life and I think that's what I saw incorporate into my life at the moment I became very disillusioned with the education system and the supports that were meant to be in place and that weren't in place just so many years I thought I was unbelievable because I was educated because I was a teacher because I could multitask because I could juggle so many things going on in my life I had this theory I would have the ability to keep myself together though realistically I was falling apart and didn't realise I was i had that belief where I was unbreakable so when I just fell away it was a huge shock I stopped becoming this very outgoing bubbly person and started to withdraw into myself quite a fair bit and it felt like I was wearing a mask or having two faces this happy person but on the other side this person that's so fearful of things and cautiously things that it was a struggle between what face was I going to put on that day you know like trying to mask things and say that same way as that is what they were the world as I had nothing just stopped even though anything because i'm starting to understand myself more be able to navigate myself through mental health a lot better that's sort of floating between a world that stopped and there is freedom and i've got little dark ears just symbols because even though we can have you know the darkness in the corner trying to get to it.

There is freedom, I feel like I'm so contented you know. I do understand that I have to look after myself and that my mental health is more important. You know I need to be the best person that I can be because I feel that my quality of life is so much better now than when I was first diagnosed and I think art has definitely played a part in that, it's definitely allowed me to see just how much I have improved.

Tim Heffernan

It's about getting Alice back up the burrow and how do you do that. The consumer movement or peer movement is, in essence, a social justice and human rights movement to try and shift the balance from that biomedical approach that is entrenched in western mental health systems and it's about shifting that back to looking at what's happened to people. Also, looking at those strengths and beauties of people and allowing them to value that diversity that we have. It's about recognising that often these current systems cause a lot of so-called problems with mental health in terms of morbidity.

Creativity has been a really essential part of my recovery and still is. I still write poetry. My personal experience in mental health issues or whatever you want to call them, I became more awake, I suppose, and not able to sleep. This was in 1983 which was around the time of a number of global tensions happening at the time. I was beginning to move into a different

space and that space was around the belief that that I had to move past my birthday otherwise the world would end. I'd constructed that sort of belief.

I thought I was moving out of the discomfort of that phase where I wasn't coping with life and moving into a place where I was very much in control and was getting into life in a new way. So I probably would have been, in a sense, discovering myself moving from what I had been to what I was becoming as a person. In that place, I was writing my memoir which was pretty pretentious at a young age. It began with the title 'Don't Go To School With a Hangover and Lie on the Classroom Floor' and ended up with the title, 'The Newest Testament' - which might give you an indication of where I was going.

Part of all this, was the idea that I had to live past my birthday. [There were] also sort of messianic type of beliefs starting to happen - that I had some control over the destiny of the world. The world moving through a time of turmoil and trouble into a time of paradise, sort of like the rapture. So I ended up in a mental health unit and actually felt that that was good because at that time I needed sanctuary and safety and those forces of evil that were out to get me couldn't get me in the hospital.

I ended up coming out of hospital still in a heightened state and still with all sorts of connections to the world and my environment. I felt where you're at one with nature, you can perceive things, you can read things through number plates, you can commune with animals more easily and you have these sorts of powers.

I was given a diagnosis of schizophrenia. At that time, in my mind, there was this connection to the world and the universe at a higher space where I really did feel things, I felt differently to other people. I think, for me - art, the visual arts, poetry, writing, they're all so important.

Yolande Lucire

Psychiatry has taken another wrong turn. It took a wrong turn when it did a hundred thousand lobotomies, and now believing that pills can sort out emotional problems, believing that we can change people's minds and make them happy when they perhaps should be unhappy. But it's not how we view ourselves it's how psychiatrists view people, how the pharmaceutical industry has taught them to view people.

When huge amounts of fines paid in the United States under the False Claims Act - for instance, 1.42 billion dollars, the first Federal settlement for Zyprexa, it gets into the financial pages here and i've discovered that my colleagues don't read.

More than a third of our admissions to that ward were people on antidepressants and antipsychotics who were suicidal/homicidal, had never been like that before and they've been given them for stress. The epidemics followed the blitzes by the drug companies so for a few weeks you'd have a whole lot of Fluoxetine suicides coming in and a whole lot of Zoloft suicides coming in, and the trinkets would appear on the tables. And I couldn't work out what it was, because I was reading product information in Australia which is one-third the size of that given to American doctors. I was seeing the suicidality and I couldn't make sense of it and then I went to David Healey's seminar and he gave a paper on Let Them Eat Prozac and in those two hours something happened to me that has never happened before. My whole professional life and professional failures just went through my mind and the feeling was as if I had been putting together three jigsaw puzzles and when David's take-home message was drug companies are lying to you then all that information from drug companies was removed

and everything else fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. It was a magical experience and it solved my confusion. I then learned, 'Yola, believe what you see in front of you, believe what you learned as an undergraduate and take no notice of these lying doctors and lying professors.'

It's simple, a road to Damascus kind of thing ... 'It's the drugs, stupid.'

Robert Whitaker

But you need seeds to sprout that really develop a whole different way of responding to people. The revolution happens from people understanding a different narrative, making real life practical changes. And here's the key - as they do so, their narrative is founded in truth.

Do we really think that all your distress arises just from your brain chemistry? We respond to environments. Once we see that, we say, 'Well listen, I don't just exist like a mind walking around separate from the environment, being depressed or whatever.' We know that's nonsense - we respond to the environment. So once you see that, you say okay and you go out and look at these new seeds sprouting that show different ways and understanding of what science is really showing us, what philosophy is really showing us, what personal experience shows us, what history shows us, what literature shows us. It all shows us, it's in this alternative narrative, this counter narrative where we see what we know to be true about human beings.

This other narrative gets understood and gets promoted in whatever circles and then seeds of practice are changed. It helps people reform their own self-conception and you have things like Soteria Israel, you have those things like Open Dialogue, you have medication free places in Norway, you have respite houses showing up.

So there are these seeds being planted and you put these little pockets where the conception of what's happening is very different. Even within the mainstream academic community there is an acknowledgement that their story that they wanted to tell thirty years ago has fallen apart. Diagnoses aren't even been validated as real illnesses so that whole biological story that was presented to us beginning in the 1980s - they have to admit there's an increasing admission that it didn't pan out. And that opens the shift for a paradigm [change], at least a change in the conversation.

You know, that said, I'm pretty pessimistic when it comes to changing the existing system and we hope that they don't get crushed by the mainstream. But you can't change existing systems where people are benefiting and have power from that. What you have to do is plant new seeds, I'm quite sure.

David Burgess

I guess I wanted to right some wrongs, possibly naively, but that goes on into developing a skill set around achieving the best results. You realise it's hard work to right wrongs and it doesn't take very long for human beings to forget a certain era if they weren't there. And in the case of the Iraq war, it became clear in 2002, that the Bush administration was determined to expand its operations from Afghanistan post 9/11, into Iraq and to invade Iraq. The arguments for weapons of mass destruction were just never cutting it at any level and all of the world could see it and used all of those processes at an international, diplomatic level to prevent it [and] yet failed. And as the failure of that became apparent, a grassroots movement developed, a bit of a final cry of defiance from at least this end of the world, where 70

percent of the Australian population opposed the deployment of troops as part of the Coalition of the Willing.

Will [Saunders] said he had this tin of paint and he wanted to paint a message against the war and he asked me where would the best place to put it. And literally as a semi-joking [comment] and to make him think, I said, 'Well, on top of the sails of the Opera House.' And I saw him draw a breath and went, 'Wow Will's actually taking this suggestion seriously.' We were both pretty angry at what was going on, like the rest of the world was.

My son, he saw the consequences more than anyone, going to school and people would ask, 'What does your dad do?' And he would answer, 'Well, I guess he graffiti's buildings and he goes to jail.'

As we're seeing right now, there's global despair or panic and people are turning to a great deal of misinformation to comfort themselves or to simplify the problems in their own heads. The first thing is, you've got to be comfortable that it's not simple and it comes down to the sheer numbers and being better than the industry you're taking on rather than the moral issues of wrong and right. You've actually got to outwit them and provide a solution.

Conclusion

In our world today, with its endless streams of information, it's necessary to be able to think critically and identify bias. The 'truth' is often manipulated shamelessly to present points of view which bear little resemblance to what is the reality of a situation. This is especially true in areas of life which are connected to power, money and control.

If we're unable to distinguish truth from lies, if we don't bother to thoroughly investigate what is happening in our world and what we're told to believe, then we suffer the consequences of believing liars who do not have our best interests at heart. This is especially evident in the field of mental health where research is manipulated at its origins and then taught as 'truth' to students who will go out into the world as professionals and practice accordingly. There are grave consequences for those who end up in the hands of these professionals who believe that marketing material equals research they can trust.

There are consequences for believing lies. Equally, there are consequences for telling the truth. History shows that speaking truth to power does not necessarily result in change, or in justice. But these stories need to be told anyway so that history will also show that people spoke up for themselves and for others rather than remaining silent.

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Alice in Dunderland :
Creativity & Mental Health
The Red Tree, Tuggerah
1/2/22-22/2/22
All welcome.



Speaking from the Body: Autoethnographic Aesthetics as Spiritual Practice for Grief Tending when Living with Childhood Trauma

Iris J. Gildea (iris.gildea@utoronto.ca)

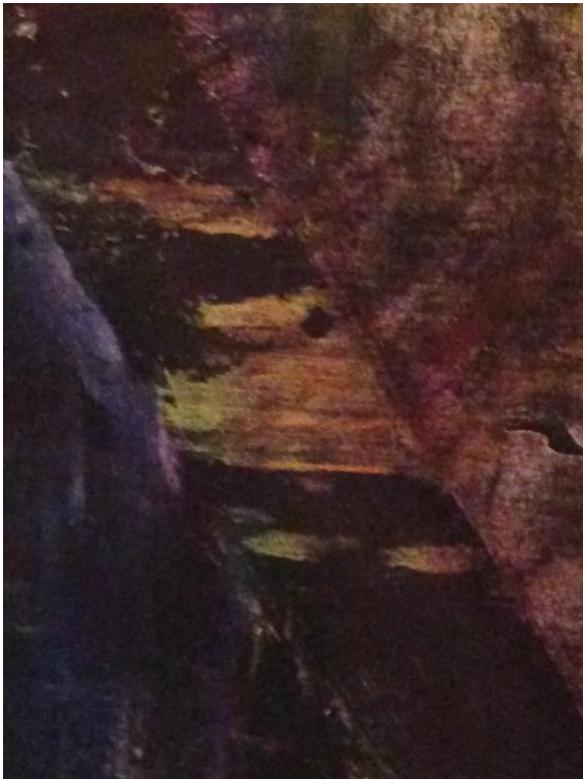
Abstract

This piece explores the intersections of aesthetic inquiry as it relates to arts-based research, practices of meaning-making, healing trauma and the embodiment of grief, particularly as these intersections concern adults living and healing with complex childhood trauma. I use my own aesthetically mediated narrative of grief tending to explore these intersections and suggest that when we come into practices of expressing embodiment through art, we encounter deepening layers of meaning making and presence that can also invite spiritual dimensions of embodiment into our conscious awareness.

Keywords

Trauma, Aesthetic Inquiry, Autoethnography, Arts-Based Research, Grief

I begin with this image:



“Breaking Through”, mixed media

I made this image many years ago during the time in my life when I first began to consciously work at healing a very violent and traumatic childhood. With this piece and in my aesthetic inquiry practice, I do not seek to translate memory or embodied history into theoretical abstractions or literal translations of trauma. For me, art as a way of knowing is not about translating or bringing my experience into a literal or explicit chronicling, which feminist practitioners and survivors have shown can be retraumatizing and not necessarily what healing requires (Levins Morales, 2019). I seek to invite art as a way of knowing into my conscious and embodied self. This occurs by developing the aesthetic inquiry practice as a practice of art-making and cultivation of present and mindful awareness of what I refer to as bodyspeak: noticing my shifts of emotion and somatic cues as I paint or write such as a pulse in my chest, a burning in my womb, a shudder throughout my spine. My body speaks with and through colour and words and my practice is to abandon attachment to outcome or ideas of what painting and writing are 'supposed' to be and emerge consciously in a process of creative expression and embodiment.

Situating this dimension of bodyspeak within aesthetic inquiry is very important for trauma and grief studies, because, in my experience, art *is* the language of trauma. Yet, to fully explore how our childhood traumas and woundings speak aesthetically through the body, we also must acknowledge what so often accompanies the depths of that wounding: grief. Especially for adults healing with childhood trauma, the reality of living with and tending to grief is almost always left out of attachment-based models, which dominate theories of healing childhood trauma (Gildea, 2021). When we invite our childhood wounds to the surface of our adult lives, especially if that trauma involves wounding within the family, we need to acknowledge the presence of grief and allow it the transformative space it demands. This may be grief for the lives or loved ones we lost, for the childhoods we did not get to have, for the parents or caretakers that could not love us, for our bodies that still carry the scars and living threats of violence and the various other situations that touch or consume our childhoods. Moreover, because of the nature of implicit memory, which often rejects explicit language and cognitive categorization (Gildea, 2020; Caruth, 2010), where implicit memory is often how trauma is stored in the body and psyche (Levine, 2010), such grief is entwined with our deep wounding and that wounding is entangled in all parts of our adult identities. Yet, what if that entanglement is not meant to be systematically untangled and categorized as western psychology or most quantitative research models often seeks to do? What if that entanglement is itself a rootedness of being that can and does speak rationally when it is given the proper language and/or mediums to speak through?

My experience as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), as a facilitator of community art groups and as a feminist trauma theorist has been to encounter that traditional paradigms of trauma work fail survivors and they fail to culturally educate society about the reality of living with the embodiment of trauma. This is especially true for those of us living with the memories of experiences that our culture continues to silence such as CSA. Like Bonnie Burstow (2013), I find most practices are not survivor-centred and often work to align survivors toward paradigms of identity and functionality that are not based on the reality of having survived violence. This is a structure of meaning-making which feminist trauma theorists connect to the inherent colonial and patriarchal roots of western psychology (Afuape, 2011). Moreover, and more directly related to my topic here, traditional psychotherapeutic practices do not integrate into their paradigms of interpreting data the need to use languages and mediums that exceed the limits of explicit language. If I am to 'speak' of my childhood trauma, which I must do in order to reclaim all the parts of my identity that are entwined with it such as my

ability to love, trust and form relationship with myself and others, then I need to be able to speak of it in a language that facilitates the complexity of my body and psyche's history of love. We need mediums of expression and communication that are capable of thriving within the liminality that comes when early experiences of love are conditional on silence and/or abuse, be that abuse within the family or systemically incorporated into normative culture through racism, sexism and/or classicism.

I return to the image above and I invite a practice of poetic inquiry to engage with the colours and textures as I receive them now at this moment in my life. In my own practice and as I teach poetic inquiry, the goal is not to write "good" poetry. The goal is none other than to develop a practice of creative expression that invites the body and psyche to speak as we give a transformative presence to that which emerges from the depths, layers and entangled realities of selfhood. In fact, aligned with mindfulness practice, the goal is to detach from any attachment to outcome as I surrender to the creative act, which may or may not be pleasant, difficult, an all-consuming flow of a creative outpour or a staccato-like march that drags and irritates me. The art-making experiences change from session to session as may our relationship to the embodied realities to which we give form. As for the art pieces that are produced, much like journal entries, I can reflect on them, work with them, integrate them into new artwork or arts-based research or I can allow them to be a practice of presence-making and never visit them again. The process though remains that which cultivates an on-going conscious embodiment of selfhood, where no expectation or static determinants are put on this notion of selfhood.

See her seeing me in shadow and in light. Her breath I know is deep within my womb. And yet, the touch of her divine knowing escapes my thought again and again. I am sent downward to the depths. My psyche trying to break free.

*Her breath trickles down my spine
the wound opens.*

*She is me is they is all of us bound together in the moment light sheds itself upon the tragic loss
of mother, brother, sister, father—
loved ones*

*hanging
on the edge of despair*

forgiving

Love

the will to rise one more day out of bed and meet the morning, her breath trickling down.

The 'She' that emerges in this space of poetic inquiry as I engage aesthetically with the above image connects me to the last topic that my title brings into these considerations of autoethnographic aesthetics: spirituality. I have found that over a decade of regularly practicing aesthetic inquiry and by exploring the connections between art and body-based ways of knowing, I have, often quite unintentionally, encountered and healed deep spiritual parts of my being as well. This makes sense given the established connection between aesthetic discourse and implicit memory mentioned above. We often discuss implicit memory only in terms of trauma and experiences too violent to be recalled by 'ordinary' and explicit cognition. However, heightened emotions such as intense joy and mystical experiences that signal a deep union of soul are also often discussed as ineffable and requiring art for representation and expression (Knill, Nienhaus

Barba, and Fuchs-Knill, 2004). By allowing myself to come into a practice of aesthetic inquiry that does not attach itself to the outcome of image or poem, nor to the limited and often patriarchal and colonial frameworks of meaning-making that define normative standards of such evaluation (Gildea, 2020), I have discovered the beauty that emerges when I do not need to identify my implicit, body-based self as ‘traumatic’ and in need of fixing. I discover a depth of womanhood that transcends the categorical demarcation of explicit language, what Leanne Betasmosake Simpson (2013) describes as “cognitive imperialism.”

The ‘She’ that emerged in my psychospiritual and psychopoetic frameworks of meaning making through the process of poetic inquiry is an enactment of my spirituality. This female presence of the divine, however, is not an abstraction I model myself to from spiritual or religious texts, she is the earth-fleshed embodiment of a womanhood grown from a girlhood forged in fire and pain. This is an earth-based and art-mediated spirituality that speaks through artmaking and for me, it is also a form of grief tending. For grief recedes as I come into creative presence with the complex parts of my identity that exceed the normative language and culture that continues to silence survivors of complex childhood trauma. Moreover, through creative and transformative act that is artmaking, I find empowerment to speak and create on my own terms.



‘I wake in love’, mixed media

*Perfected rhythm
waxing and waning
such inherent fullness
of evening’s moon
held deeply

in this body’s life-*

*giving
stain*

of crimsoned womanhood.

*Inhale, she wakes.
Exhale, she sleeps.*

When I read the above verse that emerges from my poetic inquiry practice with this image made a few years after the first one I shared, I reflect on the reality that grief and childhood trauma are extremely complex. They are entwined with our adult sense of the world and yet I myself along with many other feminist survivors and trauma theorists (Burstow, 2015) do not align with diagnostic models of PTSD and standard interpretations of ‘flight or fight.’ Yes, absolutely, I need to calm my nervous system and I have learned to do that through mindfulness practice rooted in Zen Buddhism, which, unlike Western psychotherapeutic mindfulness practices that still seek to translate my experiences into categories of understanding and diagnosis, invites me to be with the spaciousness of my being and my trauma where the two need not be separated. I, like Aurora Levins Morales (2019), am not interested in theories of PTSD, because it is not my response to extreme violence that is in need deep recalibration. It is the culture of interlocking systems of power and violence in capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, and white supremacy that bell hooks (2014) showed always impact our understandings of identity and meaning making. We can trace our culture’s and trauma theory’s reliance on explicit categories of meaning making to patriarchal renderings of knowledge. Yet, even some feminism as a theory-making act of liberation fails to realize how it perpetuates silencing through a reliance on the explicit and categorical while abstractly speaking about the body without actually inviting the body to speak for itself. Traditional research theorizes about the body just as it theorizes about CSA survivors rather than allowing embodiment to intervene and guide us to where we need to go. Speaking through aesthetic inquiry and body-based communications may not ‘make sense’ at first, but, by developing a practice of aesthetic inquiry we gradually shift our consciousness toward more embodied and creative ways of knowing, which of course, integrate with our theory and explicit cognition, creating a hybrid and survivor-centred paradigm of healing and meaning making.

Art, be it poetry, visual art, movement, music or inter-modal practices of various aesthetic modalities, is not restricted to the explicit and by extension to an inherently limited scope of meaning making. Art can hold paradox and tension and it can allow new life to emerge from within those tensions. Art can represent the reality of what it is to reside within the space between the exhale and the inhale and to feel from within the body how that space is a sanctuary that simultaneously includes my own sense of ever-changing womanhood and the infinite interconnection of all beings that is a state of belonging inherent to my own creative being. This is a state of belonging most dependent, I believe, not on the mother’s heartbeat as traditional attachment theory would claim, but on the heartbeat that psychology fails to include in its scope of healing and belonging, the primary life-giving heartbeat of this earth.

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Cool Autoethnography

Christopher N. Poulos
University of North Carolina—Greensboro
cnpoulos@uncg.edu

Abstract

I always wanted to "cool." Instead, I think I was born anxious. I came into this world shaking in my boots, before I even wore boots. For many years, I worked to deny, to suppress, to banish my constant companion: the anxiety that lived deep in my gut, in my heart, and in my head. Long ago, as part of dealing with this problem, I began writing. And I have been writing ever since. And I noticed this: When I write autoethnography, I am free of my constant companion...if only for a brief time.

Keywords

anxiety, autoethnography, cool, writing

I always wanted to be "cool." As a kid, I wanted to be a cowboy (or a pirate, or a spy, or an athlete, or a comic book superhero, or a space-pirate-cowboy)—not a guy who rides horses, or captains ships, or sneaks around, or defeats bad guys, or plays sports, or travels in space...not *really*—but that hero I saw everywhere I turned, on big screens and small ones, the one who stared coolly at the face of evil, or danger, or pain, or competition, or any obstacle, really, and didn't flinch.

Instead, I think I was born anxious. I came into this world shaking in my boots—before I even wore boots.

It's true: I *wanted* to be steely-eyed. But I was, instead, a bit twitchy. I have struggled off and on with pervasive anxiety for as long as I can remember. I can feel IT throughout my body, but most often it lives in the pit of my stomach. *IT* has manifested in many ways: As free-floating nervousness, as shaky hands, as a gnawing in my stomach, as a cracking voice, as just plain squeamishness, as paralyzing fear, as anger. It has plagued me in ways that I am only now coming to grips with.

Yes, I was an anxious little kid, and I have silently carried anxiety throughout my life. I always had a good cover, though. Or at least tried to. When I was young, I was the quiet one. I know, hard to believe. But I figured if I faded into the woodwork, nobody would notice my weakness. I was wrong, of course, but it worked for a little while.

You see, I grew up in a time when the pressure was strong. Boys were to be "men"—which meant that you never let them see you sweat, never showed a weakness, never cried, never "broke down," never seemed afraid. So I was silent. Until that stopped working.

Then I turned inward. The anxiety stayed in my gut, while I performed a different face for the outside world.

Still, not cool, not steely-eyed, not confident. Just adequate. I was a pretender. Deep inside me...The existentialists called in *angst*, or *dread*, or even *despair*, or in Sartre's starkest terms, *nausea*. Camus wrote of the question of suicide as a possible solution, and I contemplated

that possibility as a way out. But he also wrote of Sisyphus and his rock as a metaphor for our existential predicament. Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to ceaselessly roll a large rock up a hill, only to have it roll back down.

Push. Roll. Walk. Repeat.

My rock is Anxiety.

But even Sisyphus has his moments of freedom. Walking back down to retrieve his rock, he has time to reflect on his fate, and to choose against dread. Yes, like Sisyphus on his walk down the hill, I have had moments of brief respite. And then my rock is back, and I am straining, pushing, heaving back up my hill.

For many years, I worked to deny, to suppress, to banish my constant companion, my rock, this anxiety that lived deep in my gut, in my heart, and in my head. I have sought all manner of escape and treatment to rid myself of this plague. I have been addicted to work, to various substances, to success, and to external rewards. I have been diagnosed with depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and anxiety disorder. I have been traumatized by physical violence and at least one major car accident, and all of this has had consequences. I have lived through much loss—4 deaths in 18 months, then 7 deaths in 11 months, then 5 deaths in 3 months. I know the valley of the shadow of death pretty well.

All that death can make a person nervous. That's why the Psalmist vowed: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

No fear. That's it.

Yeah, right.

My body has, off and on, been riddled with pain. I have often wondered if my anxiety actually *invites* such things into my life. Like some sort of bonus: If you're going to be anxious anyway, you might as well be terrified to drive a car, or walk in a crowd, or stand in a line. I have worked with psychotherapists, counselors, acupuncturists, massage therapists, chiropractors, osteopaths, gurus, channelers, fakirs, breatharians, 12 step programs, preachers, Reiki practitioners, Jin Shin Jyutsu therapists, Qi Gong therapists, channelers, body talk practitioners, Karate Senseis, yoga gurus, doctors, allergists, and friends. I have been treated with EMDR, LENS, TENS, and many other alternative modes of treatment. I have practiced yoga, meditation, and intensive exercise. I have changed my diet. I have sought out the sources, the roots, the causes of this condition, and I have sought cures, both temporary and permanent. I have self-medicated, I have been therapized, and I have taken prescribed medications.

Some of this work of discovery and recovery has helped.

Long ago—really, I think, as part of dealing with this existential problem—I began writing. And I have been writing ever since. And I noticed this: When I write, I am free of my constant companion...if only for a brief time. That is, when I am in the *flow* of writing, when it is moving along, when my fingers are groovin' across the keyboard, I'm golden. My anxiety fades into the background.

So I write.

And I write.

And I write some more.

And, along the way, I begin to wonder...can I *win*? Can I send anxiety packing? Will I someday be *cool*? Or will I always be dogged by this "friend" of mine?

And then one day, it occurs to me that maybe I should make real friends with it, help it cool its heels, reassure it, help it learn to chill. But there it is, rearing up in all its power, flexing

its twitchiness...this monster is relentless, and this pandemic reality we've been living these last two years has NOT improved it.

In fact, during the initial COVID lockdown, I was fine. I was home. I was in my refuge, with the love of my life and our wonderful protector dogs. But as time wore on, I felt the pervasive anxiety in our world seeping in through the cracks. I realized it wasn't just me. It was everywhere. It was panxiety (pan anxiety, pandemic anxiety, everyone's anxiety).

And apparently, Anxiety crept deeper into my cells, and reignited that other nightmare sci-fi scenario that lives in my body, the chicken pox virus (varicella-zoster), which has lain dormant inside me since I was a small child who suffered only a mild case of chicken pox (before there was a vaccine). Shingles (what a hideous name), my friends, is no laughing matter. The pain woke me right up and I knew immediately what it was. I had a flare up about 17 years ago.

Ouch. And yes, I took meds, and yes, it died back down without dying completely, waiting like the creepy alien life form that it is for its next opportunity. And no, the vaccine doesn't kill it; it just keeps it at bay for a bit. And no, I didn't get one. I was thinking about it, about to get that little shot, but COVID had hit, and we were all shut down.

So the creepy little bastards waited for their opportunity. And pounced.

Apparently, "stress" triggers the virus. Damn. I have never felt so unsettled in my life. Good old ambient anxiety. Cell-munching anxiety. Immune system compromising anxiety.

So, knowing it was waiting for another opportunity, I went searching for yet another cure. And I caught myself writing. Again.

I wanted to write my way into and through anxiety, with an eye toward transcendence, or at least escape.

And this got me to reading—or actually re-reading—Paul Tillich. Tillich wrote a lot about this topic. He wrote a whole book about it, in which he poses a simple counter-measure to the intense anxiety that comes from the stark realization that human life is finite, that, well, we're all gonna die: *The courage to be*. The courage to be is the courage—the *heart*—that rises up in us as we face our fate. I must embrace this courage, and walk through the fear.

So I muster up my courage, and I write. By the way, a couple of years ago, Susan and I finally got around to watching the Netflix show “Dear White People.” We figured white people should *have* to watch that show at some point. The coolest thing is that it's a multi-layered media event. It's like one of those Russian nesting dolls I put on my mantle at Christmas, which happens to be a Santa within a Santa within a Santa. Dear White people is a TV show about a radio show that takes the form of a letter...a collage of media genres I cannot help but love. Since I was coming off of 5 deaths in 3 months, I was having a time of it. My grief was hitting me hard, and anxiety came knocking in the form of dreams about my own death. I had to do *something*.

So I wrote a letter to Death, trying to put Death (and his pal Anxiety) in the proper place. Like I said, death was knocking around my life a bit too often, and I decided to address it directly, to see if we could come to an understanding.

So, in that spirit, I've written an autoethnographic letter about anxiety to Anxiety, in the hope of coming to an understanding.

Dear Anxiety,

You are my constant companion, though I would hardly call you a friend. More like an uninvited but unshakable sidekick. You follow me around like a nervous untrained unruly puppy,

nipping at my heels. Sometimes, I think you're just always going to be there. I've come to take you for granted almost. Oh, sure, I've tried my best to banish you. I've wanted to kick you to the curb for as long as I can remember. I've worked very hard—in every way I could think of—to dump you.

And then, last spring, I decided to try a new approach. I tried to make friends with you, by writing a collaborative autoethnography with you. I presented it at ICQI 2021, remember? Well, I get it if you don't. You're even twitchier than me. Obviously, you weren't paying attention.

Let's face it. You're kind of a pain in the ass. Actually, I've begun to think you're a bit of an asshole.

You're like that kid in 6th grade—Rusty, the one who never relented. The bully. The one who just couldn't seem to stop himself. A real classhole. He just punched people for fun. I'm sure he's in prison now, or worse. Someone likely knocked him off. Nobody liked him, after all. How could they? He was cruel. For no discernible reason.

Sure, he was probably wounded, likely passing on something he'd learned in his home. Like you, he had *issues*. But that's no excuse. *Somebody* needs to stop the cycle of violence. Apparently, that someone is me. So here's the deal. I'm not going to hang out with you, at all. We're done. I've been practicing my steely-eyed stare. And I'm getting good at it. I shot it at a guy in Costco the other day. He was wearing his mask under his chin, and I gave him the look. We made eye contact. He pulled his mask up. I've also practiced my self-defense moves, and my breathing, as I'm going to stare you down. I'm gonna be cool, whether you like it or not. I've got the black T-Shirt and the tattered jeans. I've got some kickass boots. I'm ready.

Like the hero of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, I will recite the litany against fear:

I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.

I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past, I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.

Best of all, have my little ultra-quick MacBook Pro with its brand new M1 chip, ready to hum along as fast as my fingers will fly. You think I need to kick your ass with physical force? Ha! I've got *soul* force. I've got my better, stronger, faster, cleaner, more powerful, more evocative, more moving, more compelling, friendlier friend...autoethnography. In other words, Anxiety, you've been replaced. From now on, every time you show up, I'm just going to *write* you away.

So take a powder. Ciao, baby. Hasta la vista. Goodbye. Get along. Go! You're not welcome here. *Auf Wiedersehen*. See ya. Wouldn't wanna be ya.

Seriously,
Christopher

Where does this leave us? We are left with a call.

A call to stay cool, to hang with the cool kids, to read and write and study autoethnography.

Yeah, I know. You thought we were all nerds. Well, we are. But nerds are the new cool. Like I said, we are left with a call.

A call to write our way through the valleys and the ditches, up the hills and across the ridges of life.

A call to make our way through our pain, our fear, our anxiety, our depression, our anger, our grief, our joy, our cynicism, our laughter, our loves and our broken loves, our relationships of all kinds, our trials and tribulations, our challenges and our triumphs...by writing autoethnography.

It's a call to make ourselves better, to make our writing better, to make our world better.

It's a call to follow our hearts, and as Ruth Behar would have it, break them, if only a little. And then to get back up again and write some more.

In closing, I have a simple argument for your consideration: There is nothing cooler than autoethnography. And no better cure for anxiety than writing your way through it.

So, there is good news: Y'all are now part of the cool kids.

What could possibly be the bad news? Well, I'm here to say that writing autoethnography is *hard*. But that's not really bad news, is it? Everything worthwhile requires effort and grit and perseverance and determination. Life itself means making our way up the mountains and through the valleys. Hell, you might even be walking through the valley of the shadows.

But there's this: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*

Stay cool, everyone!

And keep writing.

Autoethnography and Tojisha-Kenkyu (Self-Directed Studies) in Japan: Rethinking Positionality

Yusuke Katsura
Osaka University
omameboys@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, I will introduce the current state of research on the self in Japan and show how the discussions and models therein provide an opportunity to reconsider our practices and positionalities. First, I will overview the research on oneself under the name of Tojisha-Kenkyu, in contrast to autoethnography which is not sufficiently recognized in the country yet. Second, I will argue that the concept of the Tojisha, which has multiple meanings, has led to a debate on positionality. Third, I will show how the “toroidal Island model” presented by psychiatrist Naoko Miyaji helps situate the experiences and positions of autoethnographers.

Keywords

Tojisha, Positionality, Toroidal Island model, Japan, Subaltern

Introduction

In the 2000s, when an increasing number of academic researchers in the Anglosphere adopted autoethnography as a research methodology, patients in Japan undertook research themselves in the medical care and social welfare fields under the name of “Tojisha-Kenkyu.” The Japanese word “Tojisha (当事者)” is often used as a key concept in academic research. The Japanese word “Kenkyu” means study or research. For “Tojisha,” it is difficult to find an equivalent word in English because it has various meanings, including insider, stakeholder, research subject, patient, concerned person, minority, victim, involved party, and so on.

This paper introduces Tojisha-related studies in Japan and explores what autoethnographers can learn from them. First, I provide a brief overview of Tojisha-Kenkyu and autoethnography in Japan. While autoethnography is not well known in the country, research on the self has increased in the past decade, under the name of Tojisha-Kenkyu. I will then describe how Tojisha-related arguments can provide rich insights into autoethnographic research. Specifically, I argue that autoethnographers may become more aware of their positions through the psychiatrist and medical anthropologist Naoko Miyaji’s “toroidal island model,” which highlights the complexity of positionalities of traumatized Tojishas and their supporters.

1. Autoethnography and Tojisha-Kenkyu in Japan

In Japan, papers using autoethnography have been published in recent years, but they had been unacknowledged as an academic methodology. I submitted my master's thesis using autoethnography in 2019. During the writing process, I was often asked, “How is it different from autobiography?” and was told that “it is difficult to accept it as an academic method,” and so on.

It was not until 2020 that an academic book with ‘autoethnography’ in its title was published (Ishihara 2020). It was written by ‘a multi-racial researcher of Ainu and Wajin plus’¹. At present, autoethnography is gradually gaining attention in Japanese academia.

However, several books titled "Tojisha-Kenkyu" have already been published since 2005. The word Tojisha has multiple meanings, as stated before. Tojisha-Kenkyu is translated as “science of self (Kumagaya 2016),” “research that interested persons conduct on themselves (Rurika 2019),” “self-directed research program (Mukaiyachi et al. 2019),” and so on and is often written as Tojisha-Kenkyu in English². When I talk about autoethnography, people frequently ask, "What is the difference between Tojisha-Kenkyu and autoethnography?" Hence, there is a need to combine both contexts to understand and show the possibility of focusing on our own experiences as social practices as well as academic methodologies.

2. What is Tojisha-Kenkyu?

The main difference between autoethnography and Tojisha-Kenkyu is that the former has been mainly developed by academic researchers, while the latter was originally started by patients, social workers, and medical practitioners, and gradually adopted by researchers.

Tojisha-Kenkyu is said to have originated in the "Bethel House," a community activity center for people with mental disabilities in Hokkaido. In 1995, they held the first conference to present their hallucinations and delusions, and in the early 2000s, they started practicing under the name "Tojisha-Kenkyu."

One of the main methods employed in Tojisha-Kenkyu is to invent a “name for personal illness,” such as Gencho-san (Mr/Ms. Auditory Hallucination), in which patients name their symptoms to externalize and share them with their peers (Ishihara 2015:31).

In other cases, they externalize and share their symptoms by positioning them as "guests" or "phenomena". For example, someone may say, “When I go to work in the morning, everyone makes fun of me and talks badly about me,” which is replaced with “When I go to work in the morning, I am visited by a ‘guest’ who thinks everyone is talking badly about me (Tojisha-kenkyu Network 2019).” So, it is the guest who thinks that way and not the person themselves. Others can also ask, “Is your guest or Mr/Ms. Hallucination doing fine today?” This way, the symptoms can be externalized and shared with others.

3. Possibility of the Tojisha as an Academic Concept

As evident, Tojisha-Kenkyu began as a non-academic practice, but academic discourse has supported it. One of the most influential concepts is Tojisha autonomy (individual autonomy) proposed in the context of disability studies.

Nakanishi and Ueno (2003) sought to shift Tojisha from its traditional objective attributes to a subjective sense of self with respect to the surrounding environment.

According to them, "a person is identified as Tojisha when they understand what their needs are and sees the current state as deficient and has the conceptual ability to create a different reality." These Tojishas are in contrast to experts who are "third parties who are supposed to be able to make more suitable judgments about the person's condition and interests on behalf of the Tojisha."

¹ The author’s self-designation (Mai Ishihara, personal communication, January 2022).

² For example, there is a laboratory in Tokyo university that is called the *Tojisha-Kenkyu Laboratory* in English. <https://touken.org/>

Since Nakanishi is a quadriplegic and a leader in the movement of people with disabilities, and Ueno is one of the most famous feminists and sociologists in Japan, this conceptualization that emphasizes Tojisha's agency has influenced the academic and public discourse and helped shift it from decisions dominated by experts to those made by the Tojishas themselves. This transition has empowered social minorities, patients, and other Tojishas who are willing to speak out.

Today, Tojisha-Kenkyu is being adopted not only in medical care and social welfare but also in sociology, pedagogy, gender studies, organizational studies, disaster research, and so on. It can be considered as a suitable counterpart of autoethnography; which has been developed from sociological or anthropological methodologies of social practice (Figure1).

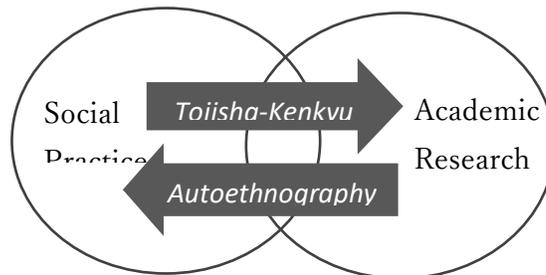


Figure 1. Tojisha-Kenkyu and Autoethnography.

4. Toroidal Island Model and Autoethnography

4.1 An overview of the model

However, the spread of Tojisha concept has also created problems: when more people, including researchers, start talking about their own experiences as a Tojisha, it becomes difficult to know who the "true" Tojisha is and the voices of the oppressed are overshadowed. The issue has sparked debate and led to the publication of a book titled "You Are Not a Tojisha" (Miyachi and Imao eds. 2007).

There have been many discussions to understand this complex situation regarding positionality, narratives, and representation: to seek a more suitable research process. Specifically, "toroidal island model," proposed by Naoko Miyaji, a psychiatrist and anthropologist, offers many possibilities. The model is based on the shape of a toroidal island, which differs from a normal island as it has a sea inside (Figure 2).

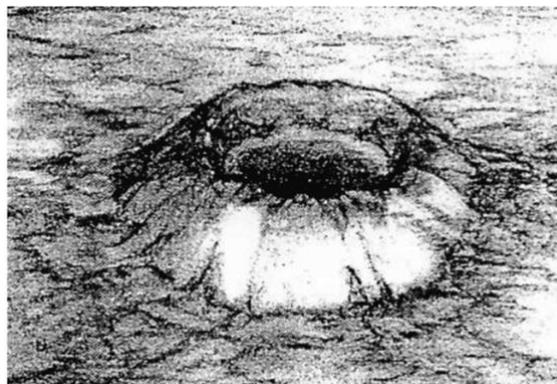


Figure 2. Toroidal island. (Miyaji 2014:138)

Figure 3 depicts the lateral and overhead views of the toroidal island model. There are ridges on both sides and an inner sea at the center.

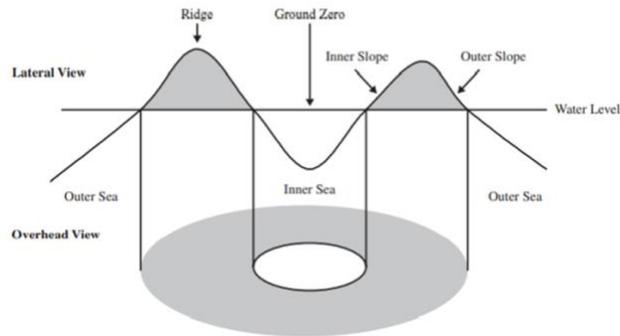


Figure 3. Lateral and overhead views of the toroidal island. (Miyaji 2014:139)

Figure 4 is an enlarged view of the right ridge.

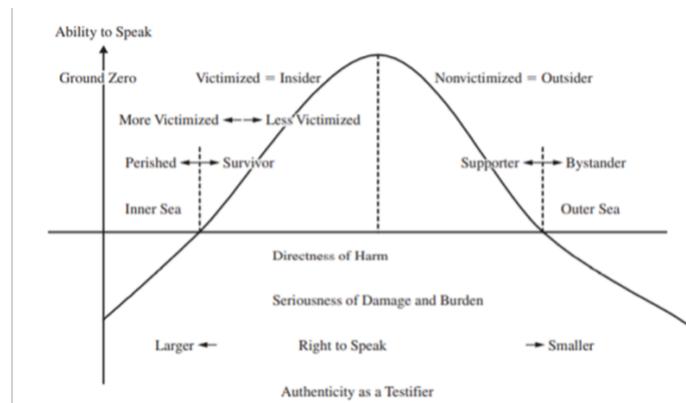


Figure 4. Detailed right lateral view of the toroidal island. (Miyaji 2014:140)

The left side represents the Tojishas, and the right side represents non-Tojishas. Since Miyaji specializes in trauma care, the model shows the relationship between Tojishas as victims and non-Tojisha as allies, supporters, or bystanders. Generally, it is believed that the more a person experiences, the more they can talk about it, and the more their testimony becomes legitimate. It can be portrayed as an island with no sea inside. However, in this model, the more a person experiences (the further they go inside), the less they can talk about it, and finally, there is an inner sea from where they cannot speak. It is there that subalterns, as conceptualized by Spivak, and those who have died because of their trauma and burden, are situated. Miyaji says, “The inner sea is a sea of the dead, the space into which victims sink. The nearer to the zero point, the less chance there is that they have left traces of their existence.” (Miyaji 2014:140)

Some of the Tojishas on the left try to speak out their experiences through Tojisha-Kenkyu, and other ways, and the researchers and supporters on the right try to listen to them. However, the steep slope shows the task’s difficulty for both sides, and the headwind, criticism, or indifference from society may push both downward at any time into the inner and outer seas.

As we have seen, this model is useful for structurally understanding the dynamics regarding positionality, Tojishanness, and the ability to speak.

4.2 Situating our experiences and positionalities

Now, we focus on some types of autoethnography discussed by Ellis and Bochner (2000) within this model. First is native ethnography, which aims to describe the experiences of the marginalized or the subordinated to the outside or to society. They are researchers situated inner slope and trying to climb up to the top so that their voices can be heard. Here, Tojisha refers to native or minority researchers. Interestingly, native ethnography is sometimes translated into Japanese as the "ethnography of Tojishas."

Next, autoethnography by complete member researchers focuses on the social or cultural group they belong to, often including how they become one of them. This process describes their positionality transition starting from the outer slope at first as a researcher. Then, little by little, they become a Tojisha or an insider of a particular group that is usually regarded as a target of research.

Thirdly, the personal evocative narrative type of autoethnography refers to more individual incidents such as disease, accidents, oppressed experience, the passing of a family member, and so on. They also start from the non-Tojisha positionality as a researcher but try to objectify their Tojisha-ness in their personal experience.

In any case, reflexivity is important for situating and contextualizing our research so that our discourses are more suitable and does not oppress people's voices around the inner sea. The experience of harm, which is directly related to pain, hardship, and trauma, is difficult for the Tojisha individuals to talk about. Miyaji describes those who are closest to the inner sea in the following way:

Farther out from the dead are those who have barely survived but lost their minds and capacity to speak. Some are totally mute; others emit strange sounds. Some cannot stop shaking and others just stand there, rigid. Others, closer to the water's edge, mumble "meaningless" words, scrawl undecipherable figures, or try to make sound and rhythm. There may be someone frenziedly dancing, hair flailing. They are at the inner sea's edge, drifting back and forth in the waves. (Miyaji 2014:140)

Even if they can describe their lived experiences and emotions, people in these situations cannot be fully depicted in ordinary academic language.

However, some of their experiences can be shared through literary autoethnography with poetry and fiction, and also music, performance, or other forms of art. Even if they cannot talk or express themselves, they could engage in collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al. 2013) with people who are higher up the slope or on the ridge and can speak out by themselves.

Using this model, the self and one's own agency can be located within the structure, visually and physically, as an autoethnographer, whether as an individual or a collaborative subject, including the mechanism that makes people voiceless. Moreover, it is open to various metaphors, and can be applied in different contexts.

Conclusion

Autoethnography is not fully acknowledged in Japan and our position as autoethnographers is questioned. But discourses and models around the inclusive concept of Tojisha (insider, stakeholder, research subject, patient, victim, minority, native, and so on) are being developed. Although every person can speak as a Tojisha in some way, we should be careful and conscious of the ground from which we speak, since there are many Tojishas who

cannot speak due to the severity of their experiences. Referring to Tojisha-related models and discourses may lead to a more reflective and collaborative practice of autoethnography.

The challenge for the future is to explore the nature of the Tojisha more concretely and profoundly, and further, not only as individuals but also as relational subjects. As an attempt to do so, the other papers in ISAN2022 (Takagi, ISAN, 2022; Zlazli et al., ISAN, 2022) will present narratives from multiple perspectives.

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Dancing the Body—Taiwanese Professional Acrobat’s Body Performance

Hsienwei Kuo
National Tainan Institute of Nursing
kuohsienwei@gmail.com

Chinfang Kuo
Aletheia University
au4423kuo@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper aims to understand the display and interpretation of the physical technique of Taiwanese professional acrobats during preparation, rehearsal and performance, and then to elaborate on the actor's levels of the body. The results show that the performance of acrobats includes three different physical levels. They are skillful, characterized and artistic bodies. The three different physical levels are caused by the social environment, organizational system and personal habits of the actors. Most acrobats pay more attention to the ‘precision’ and ‘difficulty’ of skill and ignore the emotional and spiritual levels so that they lack vitality, emotion, intentionality and logic on the stage. Therefore, it is a big challenge for Taiwan acrobats to comprehend the spiritual power and affection in the skill and role-based physical performance.

Keywords

Acrobat, technique performance, body levels

Introduction

The artistic display of the body produces changes in different forms due to the impact of modern technology, multiculturalism and globalization. The acrobatic body performance is no exception. The improvement of physical technology, the integrity of the program plot, the transformation of physical quality, etc. are constantly evolving in practice and reflect the art of the unity of new, strange, refined and beautiful. (Kuo, 2007). The skill of the actor is composed of three hierarchical elements. The first element is the actor's personality, sensitivity, artistic ability and social role. The second is the social tradition and socio-historical background that formed this unique life; the last is the physiological application of physical skills based on non-daily life. (Chen, 2014) This article aims to understand the display and interpretation of the physical technique of Taiwanese professional acrobats during preparation, rehearsal and performance, and then to elaborate on the actor's levels of the body. Therefore, we take Taiwan Acrobatic Troupe as the research subject and collect cases through narrative research.

Narrative research

This paper takes narrative research as the core to write, interpret and analyze. Narratives are widely used in the relationship between contexts, and their related meanings have also changed accordingly (Dwyer, & Emerald, 2016). The way to conduct narrative analysis is that, the researcher must explore the structure, development, beginning and ending of a story, and focus on the current narrative of the research participants and meaning of the story (Ntinda, 2019).

Ford (2020) reminds us that the establishment of relationships with research participants can help improve reflection and reimagining of the narrative process. In other words, before narrating, an interactive relationship should be established between the researcher and the participant to better understand each other, and then enter the world of narrative situations of the research participants, so that the researcher could understand, interpret and discover the meaning of the life experience of the research participants (Kuo , & Kuo, 2017).

Therefore, the authors and the participants in this paper had a certain basis for interaction before narrating, so they could understand the terms in acrobatics culture. this paper follows the thematic sequence to elaborate and explain the context based on the physical preparation, rehearsal and performance described by the participants, and explore the meaning behind the story before specifically outlining the process.

Observation and interview in the field

Fieldwork and interviews were from November 2011 to October 2012. The asking for consent and signing an academic research report agreement before entering the research field. One of the authors first observed the training, rehearsal, and performance process of the troupe members in the field, and then chatted with the troupe members. Additionally, the researcher also went to the National Center for Traditional Arts, where the Taiwan Acrobatic Troupe had an invitation to perform on-site. The researcher stayed with the performers to observe their daily life and rehearsal. After all, acrobats have different body interpretations and expressions on the stage due to the displacement of time and space, and the performance and self-correction of the actors will shape different performance bodies.

Change of author status

Local people in the field put the researcher into a place, giving them a position; the researchers are also looking for a position of their own (Bih, & Shieh, 2005). As far as the current authors were concerned, they initially positioned themselves as an academic worker during fieldwork in 2011. However, when they officially entered the field, the strange impression of the Taiwan Acrobatic Troupe made the authors change their "identity". To most acrobats there, because the first author was their students, underclassmen, or upperclassmen, when the first author got along with them in this attitude/identity, the "fellowship" would return, which also brings a lot of convenience to the author's fieldwork. For example, participants were willing to share stories about their work and life situations with the authors, such as complaining about unfairness in their troupe's system, troupe members' welfare, gossiping about the members' daily lives, or chatting about how certain people are doing. Although some of these chatting topics have little or no direct correlation with the study, this process brings the relationship of the authors and the participants closer, and allows authors to participate in some activities such as guest performances. Participants would also ask for the author's opinions regarding evaluation methods or the development of the troupe.

An opportunity allowed the first author to regain the identity as an acrobat, which had been gone for a long time. Because the author had been observing the practice, rehearsal and performance of the Taiwan Acrobatic Troupe, one day an upperclassman suddenly said to the first author, "You used to be an acrobat. What good is it to keep observing? Why don't you just join it? It should be more practical to experience it for yourself." It suddenly became clear that, after all, only through the "local people's point of view" could we better engage in the cultural context and thought process of acrobats. Therefore, the identity of the first author was constantly

changing, and appropriate adjustments were made according to different contexts. In addition to participating as an "insider", the author also took the role of an "outsider" to observe the research field. The people and events happening in the field would help the fieldwork.

Participants

There were nine research participants (five males and four female), who were all alumni of Chinese Folk Arts Training Center or Troupe of Acrobatics of National Taiwan College of Performing Arts. They were all employed by the Taiwan Acrobatic Troupe (hereafter TAT) when participating in this study. They ranged from 33 to 70 years old, had studied eight school years, and had more than 15 years of practical experience (see Table 1). During the in-depth interview process, each participant would have varying degrees of experience and opinions based on age, special skills.

Table 1. Participants' Description

Alias name	Gender	Age	School years*	Seniority**	Special skills
Rongfu	Male	43	8	25	turning bowls, juggling, knives and fire circles, flag balancing arts
Hu Chong	Male	39	8	21	spinning bowls of water, handstand, hoops diving
Bo Tong	Male	50	8	31	Juggling, flag balancing arts, bicycle acrobatics
Chongyang	Male	70	6	54	magic, mouth acrobatics
Xiao Bao	Male	49	6	34	handstand, spinning bowls of water, flag balancing arts, whip arts
Yilin	Female	46	8	28	Juggling, diabolo, unicycle acrobatics, spinning plate
Yingying	Female	52	6	34	bicycle acrobatics, spinning plate, lion dance
Nian Ci	Female	47	8	29	spinning plate, diabolo, bicycle acrobatics, cigar box juggling
Zhi Ruo	Female	33	6	15	spinning plate, contortion act, spinning carpets

Notes: This table is prepared in 2021.

* School years refers to the time it takes for an actor to learn acrobatics from entering school to graduation.

**Seniority refers to the actual age of the performer minus their age at graduation.

Results

From the perspective of the physical level of the preparation and rehearsal process, the technicalization is mainly traditional, emphasizing the difficulty, proficiency and integrity of the movement technique. The rehearsal emphasizes the beauty of technical movements rather than movement forms, and emphasizes real kung-fu. However, less attention is paid to the arrangement of the arrangement and the form of the program. During their apprenticeship, acrobats were accustomed to passively receiving instructions, which indirectly hindered their creative thinking. The preparation process of characterization needs to understand the external environment and internal background of the character so that the character can be able to interpret delicately between each action. As far as acrobats are concerned, there is a lack of awareness of this part, and they often only focus on the performance of their own roles.

The discrepancy between the director's idea of character setting and choreography during the rehearsal process could cause the gap between actors' participation and cooperation. For example, the way in which the acrobats move will be different due to the physical habits of the acrobats. Therefore, when the director asks for the whole line, the actors often show an

indifferent attitude, or passively wait for the director to give orders. The condition of the artistic level is not only to show off physical skills, or emotional performance. It is more of a spiritual level of fit. On this basis, few acrobats' bodies are "artistic". The preparation process at this level includes the director's choreography concept and the actors' rehearsal. The whole process must go through discussion, running-in, trial, and tempering before entering the rehearsal process. Although acrobats understand their own shortcomings, they are often unable to adapt or escape from the old framework, so their performances remain technical behaviors, lacking the fit of the spiritual level. A handful of actors, through rehearsal after rehearsal, began to understand that the body had a memory and a continuous process of practice that transformed their performances from lifeless bodies to living bodies.

In terms of the performance process, if the technical actors have a good technical foundation in childhood, the fluency of the performance will be perfect. Characterized actors become more and more skilled with each performance, and their daily performances in a fixed pattern make their minds or bodies carry perseverance, endurance and toughness. Acrobats have to adjust their performance style and mood due to venue constraints, stage format, audience response, and know how to get around when things go wrong. Over time, a built-in interaction takes shape naturally. Acrobats mainly connect their bodies with props to create a sense of distance between the actors and the audience. Actors can only communicate with the audience with their eyes, and the interaction process is to narrate the storyline with the content of the characters. The audience has a sense of identity and is inspired in this specific atmosphere. It is worth mentioning that at this level of performance, acrobats will enter the state of "I am me, not me" due to the transformation and improvement of current emotions, but it is not easy to have this experience. Therefore, it is a big challenge for Taiwan acrobats to comprehend the spiritual power and affection in the skill and role-based physical performance.

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Expanding the Range of ‘Tojisha with Shogai (Person with a Disability)’ by the Phenomenological Concept of Setsumen: Through the Impairment/Disability Discourses and the Documentary Film ‘Boku to Otouto’

Yuto Takagi
Kyoto University
y.takagi1794@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, I will introduce the discourse on Shogai that encompasses terms such as impairment and disability, and then describe the range of what is defined as ‘Tojisha with Shogai (Person with a disability)’. Then, as a concept to extend the range, I introduce the phenomenological concept of Setsumen (the contact surface) by Takashi Kujiraoka, a developmental psychologist influenced by phenomenology. As a moment in time when Setsumen is established, I will present a scene from the documentary film ‘Boku to Otouto’, in which the author himself turned his camera on his younger brother, who is mentally disabled.

Keywords

Siblings, Disability, Phenomenology, Documentary Film, Tojisha

Introduction

In the studies of Tojisha with Shogai (障害の当事者 Tojisha with impairments, disability and so on), we first need to study Shogai before thinking about Tojisha. As Yusuke mentioned in his presentation ‘Autoethnography and Tojisha-Kenkyu (Self-Directed Studies) in Japan: Re-thinking Positionality’ in ISAN2022, Tojisha (当事者) is a polysemous concept and difficult to find an exact equivalent in English. Similarly, Shogai (障害) has many different meanings, including disability and impairment, and is difficult to translate into English. In this paper, firstly, I would like to introduce the background of the studies of Shogai and Tojisha with Shogai in Japan, and then explore these concepts and attempts to expand the concept of Tojisha. Then, I will introduce the concept of Setsumen (接面 contact surface) proposed by a developmental psychologist Takashi Kujiraoka who was strongly influenced by phenomenology. Setsumen is a concept that can expand the category of Tojisha. Finally, I will also introduce a scene in which Setsumen can be established from my documentary film, ‘Boku to Otouto’ (僕とオトウト Me and My Brother), in which I filmed my brother with a severe intellectual disability.

1. What is Shogai ? / Who is Tojisha?

Shogai (障害) is very polysemous. Firstly, Shogai means a simple barrier or hindrance (e.g. obstacle; obstruction; barrier; snag; hitch; difficulty). Secondly, The word Shogai used in the sense of Shogaisya (障害者 Person with a disability) has the same meaning as in impairments. In English, Shogai is divided into various concepts, such as disability and

impairments, and so on. But in Japan, except for specialists, people often refer to them collectively as Shogai.

Who, then, is Tojisha with Shogai (障害の当事者 Tojisha who has impairments, disability and so on)? The medical model of disability would define Tojisha with Shogai only as a person who has the impairment (Figure1).

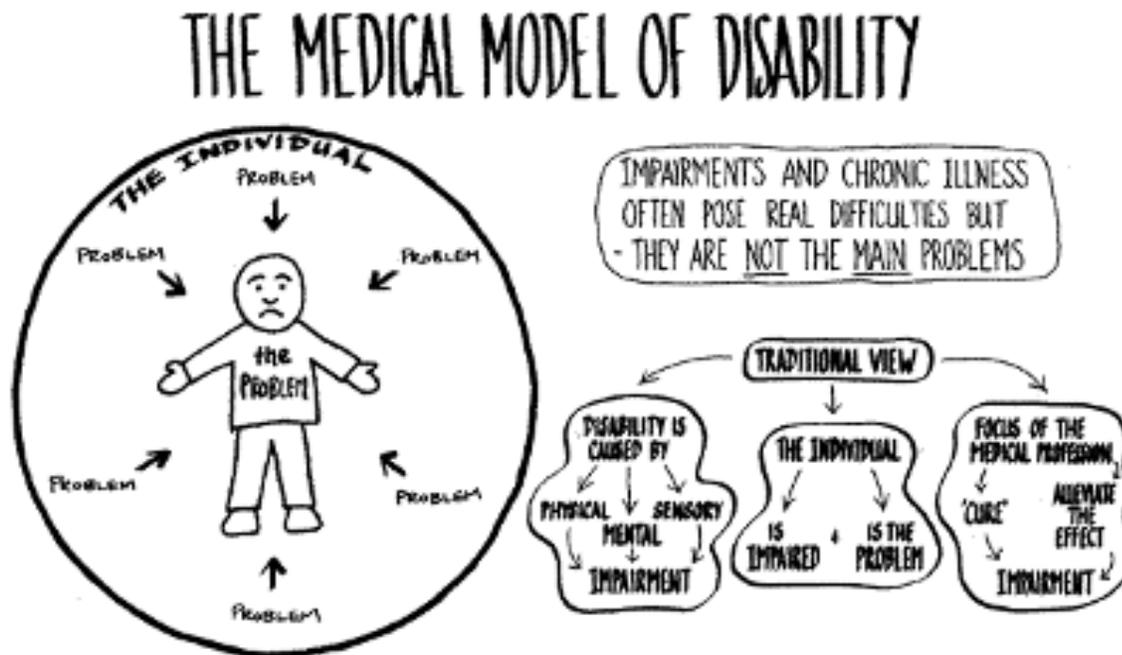


Figure 1. THE MEDICAL MODEL OF DISABILITY (NEURO*DIVERSITY Medical & Social Models of Disability. (n.d.))

What about the social model of disability? In a building without elevators, it is difficult for a person in a wheelchair to move from one floor to another. A person who suffers from a disability caused by the environment of a building without an elevator / would be a Tojisha with Shogai. In this sense, just as in the medical model, only the person who has the impairment is Tojisha with Shogai(Figure2).

However, this is not the only case that is considered Shogai in the social model of disability. Not only the person with the impairments but also the family members of the person with the impairments can be prejudiced and have a burden of care. In this sense, the family of the disabled person may also be Tojisha with Shogai .

On the other hand, there is a criticism that such an expansion of the concept of Tojisha with Shogai strengthens the rights of family members and diminishes the rights of the persons who have the impairments, taking us back to the previous era. This has led to an ongoing debate among disability studies scholars.

THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

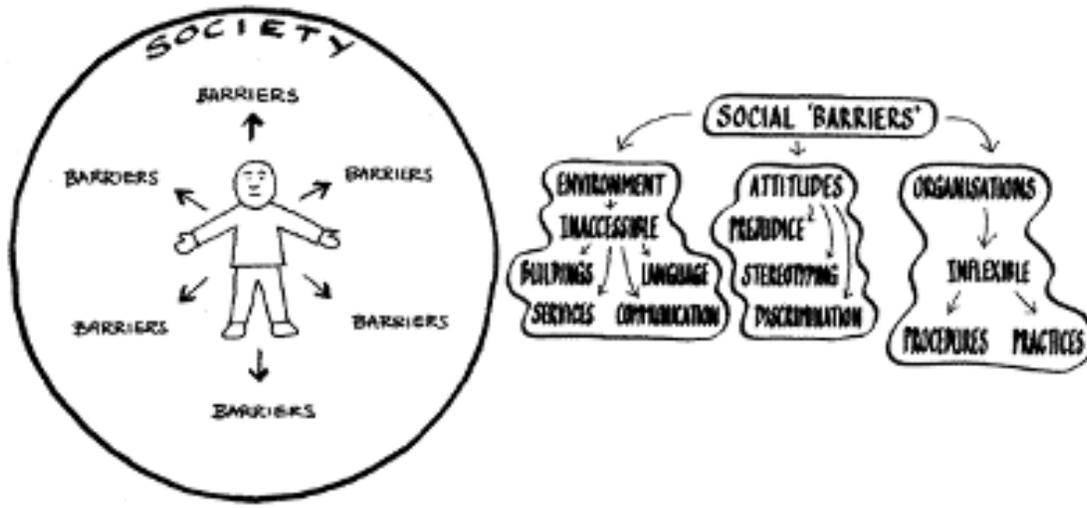


Figure 2. THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY
(NEURO*DIVERSITY Medical & Social Models of Disability. (n.d.))

2. Expanding Tojisha with Shogai through the phenomenological concept of Setsumen

However, researchers in disability studies are not the only people who study disability. In this article, I will introduce a developmental psychologist Takashi Kujiraoka's concept of Setsumen (接面 Contact Surface) and Tojisha at Setsumen (接面の当事者 Tojisha who share the Contact Surface).

Kujiraoka has been strongly influenced by phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and developmental psychologists such as Heinz Werner and Henri Wallon. Kujiraoka advocates the theory of relational development (関係発達論 Kankei Hattatsuron), which states that humans do not develop as individuals, but that parents and caregivers as 'nurturers (育てる者 Sodateru-mono)' and children as 'those who are nurtured (育てられる者 Sodaterareru-mono)' develop together.

From the standpoint of the theory of relational development, he argues the concept of Setsumen and refers to those who share Setsumen as Tojisha at Setsumen. Setsumen refers to a unique space and atmosphere created between people who share their feelings. Under the Setsumen paradigm, not only those with impairments are the Tojisha, nor only those with disabilities are the Tojisha. The siblings of the disabled are Tojisha at Setsumen who grow up with their disabled brothers and sisters, grieving and rejoicing together.

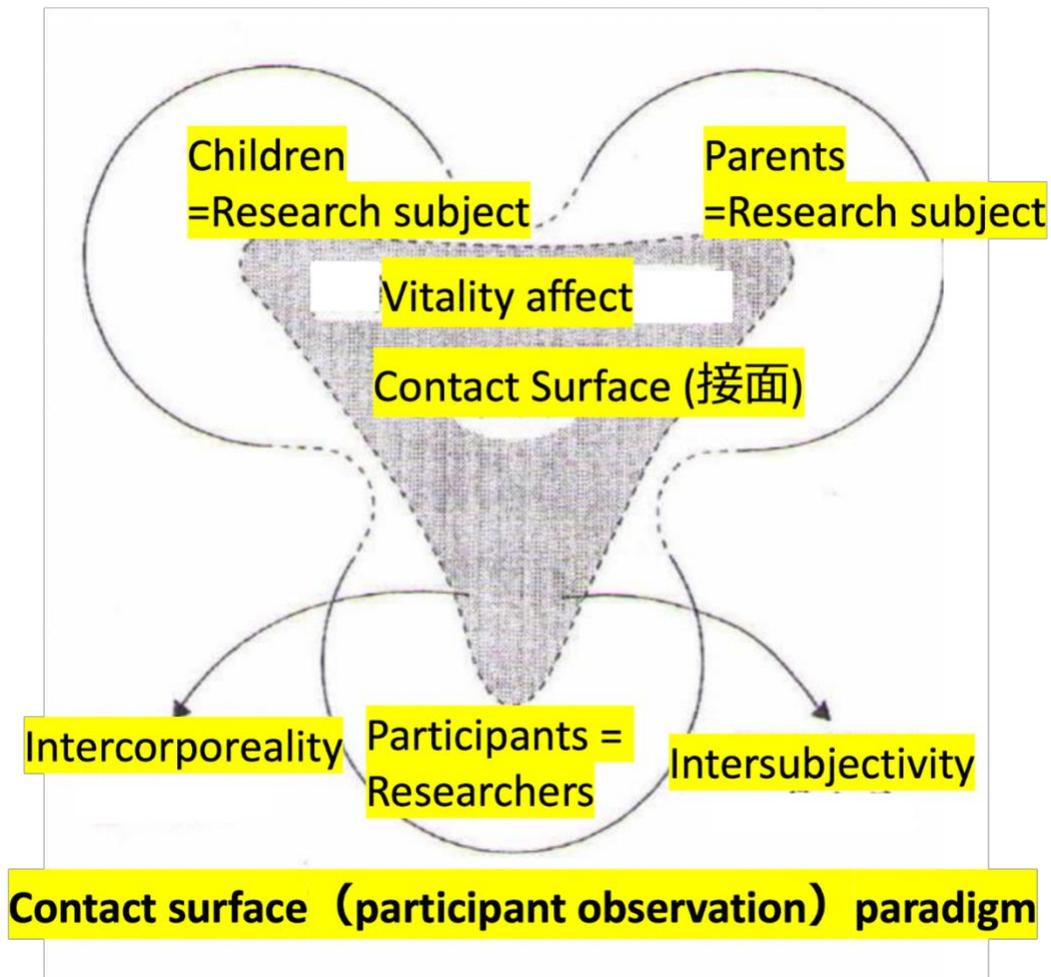


Figure 3. Setumen (Kujiraoka, 2016)

3. Exchanging our thoughts through Setsumen

In this article, I would like to introduce a scene from the movie I directed, ‘Boku to Otouto’ (僕とオトウト Me and My Brother), in which my brother and I exchanged our thoughts through Setsumen. This film is about my brother, who is severely mentally disabled, and me, his older brother. I shot and directed the film myself.



Figure 4. ‘Boku to Otouto’ (僕とオトウト Me and My brother)
 Director: Yuto Takagi
 Producer: Kaoru Ikeya (The Ants (2006) / Roots(2012))
 HP URL: <https://boku-to-otouto.com>
 Trailer URL(Subtitled in English): <https://youtu.be/W73rjiqygOs>

At the end of the film (URL: <https://youtu.be/-8aEkuWKjrU> This is a limited public URL. It is copyrighted material and may not be saved. Please do not share only the video link of this scene.), I am having a serious conversation with my brother. If I get married and start a new family if my parents die, should I live with my brother or not? As I continued to talk to my brother about these unresolved issues, he said to me, ‘Kishukusya’ (寄宿舍 school dormitory), ‘Midorien’ (みどり園 the facility where my brother was taken care of when he was in elementary school), ‘Pansy’ (パンジー Facilities to go to after graduating from school).

He did not say that he wanted to live with me. As a human being, he was much more prepared to live his own life than I was. Even with the most severe mental disability, my brother had a clear will of his own, and he was trying to communicate it to me. I felt as if he was telling me, ‘You can be content with yourself just the way you are.’

These brothers look out for each other. In the medical model of disability, only the younger brother is the Tojisha. In the social model of disability, my brother is not the only one who is the Tojisha, but also I am the Tojisha, the sibling of a disabled person, who is burdened by society to take care of the disabled.

However, in the social model of disability, each Tojisha is defined as a separate individual Tojisha due to the barriers brought by society. In that model, the thoughts of the Tojisha, where the subject and the object are one and the same, cannot be seen.

‘I want to be happy as I am. I want to be happy as I am, but I also want you to be happy as you are. My happiness includes my being happy and your being happy.’ This is the thought of Tojisha, Me and My brother.

Conclusion

The concept of Tojisha at Setsumen reveals the form of Tojisha that is established in the web of relationships between individuals, rather than defining the Tojisha as an independent individual. In the future, we should also study the real feeling of Shogai through Setsumen by qualitatively researching Shogai from a phenomenological standpoint like this, or by representing it in films. It is necessary for future research on Shogai to have the concept of Tojisha that allows people to value each other's real feelings.

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Identity, Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces, and the Indifference of Love*

Douglas L. Kelley
Arizona State University
douglas.kelley@asu.edu

Abstract

The present autoethnography explores two-plus years of identity deconstruction as well as passive and active identity reconstruction following a diagnosis of *acute myeloid leukemia* and eventual stem cell transplant. I cast these parallel identity processes in terms of centripetal force, a result of loss of volition expressed through victim/patient syndrome, monitoring fatigue, disability bias, isolation, and dehumanization; and, centrifugal force as characterized by an increase in volition and expressed through the contemplative practices of centering prayer, T'ai Chi, and guided imagery. I finish this exploration by casting centrifugal force as spaciousness and love arising from indifference.

Keywords

Identity, centrifugal force, centripetal force, indifference of love, spaciousness

*This manuscript contains excerpts from a larger manuscript. The complete manuscript is available at *American Journal of Qualitative Research*.

*Spinning. Slowly at first, so as to hardly notice. Suddenly strong,
a steady force pulling me inward...downward.
TIGHTER-SMALLER. Tighter-Smaller.
tighter-smaller. tighter-smaller.
Poof!
I am gone*

These opening lines describe the power of centripetal force as my sense of self was dismantled following a cancer diagnosis and eventual stem cell transplant in 2019. The following account uses aspects of analytic (Anderson, 2006; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Tracy, 2013) and evocative (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 67) autoethnography (also, see Kelley 2020) to investigate the deconstruction and reconstruction of my identity as affected by centripetal and centrifugal force. I finish this narrative romp by somewhat counterintuitively exploring the expression of centrifugal force as spaciousness and the indifference of love.

Initial Identity Deconstruction

The cancer diagnosis of acute myeloid leukemia (AML) catapulted me into a significant process of identity deconstruction. Shortly after finding myself admitted to Mayo Hospital, Phoenix campus, I heard the doctor's voice echo against the walls of my recalcitrant ego, "The results from the bone marrow biopsy indicate acute myeloid leukemia (AML)." I was shocked.

In disbelief. Wasn't this the same type of cancer my friend Ted had? I have been his friend and helper. He is the cancer patient, not I (see Beck 2021 for more on our friendship during this time).

I am active
I am healthy
I am physically fit
I have good social support
I provide good social support
I have a meaningful spirituality
I am FUN for God's sake!¹
I AM NOT the kind of person who gets cancer!!
I AM NOT a cancer patient!!!

I had no time to ease into a new way of understanding myself. Unlike developmental change that is somewhat predictable, I was unexpectedly thrust into a new way of experiencing life and my own identity. I felt my uniqueness as a human being begin to slip away. Overtime, I lost my hair, my weight, my clothes (exchanged for hospital gowns), and my energy. I became common. Part of the blood cancer herd. At times, simply a name on a chart. Most poignant was the reduction in volition I experienced during those first weeks. Volition - that which makes us so human. So unique. I was no longer in control over much of my life. My family and I sought to regain control by searching for choices and options other than the path that had been laid for me. But we soon learned that there are few alternative treatments for this aggressive cancer. I was given some choice as I had to consent to this line of therapy, but it felt much like someone holding a gun to my head and asking for my money - in theory, I had a choice, but practically there was little real volition.

An image that represents this loss of uniqueness and volition occurred a few years back. A friend and I were kayaking on the Salt River near Phoenix, Arizona. It was a remarkable fall day. We gazed at the beauty of the cliffs. We stared in awe at the wild horses feeding on the river's rich grasses. We joked and laughed as we heard the roar of the river increase around the bend. Then, rather unexpectedly, we were pulled against our will into a violent rapid for which we were unprepared (this level of torrent was not our map). We made choices as the river carried us beside and against a labyrinth of partially submerged rocks, but we were little match for the strength of the current. I was eventually swept near the eastern bank and into a large, low hanging mesquite tree, to which I clung as the river pulled my paddles, iPhone, and flotation device down the river.

So, too, my initial cancer experience - a forceful current moving me at will...against my will...down a river of great uncertainty and danger. I had choices along the way, but the initial force of the current was overwhelming, and there were rapids that were simply not on my map. I grasped desperately at what I could in order to stabilize me, but the river defined the moment, deconstructing much of what I knew as *self*.

¹ I do not take lightly the statement, "fun for God's sake." Perhaps in another writing I will explore the meaningful role of play in my life.

Centripetal Force and Identity Deconstruction

I didn't initially recognize that this time of identity deconstruction was influenced by centripetal force. As the opening lines to this essay reveal, I sensed my social/relational self becoming smaller. Pulling inward. Downward. Aspects of *me*, aspects that I valued and that served as identity anchors, were diminishing as I spiraled helplessly in a whirlpool of darkness and isolation - my social self becoming smaller and smaller as time progressed.

Five processes contributed to this centripetal identity spiral: victim/patient syndrome, monitoring fatigue, disability bias, isolation, and dehumanization (Kelley, 2020). *Victim/patient* syndrome for me was facilitated as doctors and nurses took control of my immediate experience, my all-too-real physical limitations, mask wearing (pre-COVID), and a sense of childlikeness – not in the beautiful sense of innocence, openness, and play, but instead through the experience of being less competent (frequently knocking things over; having my wife cut my food for me), losing many of my adult roles (waiting outside a store while my wife finished a cash transaction), and feeling reduced energy (fatigue requiring multiple naps and early bedtimes).

Part of my willingness to turn over key life decisions to the Mayo staff was rooted in what I have called *monitoring fatigue*. In the hospital I was monitoring my body, monitoring my energy, monitoring my blood counts through the Mayo portal each morning, monitoring visitors who always posed a threat of carrying some unwanted virus into my secure hospital room. Days when I was home, I added to this list the monitoring of self and others as I walked the neighborhood.

Disability bias continued my downward identity spiral. This occurred as I saw and internalized my new self as reflected in the eyes and reactions of others and by becoming keenly aware of my new limitations (e.g., I could experience dizziness when standing, I bruised and bled readily), I began to limit my activity and let others (my wife, in particular) do for me. Driving, taking out the garbage, changing light bulbs were now buried parts of my former self.

At this point, the centripetal force led to a sense of self-imposed *isolation*. It was easier to be home alone, or just with my wife, than in a public setting. There was less to monitor, less to explain, less energy to expend. This self-imposed isolation became self-reinforcing as I began to find that I didn't miss the interaction with others.

These preceding factors culminated in feelings of *being less human*. Central to our humanity is the ability to adapt and change (Oelofsen, 2009). And, although I was changing, most of it was not intentional, at this point, but rather a passive identity shift caused by centripetal force pulling me downward away from my former self, inward away from my former connectedness.

Passive Identity Reconstruction

I initially conceptualized centripetal force as deconstructing my identity. However, upon reflection, I have come to realize that not only was I engaged in the experience of mourning the lost elements of my former self, but I was also grappling with a new sense of self that was emerging. This latter process of *passive identity reconstruction* felt as if a new self was coming into being, bereft of my own volition. In this way, parallel patterns of identity work were taking hold – deconstruction was not resulting in elimination of identity but, rather, in reconstruction of a newly materialized self.

Passive identity reconstruction began almost as immediately as deconstruction had commenced. While clinging to my crumbling identity as if it were that low hanging mesquite branch, rushing water ready to sweep me away if my grip only weakened, I also experienced a tension between going with the current (accepting that I had joined the world of cancer patients and survivors) and finding a shallow that would allow me to trudge across the river's flow and take a less prominent path. Perhaps many simply accept the traditional course, but I've never been one to want to walk exactly where someone else has. This may sound bold and adventurous, but it is not always from good intentions. I instinctively resisted that which I felt was being forced upon me - I was now a cancer patient, but I couldn't say the word, *cancer*; I wanted to live, but I didn't want to be a cancer survivor; I was willing to undergo hardship, but I wanted linear progress, everything tied up neatly in a bow.

Early on, however, despite my best efforts to forge my own way, I continually found myself on the existing path (passive identity reconstruction). I was now a person who had an oncologist - *my* oncologist! I had regular appointments with Mayo staff. I even got to the point where I actually missed going in for tests and checkups when they moved me from a three-a-week to a once-a-month to an every eight-to-twelve-week schedule. Also, I found that many of my previous identity anchors - characteristics that in the past facilitated hiking off suggested paths - had been dis-abled. In particular, I could no longer use my active lifestyle, my just-enough-ADD personality, and my love of the outdoors to cope with my stressors.

Active Identity Reconstruction

In tension with the centripetal forces that were at work deconstructing my former identity and leaving a skeletal sense of *self* in its place, centrifugal force exerted itself through active identity reconstruction during the darkest days.² The seeds for this active reconstruction had been planted long before. Thankfully, twelve years prior, I had embraced a contemplative form of my own spirituality. And while, at the time of my diagnosis, I still considered myself a spiritual toddler in this arena, I was familiar with the practices of silence, solitude, and mindfulness, as expressed through centering prayer, T'ai Chi practice, and guided imagery. My hospital stays, and even my short returns home, became fodder for development of my slowly emerging *contemplative self*.

Fifteen years previous, I began the practice of centering prayer (20 minutes in the morning daily). I deeply resonated with this meditation-like practice of silence and awareness of the divine (Beourgault, 2016; Keating, 2006) as I was drawn to the peace of slowing my ADD mind and the sense of calm it produced in my body. My overall experience was one of safety and contentment. Central to the practice, for me, was *nonresistance* and *refocus* – a rather beautiful dialectic between passivity (as experienced intentionally through nonreactivity and receptivity) and activity (an intentional refocusing of my mind; a returning to my place of safety) that resulted in a profound sense of presence. As I would sit quietly, stray thoughts entering my mind uninvited, I would allow them to pass through uninterrupted, only to refocus, bringing my mind

² It would be easy to construe centripetal force as negative and centrifugal force as positive, given my description. It is to be noted that centripetal and centrifugal forces are without value. In contrast to how I have experienced these, centripetal force could be a stabilizing force for identity, and centrifugal force could be one of dispersion rather than finding a secure, spacious sense of self.

home. Remarkably, there is great life and presence in this gentle movement from distraction to refocus (Bourgeault, 2006). There was no fighting or resistance of these wannabe guests that had crashed my mental solitude. I would simply let them pass, then return to my focus. There was no failure. Only presence.

This became the central process that characterized my recovery – let the medical interruptions pass by, uninterrupted, then refocus on being present in the moment. There is nothing “bad” about the medical moments, it’s just that they are just that – moments. Moments to be lived, along with the multitudinous other moments that occurred subsequently.

The process of nonresistance and refocus became rich contemplative fodder as I chose a path of contentment and solitude over loneliness. The practice of centering prayer, which had often been a struggle when I was physically healthy, made itself available to me in a new way as my outward and inward distractions diminished and my cognitive and physical energy became more focused on the simple things which were lifegiving...*now*.

As you’ve read of my active identity reconstruction you may have sensed centripetal and centrifugal forces in tension in my recovering life. I have begun to appreciate that much of our “healthy place” is learning to live in such tension. As my experience of centering prayer has taught me, it is the dynamism of the tension wherein we find presence.

Contemplation, Spaciousness, and the Indifference of Love

Here I sit...

*Alone, but not lonely
Naked, but not cold
Without thought, but not thoughtless
Vulnerable, but safe*

*The beauty of the mountains caresses me
The feeling of the sun’s rays warms my soul
Contentment eases my pain
As inner peace heals my brokenness*

*I am living...
Large enough to accept what is
Grand enough to generously give
Open enough to embrace those who come near
Safe enough to sit quietly with who I am*

*Distance allows me to see
Trust allows me to listen
Curiosity allows my release
Indifference allows me love*

*I am unique, I am common
I am distinctive, I am same*

I am eternal, I am the blink of an eye
I am spacious

Active identity reconstruction has been most characterized by giving the contemplative self a more central position in my array of identities (husband, father, grandfather, professor, teacher, writer, singer, volunteer, spiritual director). Interestingly, although contemplation might seem at first to be primarily an expression of centripetal force drawing one to isolate in silence and solitude pondering one's own thoughts and navel, in my experience contemplation is most characterized by centrifugal force - an outward thrust that has become for me closely associated with the ideas of *spaciousness* and the *indifference of love*.

Six weeks before my diagnosis, Ann and I had undertaken a rigorous rafting adventure through the Grand Canyon. Two-hundred-and-twenty-six miles in eight days. For my reading during our down times, I had taken *Fierce Landscapes* by Belden Lane (1998). Providentially, Lane's notion of the indifference of love provided me a lens with which to experience the sheer magnitude of the Canyon. Its spaciousness. The tumultuous rapids and towering canyon walls. Even its profound sense of solitude.

Ironically, some of my spacious, indifferent, solitudinous experience in the Canyon happened on the groover. (Ironic, because I'm known in our family for espousing a no-rush policy for time sitting on the porcelain throne.) A groover is essentially an outdoor toilet consisting of a seat attached to a metal box with handles, and a secure lid designed to contain human waste during the trip. It's called a groover because in days gone by these makeshift toilets were built from ammo containers that left grooves on your derriere. The groover was always placed in a location away from the main camp, but with a view. So, while "doing my business" I was in my groove, so to speak, dwarfed by the immensity of the Canyon. As I sat, I would contemplate that if tossed from our raft I would likely bob and sputter until I disappeared into the muddy brown, 48-degree water of the Colorado. The massive rock formations wouldn't blink. The crashing waves would not pause for a second. And, yet, within the midst of this seeming indifference, I felt safe, content, beloved. As Lane (1998) artfully describes, "God hides from us in an act of loving play, wooing us to the very abandonment that makes love possible" (p. 74).

The Canyon experience prepared me for another groover of my soul - leukemia. As the Canyon groover wore deep ruts into my shadow side, I realized that if I was mindful enough to look up from the trampled ground beneath my feet, even the towering canyon walls could not dwarf the love I sensed there. So too, my identity trek through a wilderness strewn with medical challenges, coronavirus quarantine, and various forms of indifference embedded in the sheer enormity of the medical system, culminated with the discovery of love hiding in the spaciousness of it all.

This counterintuitive experience, feeling a sense of belonging and love in the midst of extraordinary indifference, is in part due to the nature of spaciousness as one manifestation of centrifugal force (Kelley, 2020). For me, the idea of spaciousness is represented by an image of a mountain meadow with trees and peaks towering in the distance. I stand at the meadow's outer edge, arms held wide, peering over tall grass waving in the field. I feel small and fragile in sharp contrast to the rugged mountainscape. Yet, I feel safe...content...home. The sun's warmth penetrates my shirt. The breeze's coolness caresses my skin. I am dwarfed by the visual beauty. I am overwhelmed and taken captive by my own sensory response. A friend of Teddy Roosevelt's recounted that as they sat together one night star gazing, contemplating the sheer magnitude of the universe, Roosevelt offered, "Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed."

Small. Insignificant. Humble. Safe. Content. Home. This experience of openness, magnanimity, and grandeur translates into a centrifugal freedom to be and to reconstruct oneself in relation to others – gracious, thankful, generous, loving – outward looking, yet cultivating inner peace and joy.

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Personal Narrative and Anti-Racist Pedagogy: Performing Embodied Self in Community

Jon Radwan (jon.radwan@shu.edu)
Kelly Shea (Kelly.shea@shu.edu)
Angela Kariotis (akariotis@brookdalecc.edu)

Abstract

Higher education is re-visiting and in many areas redoubling efforts to advance equity, access, inclusion, diversity, and social justice across the curriculum. While debates over “critical race theory” and systemic or institutionalized racism can become rancorous, they also signal opportunities for creativity and growth. Anti-racist pedagogy is both critical and constructive, identifying limits within many traditional teaching methods and simultaneously proposing policy alternatives (Kendi). Authority and its function within educational narratives and settings is an especially charged issue. In the absence of an explicit critique of teacher-student power relations, educators risk perpetuating oppressive patterns (Friere). Despite any lecture’s accuracy, beauty or justice, a monologic narrative works to delimit audience agency (Bakhtin). In contrast, plural personal narratives demonstrate options and ground discourse in the truth of diverse lived experiences. This panel explains classroom exercises that use first-person storytelling to engage race and provide alternatives to dominant socio-political narratives on racism. Experience with discursive modes that both flatten hierarchy and embrace polyphony can offer new perspectives on racist rhetorics and self-serving power grabs. Exercises like “racial auto-biographies” can encourage awareness of and reflection on how and when individual bodies become raced. Reaching past the personal level, community can be built through “story exchange” performances. While reporting another’s story imposes the author’s interpretive frame, *performing* each other’s stories in a first-person voice situates others within self and highlights cultural patterns of incongruity and disparity. Where racist master narratives narrowly define community and bypass self-analysis in a prejudicial rush, anti-racist pedagogy offers self-reflection within expansive yet integral community. In this way, with specific embodied and multilateral narrative exercises, we can begin to transcend divisions and develop empathetic and open approaches to trenchant racial justice issues.

Keywords

Intercultural Communication; Diversity; Equity; Inclusivity; Belonging

Jon P Radwan

Hello everyone! Welcome to our session called “Personal Narrative and Anti-Racist Pedagogy: Performing Embodied Self in Community.” We put this work together for the 2022 International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative, part of the International Association on Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry. My name is Jon Radwan and I teach Communication at Seton Hall University. Our panel today includes myself; Angela Kariotis, who is the Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Brookdale Community College; and Kelly Shea, who works with me at Seton Hall University as the Director of First-Year Writing.

To set up our theoretical frame, the idea we're working with is that personal narrative is a powerful way to advance anti-racist pedagogy. What we do when we begin to share our personal narratives is perform our selves in community. The larger motivating context for this work, I hope you might know, is that our current educational moment in our country is focussing on diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in education, especially higher education at the university level.

For our curricular approach we are working within a movement that started in the 1960s with Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Nowadays variations include anti-racist pedagogy or sometimes critical race theory. From Freire, one of the major lessons in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is teaching that comes from the perspective and voice of the oppressed. Rather than having the power person do all the talking, as with a lecture, we listen to the people at the bottom of the hierarchy to learn how to move toward justice. Then for a more recent book, we reference Ibram Kendi's *How To Be An Anti-Racist*. One idea drawn from there is how there's really no possibility of neutrality with the issue of racism. If someone says they're not a racist, that doesn't quite do much. Anti-racism is a busy calling where you've got a lot of justice work to do.

And then last, from the history of communication theory I've chosen to cite Mikhail Bakhtin, whose thesis runs parallel to Freire. So much of culture is monophonic, where you only have voices from the top, and so the power move, the political move, is to go *polyphonic* and listen to many, many voices in society, including those of the oppressed. The unifying construct that we're describing today is local interpersonal communication building integral communities. *Communio* is the Latin root for the word *community* and root of the word *communication*. When we do the work of personal narrative work together, communicatively, we move toward building just communities -- a just identity is a joint performance. Today we will share two ways to operationalize communal personal narratives in the classroom. First Dr. Shea will teach us about racial/intersectional literacy narratives, and then Professor Kariotis will teach us about story exchanges. I am happy at this point to turn it over Kelly Shea.

Kelly A Shea

Thank you so much, Jon, and thank you all for listening. I'm going to apologize ahead of time for two text-packed slides. I teach writing and words are what I do! So I will try to briefly summarize what you're seeing here. I created, in a course that I'm teaching this semester called Modern Rhetoric and Writing (a joint grad/undergrad class, where I often assign a type of literacy narrative), a new kind of literacy narrative. This time I wanted to delve into the notion of racial or intersectional literacies, and this was really to student writers of argument situate themselves within their own identities as people and writers. So the assignment is there. Essentially, the focus was to consider how their race – and I have an asterisk by that, which I'll say something about in a moment – has informed, influenced, hindered, aided or affected (or did not affect) your development as a writer, and then you can see the rest of the prompt. Essentially I mentioned race because I was hoping that people would focus on that, but also understanding, of course, that people come from many different identities as you'll see in the quotation that I have included from Margaret Montoya. I wanted students to speak from some place of identity in this paper. I have a diverse classroom, but I did not know how the students would respond. I have a number of white students, some students of color, students from different genders and orientations as well. But the basis here is something like what you see. Margaret Montoya is saying that what we need to do is take what's happening in the classroom, which is kind of an

abstract, theoretical conversation in which these types of identity characteristics rarely enter into, to move to positioning the author within the social characteristics that formed the lenses through which they see the world. This way we can actually increase our impartiality, but in claiming their partiality, that lets students' identities shine through. So then the next slide contains some excerpts from student writing. I had some really interesting results, and I've summarized my results at the bottom. This is to say that I've come to have hope that individual changes in individual worlds will change the world and to some extent the results of this assignment helped me to believe that this is actually possible.

From the first anonymized quotation, we have a grad student who said that, "A dual-sided prejudice began to take shape, on one hand demonstrating ignorance and fear due to my skin color, and on the other hand displaying extreme caution and worry around those who didn't look like me. As a new writer, I had no way of expressing these troubling thoughts through words via paper or tongue, and I still have a hard time doing it today. Because of this, I was never the object of my own writing, I wasn't the black author who penned phrases about his own experience, my identity was split in two; I was an author who also happened to be black." So this is a really interesting way of situating the student into the world of writing.

The other student I was particularly interested in was an undergrad who said that, "I find that the more that I learn about literacy education the more unsurprising it is that a white, suburban, man finds it easy to regurgitate the information that is taught in a typical American public education. U.S. English classrooms are intentionally tailored to fit someone of my demographic. The structure and colloquialisms used in the classroom never made me feel confused or distant from the content that teachers drilled, like it may for any minority or supposedly non-neurotypical person. Overall, in my K-12 experience, I recognize that I was extremely fortunate to be the exact audience that the education system is based around raising, and I reaped the benefit of that fact."

We also have comments from a female grad student and a neurodivergent undergraduate student who wrote about their experiences. So these are my results and I'm really happy now to hand it over to Angela Kariotis who's going to talk to us about story exchange.

Angela Kariotis

One of my goals, my missions, in any space that I occupy is using story and anchoring story for empathy as a diversity, equity, inclusion and justice practice. So in America we have an empathy problem and often times we're surrounded by people that have similar experiences to people that look like them. So how can we deploy a story *exchange* to break open our small circle and create fellowship in those lines? A story exchange by way of **Narrative 4** is what I deployed with Seton Hall University as well as where I'm at now, Brookdale Community College, and also I'll be doing it in January with a professional learning team for K through 12 teachers throughout public school education districts in the state of New Jersey.

So what a story exchange does is reposition personal experience as knowledge; it doesn't have to be bound and it doesn't have to be cited, and there's the bibliography, but we're using personal experience as that knowledge. So I'm going to walk you through the **Narrative 4** process, which is not specific to **Narrative 4**, but they're the ones who really architect and brand and teach this process. So I encourage all of you to visit <https://narrative4.com/> to learn more of what that process looks like, so you could integrate it into your classrooms, but also into your campus community.

And I'll name here that Playback Theatre, as part of theatre of the oppressed – and we just heard about pedagogy of the oppressed – uses telling a story and then playing it back to the audience. I want to credit playback theatre here and Joe Solis and Jonathan Fox as those folks who really have done the pioneering work of creating this new space.

In Narrative 4 story exchange, you invite everybody into the room and you lead with an essential question; one that I lead with often is “tell a story about a time when you felt invisible.” There's massive preparation work, which is really a willingness and getting people comfortable to coming into the space and working with you as a facilitator. Taking on that courageous risk role involves making sure that you identify a question that everyone consents to so you can have many story exchanges throughout your time on your calendar. It is not a one-and-done process, and it's important to name and bring everybody into the room; everyone consents and knows the essential question they share. Then there's deep self-reflection time. They're bringing up the story from memory and then, on the day of the story exchange, you are randomly assigning partners and those partners go off and they tell each other the story. They answered the facilitators' prompt: tell the story of a time when you felt invisible to just anchor our time together. Then what happens? Deep listening AND private intimate space is created when you are listening to each other in the room. Then we all come together into a circle. Pairs sit next to each other and then everyone takes a turn going around the circle and you are telling the story that you heard, the story that was told to you, you are retelling that story *as if it were your own*, in the first person voice of your partner, and that is very important, with all the complications that come up in it. And then after that, what I've started doing is giving the person who just heard their story told by someone else space to correct, space to say, that was not right or that was absolutely right. And there is that sort of forgiveness that happens and then also spaces taken for that person to say, well, this is how it really was, or this is where we forgot, and also that gratitude exchange. Then we do the massive work of debriefing what performing another's story felt like. Prompts ask “what were the beautiful ‘uncomfortabilities’ created? Which are fertile ground for growth and seeing each other, witnessing each other into the space? Which creates a bond and a relationship across administration, staff, and students and alumni? There's real potential for group learning and witnessing beloved community for each other. Please try it in your classrooms and in the work that you do.

And I'm going hand it off to Dr. Radwan.

Jon P Radwan

Thank you so much Angela. As somebody who's participated in a story exchange that Angela facilitated, I have to say that it was enlightening. I'm a middle-aged white male and I was paired with a young black woman. To share her story in the first person was a challenge and very powerful, as was hearing her perform mine.

To summarize what we're saying today – a just identity is something that cannot be performed solo. We've described a communicative ethic of joint performance, and these plural personal narrative exercises are two ways to operationalize it. We turned toward dialogue in our classroom first with Dr. Shea, where we learned about racial and intersectional literacy narratives, and then from Angela Kariotis we learned about story exchanges as collaborative interpersonal performances.

For some closing questions, we'd ask you to consider what needs at your institution could be met with exercises like these. How would personal narratives change your teaching? And what would prevent you from trying these exercises to follow up? Of course, you'll be seeing us

at the conference online, and we look forward to discussing with you in person. But if you'd like to contact us by email, jon.radwan@shu.edu, Kelly.shea@shu.edu, and akariotis@brookdalecc.edu.

Thank you all for listening to our video. We look forward to discussing it with you really soon. Have a great day!

Slides available for download at http://works.bepress.com/jon_radwan/56/

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Professional Identity Crisis, Reconciliation, and Reconstruction: A Narrative Inquiry into Experiences of Novice EFL Teachers in China's Private Universities

Xiangchen Zhang
University of Auckland
daodaoguai@yeah.net

Abstract

Novice EFL teachers in Chinese private universities are always confronted with professional identity crisis (PIC). A lot of studies focus on identity construction but not PIC and subsequent solutions. Therefore, this research investigates causes and manifestations of PIC and how teachers reconstructed professional identity through critical autoethnography and narrative inquiry. Results showed that teachers adopted a student-centred teaching belief. The principal cause of PIC was a discrepancy between high self-expectations and inexperience. Manifestations of PIC included imposter phenomenon and weak occupational commitment. Solutions to PIC were personal achievements and institutional supports. Results proposed valuable implications for professional development of novice EFL teachers.

Keywords

professional identity crisis; novice EFL teacher; private university; teacher professional development

1. Introduction

The topic of my presentation for 2022 International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative is “Professional identity crisis, reconciliation, and reconstruction---a narrative inquiry into experiences of novice EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers in China's private universities”. I explained my presentation from the following nine aspects: research significance, literature review, theoretical framework, research questions, research design, study one and study two, methods of data analysis, primary findings of online questionnaire, conclusion. My research consisted of two parts, study one critical autoethnography and study two narrative inquiry. And I have finished the data analysis of study one and the online questionnaire part of study two. So, I elaborated some primary findings based on thematic analysis of my current data collected up till now.

2. Research significance

The significance of my research lies in three aspects: first, the status of English as a discipline in China is an important influencing factor of novice EFL teachers' professional identity crisis; second, how novice teachers in “transition circle” (Adams, Hayes & Hopson, 1976) experienced and navigated identity crisis deserves special attention; third, private universities in China are still in a developing stage. Therefore, the study of novice EFL teachers in those contexts is of great significance to the institutional development of private universities and teachers' professional development.

Those three aspects also explain why I chose novice EFL teachers in private universities as my research subjects. The first reason is related to the status of English as a discipline. In China, it is a common knowledge that English is taught and used as the most important foreign language, especially in undergraduate colleges and universities. Besides that, English has become a medium of instruction in disciplines such as business English, Engineering English, and Shipping English, etc. That is called English for specific purposes (ESP). The national education reforms in China have required teachers to master not only language skills of English, English culture, British and American literature, but also interdisciplinary knowledge.

The second reason to study EFL teachers from private universities is that novice teachers are a group of specific academics in their early career lives. First, they are emerging teachers or green hands confronted with reality shock, which means that their teaching experiences in working places collide with their original thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. Second, EFL teachers are supposed to become “deeply socialized professionals” (Huang & Peng, 2015, p. 47) according to national regulations of tertiary education. So, they must adapt to multiple roles (lecturer, class manager, students’ advisor, teaching materials developer, academic researcher, etc.) while trying to get involved into unfamiliar working atmospheres.

The third reason of investigating EFL teachers from private university is related to their working institutions. The research context of my study is private university because of its special orientation. The orientation of private universities in China focuses on applied technology and vocational education. The background of international higher education reforms is characterized with two trends: neo-liberalism and neo-managerialism. Influenced by those trends, private universities adopted management strategies of enterprise, squeezed costs, and emphasized outputs to be competitive in tertiary education field. As a result, teachers’ self-supervision was emphasized, and their salaries were directly related to their performance reviews (Huang & Peng, 2015). They must improve their professional qualities both in teaching and academic research to receive good reviews and ensure stable payments. What’s more, online teaching has also become a popular trend because of the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In that background, teachers need to acquire knowledge of online teaching methods and techniques which also proposed challenges to novice teachers in private universities.

3. Literature review and theoretical framework

As for literature review, I had an overview of previous research from the following three perspectives: EFL teacher identities, their identity construction, and most importantly, professional identity crisis.

For EFL teacher identities, the natures of their identities are multi-dimensional and multi-faceted (Tsui, 2007). The dimensions of identities include career identity, major identity, personal identity and situated identity (Xun et al., 2014). Professional identity contains these five parts: self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, tasks, perception, and future perspective (Kelchtermans, 1993).

For their identity construction procedures, EFL teachers constructed and reconciliated their identities in a dynamic and shifting way. The influencing factors of identity construction include two perspectives. The first one is personnel (emotion, belief, attitude, etc.), and the second one is contextual (education reforms, culture, institutional support, etc.) (Zhang, 2016). EFL teachers always construct their identities through institutional or personal procedures (Tsui, 2007).

For the most important part, identity crisis. The previous research has discovered the categories of professional identity crisis (PIC) existing in four phases of teachers' professional life. The first one is general view of life prior to the PIC, the second one is their life within the professional identity crisis. The third one is crisis experience. And the last one is their crisis overcoming activities (Sadovnikova et al., 2016). Solutions to identity crisis also include two parts. The first one is personal initiative, for example, "emotion strategies" (Gu & Gu, 2019). And the second one is institutional support, for example, professional learning community (PLC).

For the theoretical framework of data analysis, I applied impostor phenomenon (Clance, 1985), self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and self-identity theory (Giddens, 1991) in study one. In study two, I applied social identity theory (Robinson & Tajfel, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009).

4. Research questions

Based on the overview of prior research and theoretical framework, I proposed three research questions focusing on identity crisis of EFL teachers in private universities. Those questions are related to reasons, manifestations, and solutions to identity crisis. The first question is, what are reasons that lead to identity crisis among novice EFL teachers in Chinese private universities? The second one is what are manifestations of their identity crisis? And the third one is how do novice EFL teachers overcome identity crisis and improve themselves as professionals?

5. Research design

My research design contains two parts. The first part is study one critical auto ethnography, and the second part is study two narrative inquiry. My participants are Chinese novice EFL teachers with teaching experiences of no more than three years, which is the first stage of their academic career (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981). In study one, I narrated my reflective stories of experiencing professional identity crisis as a novice EFL teacher at two private universities. In study two, there are three phases. Phase one is online questionnaire, the second one is in-depth interview. And the third one is focus group. I have finished data analysis of study one and phase one of study two, so in this presentation I explain findings and discussion of those two sections: critical autoethnography and online questionnaire.

6. Study one critical autoethnography---my own reflective stories of professional identity crisis

In study one, to explore causes of PIC, I wrote my stories as an EFL teacher working in two private universities and my interactions with significant others (students, colleagues, and leaders). The theoretical framework of data analysis for this part is self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). Together I named those stories "tales of three selves". The three selves are my actual self, ought self, and ideal self. As for actual self, I used to feel like an impostor because of a huge gap between an overly high self-expectation and a lack of teaching competence. Next, for the ought self, I must advocate the values and culture of my private universities and try to become a well-qualified teacher who lives up to institutional expectations. Besides, I ought to approve of my membership in community and improve comprehensive abilities (teaching, academic research, executive work). Last, for the ideal self, I wished to become an academic type of teacher who is more skilful in teaching and is respected and popular among students.

Extracted from my narrative stories, there are several themes indicating pairs of conflicts that led to my professional identity crisis: “high self-expectation vs lacking teaching competence”, “high career orientation vs low level of job satisfaction”, “strong self-esteem vs unsatisfying evaluations” and “great ambition for teaching vs poor teaching outcomes”. Themes presenting manifestations of PIC are: “imposter phenomenon”, “lack of self-efficacy”, and “low level of job satisfaction and occupational commitment”.

To navigate professional identity crisis, I sought solutions and acquired support from significant others. Here in a metaphorical method, I used two pictures of my past hiking experience as visual data to illustrate my experience of overcoming PIC at two private universities, which I named Seaside University and Riverside University (pseudonyms).



The picture on the left reflects the working experience at Seaside University as my first job for a year. That was one of the most important experiences in my professional life. The towering bamboos stand for the “reality shock” (Gaede, 1978), and the “imposter phenomenon” (Clance & Imes, 1978) I have gone through is likened to the shadow under my feet. The picture on the right reflects my working experience at Riverside University for the next two years. In a transition circle (Adams, Hayes & Hopson, 1976), I overcame negative emotions, rebuilt my confidence, and reconstructed the identity as a professional EFL teacher. The “alpenstock” in my hand assisted me in forging ahead, that tool implied my progress in teaching competence, academic achievements, and awards. In addition, I was supported by “hiking companions” (my colleagues and leaders) in aspects of teaching and academic research. Themes about solutions to PIC extracted from reflective stories in that transitional period include: “initiative attitude”, “enhanced self-agency”, “positive emotion regulation strategies” and “peer and institutional supports”.

7. Study two narrative inquiry

The method of collecting data in phase one of study two is an online questionnaire containing two parts: the first part is the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) (Clance, 1985a, 1985b), which includes twenty multiple choice questions (five point for each question, totally 100 points). This scale aims at measuring the level of imposter phenomenon. I collected scores of all questionnaires from 100 participants at 30 private universities in China. Those 100 participants were selected through purposeful sampling method. The second part includes five open-ended questions about influencing factors of professional identity designed by me.

In phase two, I interviewed seven teachers selected from participants in phase one. The scores of those seven participants were between 46-72, which meant they experienced moderate to significant imposterism. And they volunteered to participate in subsequent interviews. That semi-structured in-depth interview was applied to explore causes and manifestations of professional identity crisis and teachers' trajectories of professional identity construction through narrative inquiry. Every participant was interviewed twice, and each round of interview lasted for one hour.

In phase three, I conducted a focus group interview with all seven teachers in phase two and me as participants. That focus group interview was a supplement to in-depth interviews and lasted for two hours. In focus group, we discussed solutions to professional identity crisis and prospects of EFL teachers' professional development in private universities.

8. Methods of data analysis

The methods of my data analysis were designed at two levels. The first level is thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). My reflective stories in critical autoethnography and narrative stories of seven participants were written through critical event narrative (Neisser & Fivush, 1994; Webster & Mertova, 2007; Woods, 1993) and critical incident technique (Holloway & Schwartz, 2014). And significant themes were extracted from those narratives through a recursive coding process.

For the second level, I conducted factionalization (Bruce, 2019), also known as creative non-fiction. It is a combination of "fictional" and "factual" elements. At this level, data from study one and study two will be rewritten in the form of creative non-fiction or factionalized stories to discover the "underlying meaning" of facts and create interactive discourses for participants' resonance.

9. Primary findings and discussion of online questionnaire

There are two parts in the online questionnaire, data collected from part one was teachers' scores of CIPS, and those data were analysed in statistical method. The second part are five open-ended questions related to the influencing factors of teachers' professional identity construction. The topics of those questions were designed based on dimensions of imposter phenomenon. Through thematic analysis, findings were discussed based on data from part two.

As for part one, table 1 shows the population statistics of different levels of imposter phenomenon (IP) scoring in the online questionnaire:

Table 1
Population statistics of scores in CIPS

Four levels of IP scoring	0-40	41-60	61-80	81-100
	None to mild Imposterism	Moderate Imposterism	Significant Imposterism	Intense Imposterism
People-counting (100)	6	63	29	2

As indicated in this table, there are four levels of IP scoring, and I counted the number of participants whose scores fell at each level. Among 100 participants, most teachers (94%) experienced moderate to intense imposterism. i.e., most novice teachers doubted their professional identity in early career period. Novice teachers valued students' feedbacks and

evaluations most. They were inclined to satisfy students' need to acquire a sense of achievement and receive good evaluations. For novice EFL teachers in China's private universities, outstanding manifestation of professional identity crisis included "retarded improvement in academia", "lack of autonomy" and "lack of membership". Solutions to professional identity crisis included both institutional ones (supports in profession; friendly community) and personal ones (professional achievements and honours)

For part two, table 2 presents topics of each open-ended question and remarkable codes through a recursive coding process in thematic analysis:

Table 2
Thematic analysis of five open-ended questions

Question number	External factors		Internal factors																		
	Q5	Q9	Q17	Q19	Q21																
Topics (Influencing factors of professional identity related to IP)	evaluations from significant others	influence from significant others	incompetence	failed assignments or undertakings	accomplishments																
Remarkable codes (influence of each factor on professional identity)	1. service-oriented teaching methods	2. student-centred teaching beliefs	3. excessive reflections	4. eagerness to improve	5. impressionable emotions	6. job commitment yet to be internalised	7. self-doubt in qualification	8. low efficacy	9. lack of autonomy	10. retarded improvement	11. comparison with others	12. lack of membership	13. job burnout	14. fear of negative evaluations	15. increased self confidence	16. increased job satisfaction	17. increased sense of achievement	18. consolidated teaching beliefs	19. strengthened motivation	20. active improvement	21. passion for future career

As indicated in table 2, topics of five open-ended questions were categorised into two groups, the first one contains external factors (Q5 evaluations from significant others; Q9 influence from significant others), and the second group contains internal factors (Q17 incompetence; Q19 failed assignments or undertakings; Q21 accomplishments). There are 21 remarkable codes regarding influencing factors of identity construction that have been extracted based on original data. For question 5, it can be concluded that novice teachers really cared about students' opinions and evaluations, so they tended to adopt teaching beliefs based on students' needs and requirements. Besides, novice teachers had excessive reflections and eagerness to improve, that also constituted causes of PIC. Manifestations of PIC were teachers' impressionable emotions and job commitment yet to be internalised

For other three questions concerning internal influencing factors of professional identities (Q17,19,21), they were further classified into two aspects: negative (Q17 and Q19) and positive (Q21). For the negative aspect, findings presented that teacher experienced typical impostor phenomenon in their professional life (self-doubt in qualification; comparison with others; fear of negative evaluations). Significant causes that led to teachers' PIC were low efficacy, lack of autonomy, retarded improvement, lack of membership and job burnout. For the positive aspect, one interesting discovery was that after achieving accomplishments or acquiring rewards in

teaching and academic research, teachers' job satisfaction and sense of achievement increased, their beliefs and motivation were consolidated, and they became more confident, active, and passionate about their professional development in current working life and future career.

10. Conclusion

This study explored novice EFL teachers' professional identity crisis, its causes, manifestations, and solutions, and how teachers reconstructed their professional identity in these processes. The author applied critical autoethnography and narrative inquiry as methodology, and current results showed that causes of PIC were multi-faceted included personal factors and sociocultural factors. Manifestations of PIC were mainly imposter phenomenon and negative emotions that led to teachers' low level of teaching efficacy, autonomy, job satisfaction and retardment in professional development. Solutions to PIC included personal achievements in teaching and academic research and institutional supports from significant others. So far, the author has finished data analysis of study one and phase one of study two. After the analysis of data collected in in-depth interviews and focus group, there will be more significant findings and discussion that could answer the research questions in a more complete and elaborate way.

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Appendix

a. Academic biography of the author:

Xiangchen Zhang used to work as an English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teacher at two private universities in Shanghai, China. She finished her bachelor's degree in English and master's degree in applied linguistics and conducted an empirical study of Chinese pre-service student teachers' professional identities. Currently she is a doctoral candidate at the University of Auckland, studying in the School of Curriculum and Pedagogy under the supervision of Dr Naashia Mohamed and Dr Esther Fitzpatrick. Her research interests lie in the tensions, construction, and reconciliation of EFL teachers' multiple identities and their professional development in universities with methods of critical autoethnography and narrative inquiry.

b. In the panel talk of my part on 4/Jan (EST) of 2022 ISAN conference. There was one interesting question about my research asked by one scholar named Darren, I really appreciate him for that inspiring question. And the following is the manuscript of his question and my answer:

Darren: “What I thought was interesting was your approach to addressing an overcoming impostor syndrome and sort of the three selves that you talked about. I wondered about your approaches that you came across from. The folks that you talk to about conquering that impostor syndrome. Was it more about bringing, I think it was the impostor self, the ought self, and the ideal self? Are you trying to bring those so that they're overlapping? Are you trying to transcend those to become something else? How do those three selves interplay in your experience and those who you talked?”

Xiangchen: “That's a very wonderful question, that is also a question I'm thinking about, because this research is originally based on my own experience as a novice teacher. I encountered a lot of difficulties in the first year. I encountered the “reality shock” when I first entered the professional trade, the professional atmosphere I have never been when I was a student. And for the impostor phenomenon, there are three selves. I used the theory from psychology---the self-discrepancy theory of Higgins. And I think those three parts, the “ought self”, the “actual self”, and my “ideal self”, they are overlapping in some way. And they also combine and build up I who I was and who I am and who I will be in the future in a mixed way. It's not about surpassing or transformation of becoming somebody else. So, I don't think there is an absolute hierarchy among those three selves. But in some case, the actual self might be a little bit inferior and the ideal self. For example, if I encountered some difficulties dealing with the relationship with my students, and I wish to become a “more qualified” teachers in their eyes. And if they thought, well, I hoped my teachers would add some interesting activities or games in the lessons. But I did not teach in that way, and they felt a little bit disappointed. So maybe that is the “ought self” in my students’ eyes, while my “ideal self” in that situation was that I hoped to give them, to offer, to pass on my knowledge and experience to my students in a way, which I thought was helpful and beneficial to their study. I think on some level, those three selves overlapped in meaning, in another case, maybe there is no clear distinction or boundary among those three. Thanks for your question. Darren.”

Rupture and Repair: Perilous Relationality within Arts-based Autoethnographic Supervision

Re-memembering our Symposium Presentation

Deborah Green (deborahg@whitecliffe.ac.nz)

Hilary Tapper (hilaryt@whitecliffe.ac.nz)

Abstract

Deborah: Every relational experience I've had supervising students embroiled in arts-based autoethnography (abr+a) has called me into my therapist-self to hold space while the student wrangles distressing material. This wrangling makes sense, as poiesis forms abr+a's heartbeat, welcoming uncertainty and formlessness, inviting us close-in to the arts.

Hilary: Such close-in-ing of the *auto-* moves the work (potentially) towards the *ethno*, rather than remaining – as has our history of 'objective' disengaged researchers – research of homogenised generalisations. And it's scary to stay poietically close-in. I don't know where it will lead. I'm completely in the churning unknown of the arts and autoethnography...

Keywords

Arts-based research; Supervision; Relationship discord; Creative Arts Therapy

A beginning

It begins with an almost overlooked posting on the International Association of Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry Facebook group page calling for proposals to present at the 2022 International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative (ISAN). Curiosity perks. What might be ripe for exploration in our research-entanglements as creative arts therapist-researchers? Ah, maybe this...

Deborah: Every relational experience I've had supervising students embroiled in arts-based research through autoethnography (abr+a) (Green et al, 2018) has, at some point, called me into my therapist-self to hold space while the student wrangles deep and often distressing material. This area of relational ethics in abr+a methodology is something begging further investigation. Much thought and ongoing development governs the relationship between researcher and participant/subject. Less granulated attention appears to be given, however, to the unique ethical dilemmas inherent in the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. This is especially evident when the research methodology/ies being implemented decentre traditional power-dynamics and objectivity, and invite the presence of personal emotional and/or spiritual material. Leaning into curiosity regarding this, I contact Hilary, ex-student and supervisee, and now colleague, to see if she's interested in collaborating with me to explore our experience of rupture and repair in supervision for this conference.

Hilary: I am intrigued. The rupture in my supervision relationship with Deborah in 2020 was a defining moment in my research, as well as in our relationship, but we had not discussed it much further since that time. I'm curious where this exploration might lead.

We begin to dialogue our experience, forming our proposal, and then our larger presentation as a video. And in this paper, we find ourselves spilling beyond a contained retelling of this creation-and-presentation-for-the-Symposium... but let's not get ahead of ourselves and begin by sharing a starting point.

Extracts from our original proposal

Deborah: My supervisee, Hilary, and I are sniffing about the edges of emergence from a nation-wide COVID-induced lockdown when our relationship ruptures. Her research takes her to a personal, vulnerable place of self and she sidesteps into premature theoretical interpretation, straying from her art and autoethnography. Channelling Hillman (1983), I suggest she's cut the legs off her images (and her soul), and I invite her back to the source. She's confronted and angry, and replies with a poem—

[And here, in our original proposal, lurked a poem. Or should I say *The Poem*. We write more about it, its presence – and now its absence – later. So, this is an invitation to bookmark this moment.]

Deborah: [Galvanised by *The Poem*] We exchange a flurry of emails, poetry and videoed creative responses.

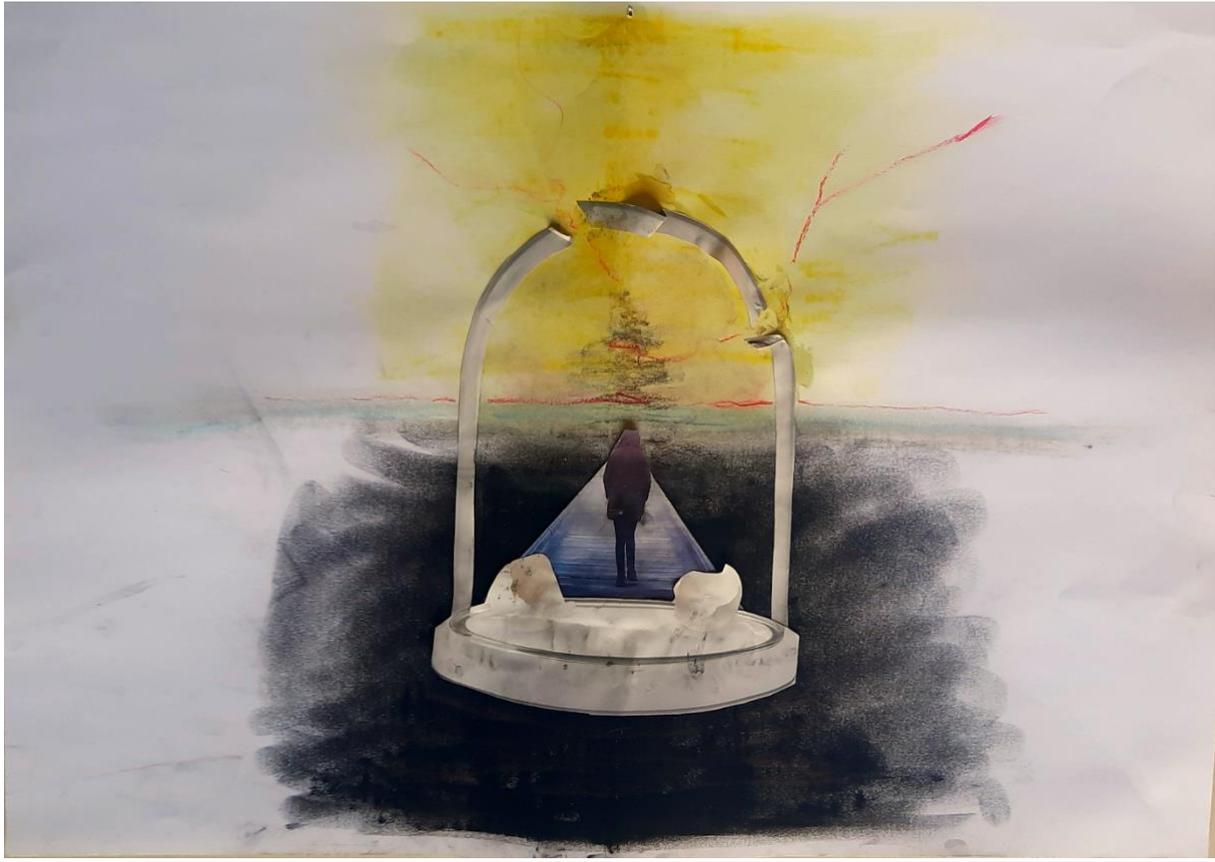


Figure 1: *Deborah Green (2020), Responding to The Poem, Chalk, and collage on paper.*

Hilary: My inner waters churn and storm in response to your invitation to stay close-in with the art and my self. I continue to flail in this new terrain, but you stay close-in with me.

Deborah: This churning makes sense, as poiesis forms abr+a’s heartbeat, welcoming uncertainty and formlessness, facilitating coming-into-form of the chaos of meaning (Levine, 2009). Infusing research with poiesis opens transitional spaces (Winnicott, 1977) that inspire meaning-making “in the same way as we engage in creative work: by letting the new form emerge without controlling it” (Levine, 2009, p.139). This mirrors Heidegger’s (1935/1975) poiesis. Rather than a wilful intellectual act, poiesis invites surrender to process, a paradoxical will-to-not-will as the therapist-researcher abandons critical intention and becomes receptive. Familiar structures are void and new ones have yet to appear, inciting confusion and powerlessness.

Hilary: In inviting such close-in-ing of the *auto-*, the work now (potentially) moves towards the *ethno*, rather than remaining – as has our history of "objective" disengaged researchers, and myself – research of homogenised generalisations. And it's scary to stay close-in. I don't know where it will lead. I'm completely in the unknown of the arts and autoethnography.



Figure 2: *Hilary Tapper (2020), Coming close-in, Photograph.*

Deborah: Scary, yes! Poiesis encourages tangents and privileges proliferative and precipitative process-orientated creativity. This unpredictability means work-in-the-making can't be predicted – only afterwards may it make sense (Levine, 2009) requiring we trust the creative process. Trusting the poietic process invites us, as supervisor and supervisee, to engage *abr+a* as an unfolding practice with possibilities for still points of completion/certainty among ongoing transition/uncertainty (McNiff, 2015) and significant experiences of rupture and (hopefully) repair (Seigel, 1999).

Hilary: Experiencing this confluence does feel perilously rupturous – not just between you and me, but within me and without.

Deborah: Poietic abra+a can be perilous – it involves ‘staying with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016), experience-near and relationally-vivid. Greer and Blair (2018) explore the ‘discourse of danger’ to reveal researchers construe arts-based/self-as-subject research as either heroic pioneering of new territory or incursions into hazardous terrain.



Figure 3: Deborah Green, (2019), Perilous practices. Digital collage.

Hilary: What if you hadn't continued to so lovingly hold me in my storming? What if we hadn't cultivated this level of trust – in each other and in these creative research/therapy processes – necessary to take these risks? How does one do autoethnography without these awareness's and considerations?

We continue to trust the embodied knowing of our past experience together in the creation of our video and our bringing together of this presentation. We lean into Hilary's history of filmmaking and Deborah's history as a dramatist (albeit 30 years ago) and decide to live into the poietic process we refer to in the proposal. We embrace the will-to-not-will (Heidegger, 1935/1975; Levine, 2009) embracing risk with trust in what may unfold through our creative engagement with our felt-experience of the subject of rupture and repair.

Transcript of video presentation

This transcript was created after the video was completed rather than before. It reports what was created through spontaneous and poetic encounters and what was crafted by Hilary over a few meagre days as she edited together images, voice recording, music and arts-making. For the video version, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxE7IR7c0wg>



Figure 4: Still from Green & Tapper, *Rupture and Repair* (0:20).

Music. Images of a hill with a gentle wind, then Deborah walking her dogs along a street in a small village with the following spoken as the images flow.

Deborah: Safety and risk. Always negotiating the line between the two. Nothing new arrives unless you take risks. But the new will fall apart unless there's enough safety to hold it. But, how do you get anything new to arrive if you don't take a risk? With risk comes the fact that something might happen, that might be harmful, plunging into the unknown, plunging into places that could be very painful.



Figure 5: Still from Green & Tapper, *Rupture and Repair* (0:52).

Images of Hilary walking up a grassy hill.

Deborah: Most autoethnographies are not about rainbows, and unicorns, and glitter, and rose-coloured clouds. We're talking people wanting to explore difficult, dark experiences in their own worlds. And so, we're opening the door for difficult material to come through. How do we, as supervisors, how do we as supervisees, hold that space? For each other? So that the harm that is done is held, and it's held in such a way that is healing, insightful, growthful, but not constricted?



Figure 6: Still from Green & Tapper, *Rupture and Repair* (1:44).

Images of Deborah and Hilary walking into their separate studio/office spaces. Both open laptops. A zoom meeting begins between them, the split screen showing Deborah on the right and Hilary on the left.

Deborah: My supervisee, Hilary, and I are sniffing about the edges of emergence from a nation-wide COVID-induced lockdown when our relationship ruptures. Her research takes her to a personal, vulnerable place of self and she sidesteps into premature theoretical interpretation, straying from her art and autoethnography. I invite her back to the source. She's confronted and angry.

Hilary: I was in entirely new territory, here I was being invited to just stay a little bit longer with the unknown.

Deborah: We exchange a flurry of emails, poetry and videoed creative responses. Poetic abra+ca can be perilous – it involves 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016), experience-near and relationally-vivid.

We return to source and revisit the experience using movement.



Figure 7: Still from Green & Tapper, *Rupture and Repair* (3:11).

Deborah enters into frame from the right, and Hilary from the left. They stand facing each other and, while holding the experience of rupture and repair in mind/body/soul, they slowly begin to improvise movement in response to one another.

Deborah: If we run back to structures that are pre-established, both therapeutically and in our research, then all we do is return to what is already known.

The rescuer in me comes to the fore, I want to rescue, but at the same time I also know this is where the real magic is waiting for you. To walk between those two roles, of: “Am I being a supervisor for your research? Or am I holding space for you as someone walking alongside somebody doing really difficult emotional work?” A lot of these research journeys are wounded-healer journeys. They are about exploring the wound in order to be able to heal both yourself and others. And so, there’s this staying long enough in the pit, staying close enough to the heart of the art and those difficult spaces, so that there can be that sense of ‘Ahh’. In those difficult places is also the healing.

Hilary: At this seeming rupture in our relationship was an invitation to return to the art, and that the art was always there.

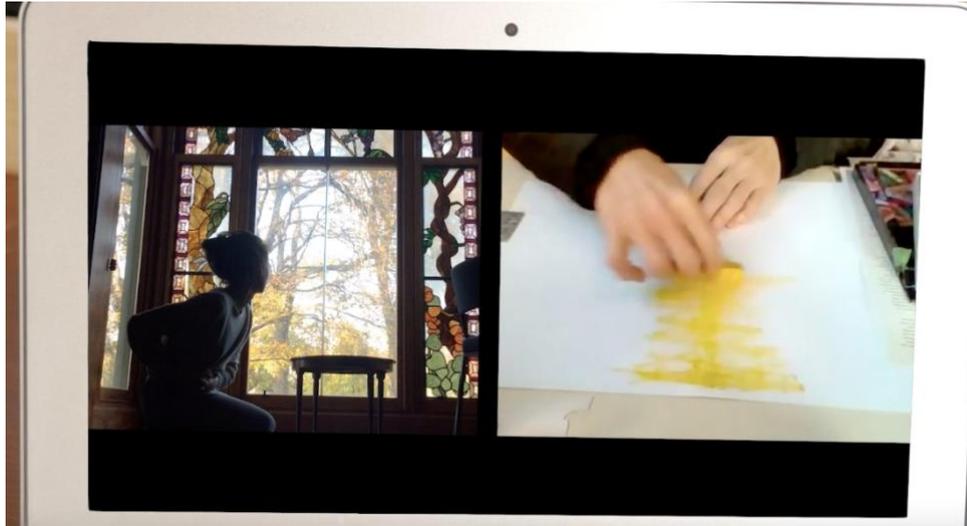


Figure 8: Still from Green & Tapper, *Rupture and Repair* (5:21).

Images of arts-making and dance from the original videos exchanged during the actual rupture and repair experience from supervision in 2020.

Deborah: You went back to the art, to refute my invitation to go back to the art! I couldn't sit on the fringe as a supervisor and tell you to go and do something that I wasn't prepared to aesthetically companion you in. Using the arts-based, and the autoethnographic to inquire, means that I need to know those spaces too, and I need to speak that language.

Hilary: The different layers of the difficult experience and the difficult terrain that I was entering in, and having a relational experience in our supervision relationship with the arts...

Deborah: The arts became – rather than thingly-in-themselves-things on a phenomenological plane – they became beings-for-themselves. They became the third in our relationship, and they were able to hold so much more than we were able to hold, than me creating and responding to you was able to. The art took its own form and came back to you down the ether. I was able to be washed over by this holding, the way in which you were using the arts as a way to put a very gentle 'e' of the ethics, through the ether, and hold it, and hold those difficult stories and remind us, that when we don't know what to do, we return to the arts.



Figure 9: Still from Green & Tapper, *Rupture and Repair* (8:33).

The imagery returns to Hilary and Deborah in improvised movement together.

Deborah: The rupture and repair. That essential thing that hopefully, when we're tiny little wee tots in our mother's arms (or our father's arms, or whoever it is that is going to be our major primary caregiver), they're able to look at us, and hold us, and love us in such ways that things fall apart, and then are repaired, and things fall apart, and then are repaired. So that we develop that incredible circle of security, where we can run out on our own, and we can skin our knees, and we can climb trees, and we can do all the crazy magical things that allow us to grow and discover and bring new into our worlds. But we know, there is a safe base to come back to. That is an essential part of any relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee, that's the rupture and repair we need as humans, to make life worthy, to go out into the world. And that's what makes a piece of research worthy to go out into the world.

Hilary: Engaging with a methodology that is so edge-walking, that it calls upon a perspective of ethics that is quite different.

Deborah: The black-and-white printed lines that usually form the ground of an ethical statement... it's all those in-between spaces and how those are held with presence and ethicality, transparency, full awareness of the journey that you're going on together. There's no deception, there's honesty, there's integrity, there's empathy, there's compassion, and there's full disclosure each step of the way, of mapping: "Here we are now. Here we are now. This is what's making me frightened. This is what's making me scared"... from both the researcher and the supervisor... and the arts!

Maybe that's where the stable ground comes in, is in those ties that hold us together. And that comes back to the original attachment: how do we form relationships that are nebulous, fluid, dynamic entities in themselves, between two moving parts always in motion? There's nothing actually solid there.

Maybe that is where the ethics live – in those magical spaces of intersubjective places between the moving parts.



Figure 10: Still from Green & Tapper, *Rupture and Repair* (10:51).

Fade out on dance and to credits.

Session during the symposium

The symposium presentation format invited us into a cluster with other researchers who have used arts-based processes to facilitate their autoethnographic engagement. We each offer a short introduction to our recorded presentation.

Hilary: By the nature of abr+a as methodology, I experienced walking to the edge of my known worldings, something I did not anticipate, something that felt rather terrifying. Deborah, knowing this terrain well as an abr+a practitioner and creative arts therapist, invited again and again to ‘trust the process’, and walked right beside me. Rupture occurred in these difficult territories, as did repair (Siegal, 1999), as an ongoing dance of response-ability: responding to and with one another, as new unfolding terrain. (The modernist composer, John Cage (1957, p.10), referred to the word ‘responsibility’ as ‘response ability’, shifting the emphasis from an ethics of accountability to an *aesthetics* of engagement.)

The significance of the arts and art-making within our supervisory relationship and my methodological approach, added a significant aspect to the conversation of ethics within research. Artmaking between us, sending creations back and forth as conversation, expanded the response-ability between us – as we made art and the art made us (Green, 2021) - ethics was not a peripheral conversation of safety and ‘do no harm’ as a predetermined criteria, but – through artmaking, and staying close-in with the artmaking – generated an embodied, inter-relational, materialized triad of ethical, response-able experience, performing new knowings in the entanglement of relationship, and our existence. This experience was an on-going process,

constantly being re-negotiated, together, with the art, at the edge of the unknown.

Post-symposium ponderings

Further thoughts, wranglings and openings continued in light of our creative and poietic exploration in the presentation. We decided to bend our minds and hearts to capture a rather rough and ready, semi-dialogic tracery of these as a way to foster ongoingness of this conversation. In the writings that follow, we meander through several themes, picking them up, peering at them briefly and then laying them down for future consideration. These themes include the poietic nature of our process, contemplations regarding reflexivity and diffraction plus objectivity and emotionality, the role of personal principles as ethical guides, and insights into how this experience aligns with Burke's (1941) encouragement towards 'perspective by incongruity'.

The impromptu and poietic process of creating our presentation evoked curiosity from the other panelists in our symposium session. We'd engaged with our emerging understanding of relational ethics within a+r through the creation of this presentation, reflecting on our experience of rupture and repair in supervision through creative-responding. The creation of our presentation itself was a living poietic exploration of our curiosity, grappling with the query: What ethics may response-ably hold intersubjective and emotionally-laden actions and interactions within supervision? This is addressed within our profession as creative arts therapists, but receives scant attention in discussions of ethical processes in research supervision. In their meta-analysis of 66 publications addressing ethics in student researcher-supervisor relationships, Muthanna and Alduais (2020) offer few references to ways emotion may be ethically addressed and held within these relational structures. There is mention of the need for supervisors to offer 'emotional support' (p.101) and to be 'emotionally intelligent' (p.103), but other than this, little is written about what ethical response-ability the supervisor may carry when their supervisee enters troubling emotional terrain as a component of the research inquiry. We feel into this and are saddened but not surprised, given that the bedrock of traditional forms of research is hewn from the quest for objectivity while scouring away the living-lichen of emotion from the process.

This emphasis on objectivity is viewed as essential to both ethics and rigour in traditional forms of research. The absence of emotion from conventional scholarship is based on the assumption that affect and subjectivity impede knowledge-creation (Walsh, 2022). According to Shankar (2020), however, emotions are productive for human understanding. Creative engagement with autoethnographic research, invites partnerships that instigate participation of the whole beings of student-researcher and educator-supervisor, not just the so-called 'objective', rational and de-personalised portion. The full, multiplicit-self-of is always present and purposeful vulnerability is essential (Holman Jones et al., 2015). Rigour thus arises from reflexivity rather than attempted objectivity (Adams St. Pierre, 2014). Reflexivity, according to FitzGibbon (2022) "draws our attention to the underlying assumptions and positionality in our research decision-making" (p.22). Researching within fluid and emotionally-charged situations requires decision-making that is "not a single action, but multiple decisions and decisions revisited. To treat it otherwise is to attempt to hammer a nail into a river" (p.26).

Hilary: Reflexivity acknowledges the inextricable interwovenness of the researcher within the research process, and offers reflective and critical awareness of our emotions, influence and biases within our work. However, in the name of performative methodologies like abr+a, I am curious if this perspective of reflexivity goes far enough, and what limitations may be imbricated. The perpetuation of reflective/reflexive practices may potentially continue to deny our experience as part of the nature we seek to understand, reifying an artificial subject / object divide, and possibly stifling new knowing available – confusing it even - "a performative understanding...takes account of the fact that knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing, but rather from a direct material engagement with the world" (Barad, 2007, p.49). I'm wondering where diffraction possibly fits in to this conversation.

Deborah: Reflexivity to me *is* the very act of recognising performativity – it is the noticing, acknowledging, and being response-able for my agential role in both shaping *and* being shaped by knowledges in ever ongoing interactive cycles. Reflexivity is owning that when light passes through me, I change it and the light changes me. It is the very removal of the idea that the world is unmediated, it is the embrace of the role I play in mediating, shaping and being mediated and shaped as part and parcel of the world – both separate and imbricated.

Hilary: Deborah's definition of reflexivity is evidently informed by a sympoietic perspective. I'm really curious about her use of the word 'reflexivity' as almost like a meta-modern placeholder (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). Deborah and I send voice messages back-and-forth about this reflexivity/diffraction divide, and she describes, "If we succumb to either/or thinking and drop reflexivity for diffraction, we risk it all diffusing, we risk the loss of 'self'". Hearing this, I'm brought back to the anguish I experienced in my abr+a research. Maybe I was diffracting – trying to bend myself around the corners of an obstacle – without the container of reflexing? Where does the self live in performative research? Deborah suggests her 'both-and-and' approach, bringing reflexivity and diffraction together. I am doubtful, how can this be possible? Suddenly, a question dawns as I listen to Deborah introducing Haraway's (2016) 'staying-with-the trouble' in relationship to artmaking to a class of creative arts therapists in-training. What about *artmaking* as diffraction, or, our diffracting? Arts-making as diffractivity? What happens when we practice arts-based reflexivity? Are we diffracting in reflexivity by engaging the arts? Or, at least, are we doing a different kind of reflexivity when we do it with art? Undurraga (2021) suggests diffraction and reflexivity blur together and that we don't in practice use pure reflexivity or diffraction, and instead proposes 'diffracted reflexivity'. Within the context of creative arts therapy abr+a research, and specifically abr+a supervision – where the arts and artmaking are provoking *and* producing thereby inviting a "relating to ourselves in ways that are relationally, culturally, and materially enabled" (Undurraga, 2021, p.1) – perhaps further exploration is called for in relationship to ethical practices?

Deborah: This delicious diversion within our deliberations resonates with my spontaneous utterance during the video-making process that there is "nothing

actually solid there. Maybe that is where the ethics live – in those magical spaces of intersubjective places between the moving parts". My positionality as supervisor could be conceived of as a meta-modern, oscillating simultaneity of 'insider' and 'outsider' (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). My indwelling comes from culminating research experience and knowledge of what abra+ might entail, my own nascent inquiries into focal areas similar to Hilary's, and my practice of sympoietic presence as therapist. ("I borrow sympoiesis, meaning 'making with', from Haraway (2016) to acknowledge the intricate tentacular imbrication of I-make-the-art-and-the-art-makes-me" (Green, 2021)). Standing further out, I also represent my educational institution and wider creative arts therapy profession by helping Hilary mediate between what is emerging in her process and what will be demanded of this research when it exits the intimate holding sphere of our relationship and jaunts off into the world. In other words, and again using my words from the video, companionship Hilary on a process that results in a piece of research that is rigorous and robust, a process that "makes a piece of research worthy to go out into the world".

Saldāna (2015) suggests that the ethics of such 'companionship' may be shaped by a "set of personal principles for interpersonal action and interpersonal conduct" (p.80). When Hilary entered difficult spaces and our supervisor-supervisee relationship was in strife, what 'personal principles' did we draw upon?

Deborah: I stepped into the code of ethical practice that governs my work as a creative arts therapist. My lived practice as therapist is intersubjective, sympoietic and informed by ongoing reflexivity that mirrors Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg's (2021) notion that reflexivity is one path to dismantle hierarchies and interrogate ways our discourses and bodies are imprinted. This sympoietic reflexivity (with this new consideration that this is diffracted through arts-making) calls upon me to practice what I preach, and, as I state in the video: "I couldn't sit on the fringe ... and tell you to go and do something that I wasn't prepared to aesthetically companion you in". This has resonances of Rooke's (2016) ontology of vulnerability by embracing "intimacy, sensory involvement, embodied experience ... which takes emotions seriously" and "questions to what extent we are willing to be pulled apart or undone by our own research" (as cited in Walsh, 2022, p.243). And as I type this, I feel a thrill of transgression and fear. Is this stance ethical? As therapist, as educator, as supervisor? I've written about being a Wounded-Healer and a Wounded-Educator (Green, 2020). Is this a call to more fully interrogate the role I play as Wounded-Supervisor?

Hilary: My response as Wounded-Student/supervisee, my spill of remorse and anguish, infuses the image below (Fig. 10) that was created the day after I sent Deborah *The Poem*.



Figure 11: Hilary Tapper, (2020), Important matter. *Pencil image.*

I can recall my panic, having felt like I had leaked out of the confines of supervision ‘formality’ with her. Deborah really did take my emotions seriously, as in, she replied to my angry poem with: “What a gift to feel so fully ... you shouted loudly and in pain, in defense of your heart and soul that are finding a way to speak out through these words ... it is in these ruptures, and the repair you and I can create together, that the real magic happens” (Green, 2020, personal communication). Deborah’s response reframed and held my emotional experience as creatively generative, with the potential for magic, together. I couldn’t believe it. This research process was alive, close-in, edge-walking, and, I wasn’t doing it alone.

A further lens that may be used to unlock an aspect of rigour-building within our rupture and repair process was gifted by Amy Arellano and Christine Ivey during their ISAN Symposium workshop focusing on ‘Duoautoethnography’ (2022). They offer Burke’s (1941) ‘perspective by incongruity’ as a way to place two different (potentially oppositional) stances into conversation so as to invite a third space of understanding. This juxtaposition of individual narratives, according to Arellano and Ivey (2022) has the potential, when brought together, to “see around the corner” (Burke, 1941, p.400) of a lone perspective. This framing comes into play again when we are attempting to coerce into words, the experience of our presentation. We exchange drafts...

Deborah: ... and I notice that Hilary has removed *The Poem* from the section where I had pasted in the text from our proposal. *The Poem* was Hilary's response to my suggestion during her data gathering that “she’s cut the legs off her images (and her soul)” by moving too quickly from richly layered arts-inquiry into what I experienced as dry, abstract theorising. This led to my invitation to turn “back to the source”. Her response using *The Poem* shook me to my core. It offers me insight (albeit enraged) into her lived/ing-story/ies. For the first time I see her edges, her teeth, I spy the muscles moving beneath her smooth skin. I'm enthralled (and appalled, as the tales she discloses are breath-snatching). When initially crafting the proposal for the ISAN Symposium, I fossick through yards of emails and winkle out *The Poem*. I insert this into our draft. Hilary goes silent. She finally discloses that, awash with hot shame, she'd deleted *The Poem* after sending it to me in 2020. Having it suddenly reappear now was like a ‘large black tongue licking up her body’. After some contemplation, she reluctantly decided she could endure a modified version being included in our proposal.

Hilary: Since the moment I originally sent *The Poem* to Deborah in my fury in 2020, I never wanted it to be read or seen again. I deeply regretted what I'd done. *The Poem* contained angry and defensive rejections of Deborah's invitations to stay close in with what was emerging in my abr+a research, as well as stories from my past that I hadn't spoken about before. (In rejecting her invitation to stay close-in, I went *really* close-in, in a way that hurts me now to see what I wrote, and how I wrote it – to her and about myself). I wasn't anticipating ever seeing it again, let alone holding it out for the world to see!

Deborah: When *The Poem* vanishes from the text of this write-up as it loops through Hilary's hands, I think, ‘Fuck-a-doodle, does this telling have heft, credibility, bite without this pointer to the personal terrain she'd entered?’

But then, I slow down, invite second and third thoughts. ‘How may we simultaneously honour Hilary's desire to not have *The Poem* out there scampering about in the world, while still doing this piece justice?’ And aha, I realize we are again being invited back to ground-zero, to the place where it began, where the discord-between provides us with ‘perspective by incongruity’ and the opportunity to ‘look around the corner’ as our ‘atoms crash’ (Burke, 1941). It is in this third space, this ‘both-and-and’ that the ‘something more’ (Green, 2022) of this form of research takes flight...

We notice several things at this juncture. One is a theme we raised at the symposium – that there was much talk of the robustness required to send our vulnerable work into the world, work that tells private, exposing stories. Work that often elicits derisive scoffing from more traditional researchers. This ‘robustness’ begs for some further pondering, further consideration of the self-belief and bounce-back-ability it implies. It calls forth curiosity from us, as therapists and researchers, about degrees to which some of us have it and others don't, and how we might (re)cultivate it (Siegel, 1999).

Deborah: In this context, my inquisitiveness peaks around a sense that often the marginalized stories (which are the least told and therefore most in need of finding voice) are often alive within those people from whom such robustness

has been stripped. I now see this at work in our interaction regarding *The Poem*. The very story that I'm urging Hilary to share is the reason she is reluctant, it details events that lodged trauma in her being trauma that screws with her robustness.

Hilary: I must also acknowledge that at an earlier time in my life, I wouldn't have taken the risk, or had the courage to say 'no' to Deborah here. I would have gone with what was asked or expected of me, despite my not feeling comfortable. As much as I don't want to 'fuck-a-doodle' with Deborah's plan here, I honour this moment as something remarkable in even the process of compiling this very document. The dance of rupture and repair, of relational response-ability, continues ongoingly, as does the emergences of these intra-actions. Again, I'm learning that I can say 'No' in our relationship, that there can be ruptures, and that too creates *something more*. With risks, something new can arrive. Even the absence of *The Poem* generates a presence.

Standing in this, I felt inspired to include a segment of *The Poem* in an (un)spoken form, honouring its absence-presence. I recorded the following, removing my voice midway through: <https://youtu.be/M219aiS0Mus>

Deborah: I'm again struck to my very core when I experience this new (de)erasure of *The Poem*. A second knowing follows on the heels of this, a questful knowing at the heart of this presentation. As a therapist, I edge towards a client's trauma stories oh so slowly, whispering and cooing. Sometimes, I don't even go there – the telling of the tale can reignite and deepen embodied distress. Most often, I never hear a full telling of the happenings and we work only with the felt sense of the experience/s as they call to us through the body and the arts. As researcher and research supervisor, however, I salivate over a good gnarly story. And thus emerges another place of incongruity, another invitation to corner-peer for ways to honour both roles. Maybe Hilary and I have modelled our emergent capacity for this?

Hilary: Abr+a experientially introduced me to the possibility of research close-in, knowledge as performed and emergent, and reality as relational. Deborah's supervision experientially demonstrated to me that I was non-separate from my research, and that I wasn't alone at my edge, and the rupture in our relationship crystallised this for me. The knowings which emerged from my research project were non-separate from my experiences with her. Our relationship was consistent with the relationality native to arts-based and autoethnographic ways of knowing and being. We were all entangled together, being formed by and forming one another. To question: 'is this ethical?', is as complicated as tracing ethics within therapy. I don't know. And, I wonder if the question itself suggests more so the limits of the paradigms which informed conventional approaches to research and psychotherapy (and their keen separation of relational entanglement) than it says of the actual safety or harm of the research or therapy participants.

I'm left wondering about the ways the arts can complexify, trouble, reflex and diffract the boxes of predetermined ethical practices, by questioning: 'Is not

my, your, our, very existence an ethical matter?’ And thereby, ‘what is our ethical responsibility within all aspects of research in abr+a?’

A place to pause

It feels as if the cantankerous, then creative, then collaborative experience we share/d during this research journey – and now the subsequent revisitings – was/is a living example of rupture and repair interlaced with perspective by incongruity (Burke, 1941) – or even perspective by perplexity. It has and continues to invite us to deepen our connection and to join hands as we peer around several corners – one of which opens provocative and as yet not adequately addressed questions regarding the ethics of creative autoethnographic supervision relationships. Let’s keep exploring, shall we?

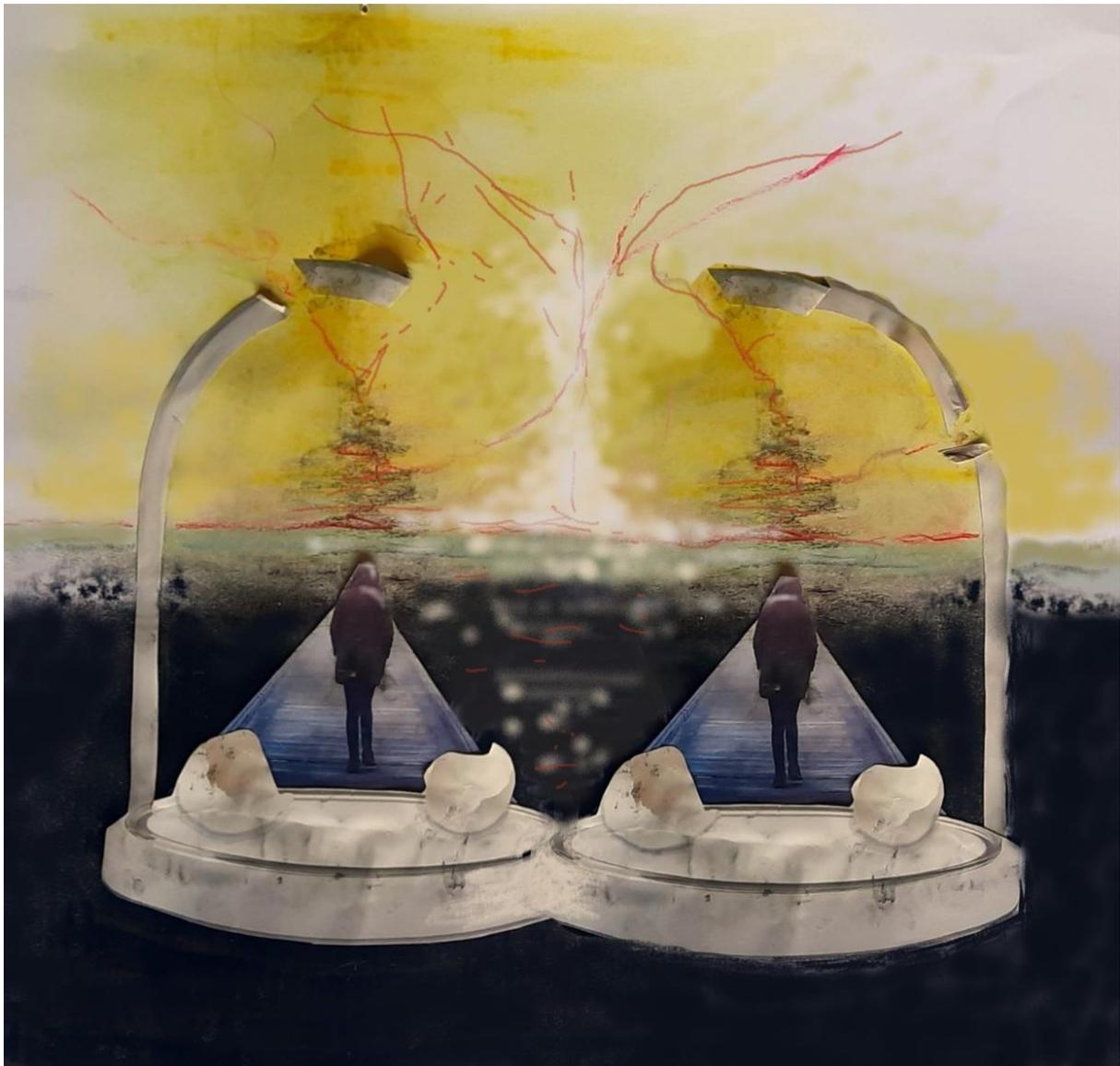


Figure 11: *Deborah Green (2022), Diffractive-reflexive-sympoietic-perplexity, Photograph.*

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Unarranged Conversations: Reflections on Uncertainty in Conversations about the Practice of Arranged Marriage

Shuktara Sen Das
Montgomery County Community College
shuktaradas@yahoo.com

Abstract

Conversations between individuals who follow different cultural practices could result in learning and bonding. But often they don't, because of perceptual barriers. In this paper, I critique my own role in conversations about arranged marriage to explore why this happens. Two conversation episodes are described, one in which I experienced a feeling of being "stuck" and felt unsure about appropriate responses and a second one where (in my opinion), I experienced greater poise. I call these conversations "unarranged" because they commenced without warning (as often happens in informal conversations) and obviously, also as a play on the "arranged" part of "arranged marriage". As I analyze my thoughts, I explore how norms and practices in evolution show up as uncertainty/anxiety in participants' thoughts and conversations.

Introduction

Some conversations keep replaying in our minds. Perhaps they were informative, emotionally touching, marking a significant life turn, or perhaps they caused discomfiture. For an immigrant, there are frequent opportunities to converse with individuals who identify with a different culture.

Discussing connections and divergences between cultures is stimulating. I like explaining my perspectives on the culture of my native country and like learning about how others practice norms of the one they identify with. Such conversations are however fraught with the danger of misunderstandings. One set of conversations (different episodes on the same theme) I particularly remember were about arranged marriages. I remember these conversations because they were uncomfortable.

Arranged marriage refers to unions where parents and/or extended family, and conditions unrelated to the marrying partners' feelings for each other have significant impact on the who and how of the union. Arranged marriages often involve overt economic bargaining and kinship networks beyond the marrying couple (Cott, 2000). This is in contrast with unions where the marrying partners have sole decision making. Arranged marriage was normative in pre-industrialized societies, have declined and almost disappeared from Western societies but remain widespread in Asia, Africa and Middle East (Apostolou, 2010; Anukriti & Dasgupta 2017; Goode, 1970; Goody, 1983 and Hamon & Ingolsby, 2003).

As Western societies have moved away from arranged marriage, their members retain an onlookers' interest in this practice, especially because of its impact on women and their ability to exercise individual choice. Not just Western societies though, progressive feminist writers (female and male) from within the arranged marriage predominant societies, as far back as the early 20th century, have written about the patriarchal bias and female disempowerment inherent in this practice. More recently though, a slew of Bollywood movies and popular literature have

posited an alternative view of arranged marriage, highlighting romantic love and fulfilment as a plausible outcome alongside and despite the power imbalance (Aguilar, 2013).

The practice itself varies (based on geography, religion, economics) in the way it is enforced and evolves. Focusing on a single country example of arranged marriage in India, we can see that there are regional and rural/urban differences in the manner of practice. Most importantly the practice is evolving as the relative role of parents and marrying individuals are actively negotiated (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016; Dasgupta, 2014).

My conversations about arranged marriage were intriguing enough to me that I found myself writing about them. In my writing, I describe the conversations, as I remember them and reflect on and attempt to analyze why I thought and said what I did. I describe how my own perceptions of arranged marriage and understanding of the social/historical context of the practice affect the way I respond to questions and comments about the same. To clarify my point of view – I am in an arranged marriage and was married at the time of the conversations described here. Hence I write as someone who is part of the system and who attempts to view it from both inside and outside. I also think of the Anxiety-Uncertainty Management Theory (Gudykunst, 1988, 1993, 2001; McIntyre, 2019). William B Gudykunst proposed the theory as an extension of Berger & Calabrese' (1975) Uncertainty Reduction Theory. He argued that individuals engaged in an intercultural conversation experience *uncertainty* and *anxiety* due to their lack of knowledge about each other and inability to predict responses. His work also uses the term *stranger* to denote individuals in an intercultural conversation. The word is used in its basic sense of a stranger being someone unknown, rather than in association with connotations of mystery or sinisterness. Uncertainty is defined as a cognitive phenomenon which affects our perceptions of people who are different from us, and anxiety is the emotional counterpart (2005a, 2005b). This theory suggests that the ability to manage uncertainty and anxiety affects communication effectiveness and intercultural adaptation (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001; Gudykunst, 2005a, 2005b). When uncertainty is beyond a maximum threshold (which could be different for different individuals), it may be difficult to communicate effectively, and one might even avoid interaction. On the other hand, experiencing low levels of uncertainty may cause us to feel overconfident and ignore differences in assumptions. Anxiety and uncertainty go hand in hand and the more uncertain we feel of the other person's reaction, the greater anxiety we feel. As I look at my reflections on "unarranged conversations", I see this unfold and realize how my experience illustrates how uncertainty/anxiety influences responses in intercultural conversations. I see the role of uncertainty especially, in my efforts to second guess the motivations of my conversational partner(s) and speedily dissect my thoughts to choose the most effective response.

Individuals have access to connections between their own thought and talk in a way that the most avid listeners and researchers don't. Though subject to bias and distortions by retrospective reconstruction and deliberate narrative organization, autobiographical / autoethnographic reflections on conversations could provide a window to an individual's thoughts in a way that third person research cannot. If we elect to publicly analyze (as in a conference) our thoughts and communication behaviors in socially significant situations (such as conversation between individuals representing different cultures), we might be able to explain more of various communication outcomes. If an ideal outcome of an intercultural conversation is that it increases understanding and dispels stereotypes, what prevents it? This paper is written with the motive of exploring this question.

There are two instances I describe, along with reflections and analysis - one conversation which I left feeling confused and embarrassed, and one where I was more in control, having learned from earlier instances. However, they both reveal a framework for understanding what prevents participants in an intercultural communication from understanding each other.

Recollections of “Unarranged Conversations”

Did you have an arranged marriage? Interestingly a common question to be asked if you are an immigrant from the eastern side of the world. I have been asked several times. Three times that I remember, once at an academic conference, once by a senior colleague, and once at my daughter’s playdate.

It was at a communication conference. There was talk of some of the attendees meeting for a dinner at a Mexican restaurant. It was about a year after completing my PhD and I had not landed full time employment. I taught as a part time lecturer and the fear that I would remain *part-time* forever, had begun to set in. I knew I had to be better at networking. A dinner with twenty odd scholars seemed a good opportunity to practice. We were seated at a table large enough for all of us and the chit chat began. As the twenty devolved into groups based on who was sitting next to whom, the attendee sitting to my left asked me about my dissertation.

My dissertation looked at parent-child communication in Asian American families in the US. I studied how parents and children negotiate privacy. As I present my much rehearsed elevator speech, she asks, “What about marriage? Do the kids get to choose who they marry?” I find my animated networking stumped a bit. I should have known that this question would make its way into the conversation. I explain that within my sample, the parents, most of whom were married through that tradition, have revised their perspective.

Then comes the question – how about you? Did you have an arranged marriage? I feel unsure about an appropriate response. I wonder—is she interested in my dissertation or arranged marriage? Who am I here? – a scholar or an oriental specimen? Is she intellectually interested in parent-child communication and arranged marriage customs or is she being nice to a poor abused woman? Do I reveal that, yes, my marriage was arranged by my family? How much detail do I go into? - Is it okay to rationalize that there are many cultures which practice arranged marriage; that European immigrants to the US in 17th and 18th centuries did too? Each group’s customs vary from the others. Customs vary across time too. My grandmothers, mother and I all had arranged marriages but very different ones. Grandmothers had little say, mother had some, I had much. I was introduced to a suitable boy and then we dated. Is that even a true blue arranged marriage or no?

Or do I blur the truth and say, “no I knew my husband, from before”. Or do I simply say, “yes”? Or do I go further and reveal that, I went along with my family’s choice, *willingly*, while many of my friends and cousins had opted for *love marriage*, the rebellious sibling of this custom? Do I say I am fine with this arrangement as are millions of women in India and perhaps quite a few in the US as well? Marriage is hard work for everybody, no matter what; being “arranged” need not make it worse?

Or do I reveal my doubts and discontent? Do I think that this modernized version is a fair option for both men and women? *Umm, not really*. Like most things in the world, the yes-no binary fails to capture the nuances of the custom. Which truth do I acknowledge and what do I gloss over?

A chain of internal arguments put me in a communication limbo. *Arranged* defines my marriage and I assume myself (irrationally) to be a de-facto apologist for both arranged marriage and India. If I could say it is a great system and that I would want it for my daughter, it would be a great defense. But I cannot say that because I do not believe it to be hundred percent perfect.

But I fear that expressing a critical perspective could sharpen the negative stereotype and obfuscate the redeemable aspects of the custom. Culture is dynamic, India is pluralistic, and no one practice defines India. I know this, yet I cannot find a clear answer because I am unable to trust someone not from India to see those nuances. To distance myself from arranged marriage is to distance myself from all its versions and I worry that would reinforce the reductive perspective of the practice being summarily abusive and of India as nothing more than an anti-women establishment.

I go into a spiel about how the custom has evolved. Mostly I give a picture of a culture-proud representative, though feeling unhinged inside. I talk more than I need to. I do not talk about my job market value. I do a pop-anthropological analysis of the evolution of arranged marriage in India. The conversation moves to my immigration being linked with my marriage. I hear “that must be so hard – do you have any family here?”. It sounds like genuine concern and awe. My mouth is open but shut. *Do I think this is hard? Did I know this is hard? Can it be easy to leave one’s family of origin thousands of miles away, a job and other interests rooted in the native country, for a man one hardly knows?*

But when thinking of migrating to the US, who thinks about that? “US will open up vistas” a relative had said. The first world is the place to be in. A man who has successfully moved to the US has proved his mettle. Women leave their father’s home; this is just another country instead of another city. Phone services have improved so much! Travel has become so much easier! What is there to think about?

That one statement, true to the core, rendered impotent through generations of practiced, reinforced denial, hits me. *How could I have not known that what I did was hard? How could I have chosen to do something hard? How could I have been asked to do something hard?* The question discovers the deepest socially conditioned part of who I am.

I have no answer. My words make a move towards friendly America and the multitude of opportunities. It works and the conversation turns. Fortunately, others are at the table too, and with so much of the conference to talk about.

Love and freedom are perhaps the two most important values for Americans. Love is the beginning, middle and end of the concept of a happy marriage. The couple relationship is the pivot of society. Dating is common before finishing school. Studies on couple relationships and marriage problems are published in multiple every year from a variety of disciplines.

Love is what we hear about less when discussing arranged marriages in many Indian families. “Marriage is between families” is the proud refrain. Marriage is responsibility, service, a rite of passage into a higher status. Love is not the thing. The thing is settling down. The thing is security, for women. The thing is status. Love is the bonus. It is a Bollywood indulgence. Are these values inherently bad or restrictive? No. Personally, I like “settling down”. I think of the stories of wives being abused; of friends and sisters who discovered soon after marriage how false and fleeting the pre-wedding promises of love forever can be, of young girls and boys bought and sold, and of sudden tragedies neatly marking a bright, happy, before from a sorrowful after. An arranged marriage with real or imagined settling down and love as a question mark is more than what most people get in this world. But still... it is hard to unsee the patriarchal assumptions underlying the practice. Still harder to unsee a more fundamental question – how necessary is marriage?

Few years later, a near duplicate sequence of question and answer occurs with a senior colleague. Later again, it moves further with my daughter’s friend’s mother, at a park playdate. Comes the question, “would you want an arranged marriage for your daughter?”. “I would want

what she wants” is what I say. Perhaps I am better prepared. It is also the truth. I want her to have agency. She chooses if and whom to marry.

Being prepared however, does not fully take away the struggle to find the right answer. I say she chooses *if*... According to a 2020 Pew Research Center report, a large proportion of the single population prefers that status for reasons such as they *like being single* or *have other priorities*. But with the world taking a noticeably conservative turn over the last few years, it is not lost to me that her choice might even go in the opposite direction. It is not lost to me that she might like me to arrange a date for her. The proliferation of dating sites in recent times testifies that single individuals often appreciate the assistance of a third party. So, if in a post-feminist *Tribhanga*¹ inspired twist, her eyes meet mine and say that she would like me to help her find a spouse, I should not be shocked. If I have lived through forty plus years without realizing that there is no such thing as a reliable prediction model, I have learned little. See, even here I am not sure!

The other mother’s face belies nothing. Does she believe me? Or does she think it is a practiced response? What does she make of “I would want what she wants”? Does she see the layers and disclaimers hidden beneath the statement? Or is she relieved – that we are a little less different than we thought?

I have been asked the same question by other Indian immigrants who married for love, but they get clear and confident responses. But with a representative of my host country, I read multiple motivations into a most likely benign question. An intellectual query? An offer of rescue? A search for gossip? A feminist appraisal? Plain curiosity? A measure of difference? A safe opportunity for a tantalizing brush with the *third* world? A moment of gratitude at being born into a culture that privileges pre-marital romance? As such, any or all of these questions can be excused, if you think about it. They all stem from the human motivation to confirm one’s place in society. I have such motivations too, I am sure (perhaps for an immigrant/“non-Bengali”² in India, to unpeel²).

Going back to the Anxiety-Uncertainty Management Theory, reviewing my thoughts during these conversations, reveals some of the anatomy of uncertainty. In my situation, uncertainty was characterized by an inner dialogue about how to interpret a question about arranged marriage and what response to verbalize. In the first conversation described above, this inner dialogue led me to a response that was perhaps more detailed than the question-asker had bargained for. But the inner dialogue also prepared me for a more confident response in a future conversation. So, yes, uncertainty did affect my ability to communicate effectively. What strikes me more though, is that a significant part of the uncertainty involved a dissection of my own feelings and perceptions of arranged marriage and almost an appraisal of that custom. I found myself rationalizing my own stance towards it. To me this is an important insight that in an intercultural communication situation, our uncertainty is heightened by our own questioning of what we represent.

Conclusion

Friendships have a chance when we move past commonly exchanged aspects of identity, such as name, place of residence, profession and so on. But when such “getting to know you” conversations move to cultural practices, they can dissolve into fogs of confusion and pretense.

¹ A recent Hindi film depicting three generations of women, the youngest of whom takes a conservative approach to approach in reaction to the unconventional lives led by her mother and grandmother.

² *Non-Bengali* is often used in common parlance by individuals who identify as Bengali speaking, as a binary opposite to *Bengali* to denote in-group/ out-group affiliations.

Our schemas about each other's culture creep in. We see nuances in the customs we have experienced, not the ones we see from afar. We read threats into these questions. We feel anxious and uncertain. Our thoughts spiral into immobilizing internal debates. We not only question the motives of the person we are conversing with but also our own assumptions of what we represent. We scurry to find an articulate response that will get us off the hook. We respond with masked answers. And this leaves us in danger of remaining strangers forever.

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Cultivating Home

Local Farms, Global Diasporas, and Transnational Labor

Himanee Gupta
SUNY Empire State College
Himanee.Gupta-Carlson@esc.edu

Nadine Wedderburn
SUNY Empire State College
Nadine.Wedderburn@esc.edu

Abstract

This paper is part of a project in which we use collaborative autoethnography to explore our respective relationships with Jamaican seasonal workers who often represent a family-owned farm as vendors at a farmers market in upstate New York. We argue the farmers market, a space where global peoples, foods, and racial and ethnic dynamics intersect, leads us as women of color to ponder ‘home’. As we explore our relationships with the market, we show how the COVID-19 pandemic and repeated explosions of violence, such as the strangling of George Floyd, make cultivating home in this space more vital than ever.

Keywords

Farmers Markets (United States, New York), Diasporas (South Asian, Jamaican, Caribbean), Collaborative Autoethnography, Home, Farming

Presentations for the annual conference of the International Society for Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry have taken place in a unique manner in 2021 and 2022, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for the gathering to go virtual. Participants submitted “paper” proposals and then prepared short video presentations based on those proposals. ISAN made the presentations available to registrants about a month before the conference, with the idea that the conference time be devoted to discussion of the prepared video presentations, rather than having participants share their work in live time. In our panel, each presenter offered a 1-2 minute overview of their presentation and work, before our moderator opened the floor for discussion.

This conference format gave us – Himanee Gupta and Nadine Wedderburn – an opportunity to first prepare our work, then to reflect on the work in the context of pre-conference workshops and other presentations, and finally to share our work, receive feedback from others, and reflect on the overall experience. This format models the work of autoethnography as a production of texts that are “complete” for a given purpose (i.e., conference presentation, publication) but never entirely finished. It also gave us numerous opportunities to engage in revision. Ellis (2020) helpfully articulates revision as “rewriting current stories to assist in determining how best to live in the present and the future rather than seeking new meanings in what already has taken place”, even as one “consults the past for the lessons it provides us to use now and take into the future” (pp. xi-xii). She notes that this is a revision to an earlier

understanding of revision where one reflects on “how, as we pass through different stages of life, the meanings of previous experiences move, change, and call for revision” (Ellis, 2020, p. xi).

This sense of looking back and then looking forward while engaging in consultation with the past has helped guide me, Himanee, particularly in preparing this essay about the work Nadine and I have begun on exploring our relationships with Jamaican farm workers we have gotten to know. I, Himanee, have sought ways to deepen my understanding of the theoretical components of autoethnography, and see revision as a process of continual reflection, leading to a deepening of analysis. I, Nadine, am newer to autoethnography as a research method, academic genre, and writing style. I have found particular sustenance in the memory work enabled through engaging with Himanee and the Jamaicans who I meet at the market. As we work together, we realize we have been using many of the strategies of collaborative autoethnographic work that Jonathan Wyatt highlighted at ISAN 2022 in his workshop on Collaborative Writing as Inquiry. This iteration of our project “Cultivating Home: Local Farms, Global Diasporas, and Transnational Labor” has taken shape through these experiences. In the sections that follow, we intersperse uses of the “I” to refer to us individually with the “we” to reflect collective understandings.

Cultivating Home project

We began working on our project, Cultivating Home: Local Farms, Global Diasporas, and Afro-Caribbean Labor, in the summer of 2021 as a means of brainstorming ways to make more visible the invisibility of Jamaican and other Afro-Caribbean farm workers. We decided to hone in on one farm – a family-owned apple orchard that is relatively small, as orchards go – and one local farmers market in the upstate New York city of Schenectady. Schenectady, population 158,000, is a majority white city in a predominantly rural part of New York. By car, it is about two and a half hours north of New York City.

Nadine: I am an Afro-Jamaican immigrant woman living in Schenectady. I am a college professor who teaches sociology and public policy. In the past, I have taken the train once a week to New York City to teach a study group of undergraduate students. I am a regular patron of the Schenectady Greenmarket which takes place on Sundays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. year-round.

Himanee: I am the eldest daughter of immigrants from India. I live about 40 minutes by car from Schenectady. In addition to being a college professor, I am one of a few women of color in the area who owns and operates a farm. I have been selling my farm-grown vegetables, eggs, and meats at the Schenectady Greenmarket since November 2019. We both have lived in the area since 2010, when we joined the SUNY Empire State College faculty as assistant professors.

Farm work is one of the opportunities for overseas employment available through Jamaica’s Ministry of Labour and Social Security in partnership with the H-2A program for Temporary Agricultural Workers in the United States. This program enables U.S. employers to recruit and bring foreign nationals into the country (temporarily) to meet agricultural labor needs. For Jamaicans to qualify for the program, they must be between 21 and 45 years old, literate, in good health, and have a valid Jamaican passport and two other government-issued documents (Jamaica Ministry of Labour and Social Security).

In September 2021, the Jamaican government reported that of the 4,781 Jamaicans participating in the Overseas Employment Programme, 3,625 were farmers in the H2A program.

The government has expressed interest in expanding this program. In the same report, the Jamaican government announced that 250 farm workers departed the island to take up positions in the United States. Of that total, 150 were employed as cane cutters (Jamaica Observer, 2021).

Based on these figures, we surmise that the Jamaican farm workers who we have gotten to know are part of a small group. This group differs from other Jamaican agriculturalists who enter the United States each year to work. Our preliminary research suggests the farm workers who come to upstate New York are part of a network of friends and acquaintances whose ties extend to farm owners whose operations are large enough to require seasonal laborers and to individual districts and parishes from where these farmworkers hail in Jamaica. It is also clear from our preliminary research that the farm workers we know are highly skilled, hardworking individuals whose labor has contributed significantly to the farm owner's growth. The owner of the apple orchard that employs these Jamaicans consistently credits their skill set and hard work as integral to his farm's success.

As we began outlining how we might approach the farm workers, we began talking and writing about our relationships to those workers, the particular farm where they work, and the farmers market in Schenectady that brings us all together. We also reflected on our multiple locations within the ethnographic site.

Himanee: I found myself drawing a bit subconsciously on Donna Haraway's 1988 essay, "Situated Knowledges," which, like many studying feminist theory, I read in graduate school. Haraway's claims of knowledge and objectivity as being articulated on the basis of where one sits within particular discourses has long been a part of how I have determined how to place myself within both ethnographic spaces and autoethnographic writings. Engaging in this practice with a colleague who was placing herself differently in the ethnographic space we were occupying pushed me to think further about how to articulate my relationship with the farmers market, the Jamaican farmworkers, and even the owner of the apple orchard with whom I had been acquainted for a number of years.

Nadine: I found myself recalling my childhood education in history and social studies when I learned about the Tainos, the indigenous people of Jamaica and, therefore, the original custodians of the land; poems and folk songs which celebrate the Jamaican market experience, e.g. those written or rendered by Jamaican cultural luminary Louise Bennett-Coverley; and readings of "The Story of the Jamaican People" by Phillip Sherlock and Hazel Bennett which recounts the history of the island from an Afro-Jamaican perspective.

Bringing these varying responses together as we met first monthly, then weekly, to work on the project helped us start to see ourselves as participants in a farmers market that was a confluence of global peoples, migrations, foods, socio-economic issues, racial and ethnic dynamics. In that space, tensions over land ownership, labor, food security, and food sovereignty come into play. We realized our project contained many layers of relationality between the local and global, laborers and land owners, farmers and farm workers, and, as colleagues and friends, ourselves. The video we shared with conference participants beforehand begins to unpack these layers.

Conference Presentation

Nadine opens our video presentation with a statement of purpose. Speaking from her home office in Schenectady, she articulates the scope of our work in the elocutionary style in which she was trained in her early school years in St. Ann, Jamaica. She is crisp and professional, as a scholar and professor.

The scene then shifts to Himanee's farm, where she and Nadine are much more casual and relaxed. They are wearing jeans and light jackets. After hours of being outdoors, Himanee's hair is windblown. They stand on the banks of the Hudson River, which abuts Himanee's farm. She offers a land acknowledgement to the Mahican peoples and identifies the river as the Mahicanituck, meaning waters that never are still. For the next several minutes, we converse about the project.

Toward the end, the video shifts to scenes of the farmers market, closing with a brief introduction to a Jamaican farmworker, photos of the market, and music that captures a sense of its atmosphere.





Our panel took place on the third day of the conference, following one full day of workshops and a full day of panel presentations, keynote addresses, and author spotlights. We met via Zoom the night before to discuss our reactions to what we had been taking in and to plan how we would describe our video. In doing so, we realized that at least two themes of this conference have been informing our work: Collaborative autoethnography and the pandemic.

Himanee: On the latter, we came to see that the desire to Cultivate Home at the farmers market grew stronger during the pandemic. We also saw that the pandemic for us is not just about COVID – testing, infection rates, social distancing, masking, vaccines, sanitizer bottles, washing our hands. We do all of that. We always have taught online so there were no major shifts there either. What has impacted us more are the repeated explosions of violence and other events – the strangling of George Floyd, the police suppression of demands for justice over the killing of Breonna Taylor, the claims of a stolen election, mob violence in the U.S. Capitol one year ago, the surge in anti-Asian hate, the breakdown of civil society in Afghanistan.

Nadine shared with me that watching these events unfold on TV brought her to tears more than once. Listening to reports on the radio while crisscrossing the region in my car left me with a heaviness that was hard to shake off. Amid the violence that the pandemic made visible, the home we have started and continue to cultivate at the Schenectady market seems more vital than ever.

Nadine: Ideas about the meaning of “home” kept coming back to me as I contemplated what it meant to be living as a Black immigrant woman from Jamaica in upstate New York (where the demographics are changing but still remain predominantly white). The so-called racial reckoning that I witnessed unfolding had me reflecting on my lived experience(s) in a place I had come to call “home”. All of these memories “took me back home” in a strangely ominous way; and so, to have a space where I could “release” some of these tensions – by way of commiserating with Jamaican farm workers who are vendors at the market – was nothing less than vital.

I should hasten to say that I am by no means estranged from family and friends; but, short of visits which are infrequent, and even more so now with the pandemic, the farmers market is the one place where I get to meet regularly with other Jamaicans while living in Schenectady. This is what I mean when I say in the video that being a farmers market regular is “heartwarming”. I look forward to Sundays when, very often, it may be the only time in a week when I publicly “get to just be my Jamaican self.” For instance, a typical conversation may be:

Nadine: Suh when laas yuh guh home?

Jamaican vendor: Mi a go dung inna Decemba

Nadine: An wen u come back?

Jamaican vendor: Some time inna March

When I describe in the video how the vendors and I talk in Jamaican Creole (what might be commonly known as *patois*), I become animated and I comment that the movement of my body is instinctive in the expression of my Jamaican-ness. This part of being Jamaican is rooted in my African heritage. Jamaicans communicate with their whole bodies, and so even in talking about the parts of my farmers market experience that involves chatting with Jamaican vendors, I feel my body get lighter and more relaxed. Erica Stearns, a panelist in the session who shared work on disability community-building, pointed out this part in the video to recognize how people communicate affinities through their bodies and their interactions. Having a common language different from that of the dominant group is one way that I bring out my Jamaican self when I am with the Jamaican vendors I meet at the market.

Himane: If I happen to see Nadine interacting with the Jamaican vendors in this way, I get the sense that she and they have entered a different sense of community. She is still here with me at the farmers market, but she is also almost somewhere else, in her own sense of home.

Conference Reflection

After the conference, we met to discuss preparing our Conference Proceeding. We decided to follow a technique of writing together that Wyatt had shared in his Collaborative Autoethnography workshop. We set our timers for 50 minutes, turned off our videos, muted our mics, and wrote separately. When we reconvened, we realized we each had gone deeper into our relationships with the autoethnographic space we are striving to cultivate.

Nadine: Our panel discussion during the presentation time further reminded me that processing my feelings during the summer of 2020 made me recall memories of my father talking about not wanting to live in a place where he would be treated as a “second class citizen”. As various replays of footage from the 60s civil rights era rolled across the tv screen day after day for months, I remembered how my father, who had had a taste of that era, would talk about his experiences of the Jim Crow south. As a young ship worker, he traveled as part of the shipping crews that would deliver bauxite from Jamaica to U.S. ports in Corpus Christi, Texas and Gramercy, Louisiana in the early sixties. I drew on Bob Marley and Peter Tosh albums to get me through these difficult, emotionally-intense moments – as the sounds of militant, yet soul-affirming Jamaican reggae music seemed to be the only source of strength and calm for me.

Himane: I focused on the significance of the two sites that our video depicts – the farmers market and my farm. I also thought about who we were in relationship to upstate New York, the college where we work, and each other.

Collaboratively Writing about “Cultivating Home”

Himane: Both Nadine and I have lived in the area for more than a decade. However, we each acknowledge a sense of remoteness and isolation as conditioning our lives. Our college is aimed at educating non-traditional adult learners in a decentralized manner. Its aim is to reach the hard-to-reach individual and put them in contact with supportive faculty who then work one-on-one with the students to individualize their learning. That pedagogical style creates close interactions between students and faculty. However, it often leaves us as faculty little time and opportunity to build relationships with one another and with the communities where we live. These work conditions make our professional and personal lives seem discombobulated and lonely, feelings that often are magnified by our sense of being only one of a handful of people of color in predominantly white communities. The loneliness evaporates when each of us enter the local farmers market, a realm that is infused with warm smells, good food, live music, and people of multiple ethnic and racial communities.

I am a vendor at two farmers markets. I experience each of them differently. For me, a Saturday morning farmers market in Saratoga Springs is like home base. It’s a space where after 12 years of being first a shopper, then volunteer, then food security organizer, and now a vendor, everyone knows my name. When I go to Schenectady on Sundays, I get a different feeling. I do not live in or near Schenectady as I do Saratoga, so I am less familiar with the community. But in Schenectady the demographic is much more diverse, and with more people of color around me, I slide into my element. I am with a multi-racial and multi-ethnic crowd of people who not only want to talk food and buy my products but also want to know where I am from and to share

where they are from. If “America” is the crosspaths of a busy New York City subway station where people move rapidly from one train to another speaking multiple languages, the Schenectady Greenmarket is one of the provinces in that America I crave.

“They call me aunty here,” I say in the video.

As I reflect on that statement, I realize it’s less about the gray hair I joke about in the video and more about a sense of respect I am given by customers at the Greenmarket. They value my knowledge. They appreciate me as a farmer and perhaps as someone who looks more like them. I am someone they feel they can trust to ask questions about food they might be afraid to ask in a more white-dominant space.

But perhaps the farm is where I feel most centered and in tune with myself. The farm was my home until December 2021, when I left an abusive marital relationship. It remains a sacred space because by being a farmer, I have cultivated relationships with land and nature. I am a teacher and mentor to many students, but on the farm, I am the learner. Land and nature are my teachers. I begin our video presentation with an acknowledgement to the Mahican peoples for it is their ancestral land that I cultivate. I see the acknowledgement as part prayer and part ritual:

“Hi everybody this is Himanee Gupta-Carlson and I would like to acknowledge that I am standing next to the Mahicantuck or the Hudson river. The Mahicantuck is the name that the Mahican people who are members of the Mohawk Nation and part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy gave to these lands; and it refers to waters that are never still. And, this land is actually part of my farm.... The far edge... And just above it is a lowland area where we lease land to a hay farmer and across the road on higher ground is where we grow our vegetables and pasture all of our animals.”

I am not sure how an acknowledgement rectifies more than three centuries of European colonialist exploitation, but I have learned never to take the land for granted and that, in time, she will give me the answers. I also have discovered that while my desire to offer an acknowledgement is sincere, in doing so, I made an error. The Mahican peoples were not a part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy; they were of the Algonquin language-speaking group. The part of the Hudson River where I farm is Mahicantuck, and I offer apologies for my error along with gratitude, once again, to the Mahicans of this area.

Closing

Drawing on work by Alkon and McCullen (2011), we state in our conference video that farmers offer stories of themselves in the food they produce. Consumers build upon those stories in their interactions with farmers as the foods they see call up memories, curiosities, and such things as recipe exchanges. Collectively, those stories make the market. In some ways, this is problematic in that many of the discourses around farmers markets reinforce whiteness. However, farm workers have a story to tell, too. As their stories come to light, public knowledge is enhanced in terms of who, how, and where the foods one eats come from, and stories of what it takes in terms of land, labor, sweat, equity, and toil add complexity to the market narrative. By encouraging farmers of color and farm workers of color to tell their stories, Alkon and McCullen (2011) argue that discourses of whiteness can be disrupted and allow for a new anti-racist and multiracial vision of just sustainability to emerge. Our goal is to contribute to that complexity.

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Stirring Atoms: A Performative Writing Process of Crystallization

Craig Wood (cwood@qtu.asn.au)

Abstract

Stirring atoms is a method of generating new knowledge through performative writing and the methodological process described by Laura Richardson and Laurel Ellingson as Crystallization. *Stirring atoms* outlines the three-phase process of performative writing that I applied to reveal and deepen understandings of how dominant forces shape identities and are replicated through professional practice. Working emically through the three phases, has deepened my understanding of identity, the impact of identity on praxis, and my experiences in schools. Working etically, this method of crystallization has continued to reveal places where hegemonic forces like whiteness manifest in schools.

Keywords

Crystallization, Critical teacher research, Reflective practice

I was born on the traditional lands of the Kaurnu people. The Old Gum Tree, shown in Figure 1, is found on the lands of the Kaurnu people and it is right next door to the primary school I attended in the 1980s, and it is an important symbol in the colonial history of the state of South Australia.



Figure 1: *The Old Gum Tree* [Photograph].
From the author's private collection.

The weekends and school holidays of my pre-teenage years were often spent playing on the lands and in the waters of the Ngerindjeri people, where the Murray River reaches the Southern Ocean, and shown below in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Traditional lands and waterways of the Ngerindjeri peoples. [Photograph]. Alexandrina Council. <https://www.alexandrina.sa.gov.au/connect/environment/water>

Until recently, I didn't know the names Kaurnu and Ngerindjeri peoples. Their names and histories, stories, cultures, and languages were omitted from my neo-colonial schooling. Today, I am writing on the lands of the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, about halfway up the eastern coast of Australia, shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Picture of traditional lands and waterways of the Jagera and Turrbal peoples. [Photograph]. Queensland Integrity Commissioner. <https://www.integrity.qld.gov.au/>

My presentation to the *2022 International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative* began with an acknowledgement of the Kaurnu, Ngerindjeri, Jagera and Turrbal peoples. Similarly, in this conference paper, I also pay my respect to elders past, present, and emerging of

those First Nations, and I thank First Peoples who have extended the gift of their knowledges to me.

Introduction

Stirring atoms is a part of a research process related to crystallization methodology. The process is critical and performative and, as I applied the method during my doctoral research, I became increasingly aware of and open to Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies. I engaged in stirring atoms to crystallize understandings of whiteness in school curriculum as well as in my own teacher praxis.

During my doctoral research, I assumed the title *The Crystallizing Teacher* as I applied Laura Ellingson's notion of dendritic crystallization. Ellingson (2009) posits dendritic crystallization as a metaphor for the construction of knowledge, whereby new crystals branch out and new knowledge is constructed from new understandings and new connections between the crystals.

As *The Crystallizing Teacher*, I revisited places and memories, like The Old Gum Tree and the lands and waterways of the Ngerindjeri peoples. I tried to re-remember how such places had shaped my identity and were influencing my praxis as a secondary school teacher. The more I interrogated my past, the more I became increasingly aware of how dominant forces like colonialism and whiteness are replicated in schools. My increasing critical awareness of whiteness in my praxis also made me critically aware of the scant availability of teacher professional development programs which could support my investigation and intervention in areas of my praxis that I viewed as flawed.

This conference paper will describe the process of stirring atoms that I applied to interrogate my identity formation and my teaching praxis. I discuss a theoretical framework that includes crystallization and the use of mystories. I then outline a three-phase process of stirring atoms that includes reclaiming stories, representations of mystories, and reflections on stories. This section also describes my application of Gillie Bolton's (2010) five stages of through-the-mirror writing.

Crystallization and mystories.

Drawing from crystallization as methodology, my critical praxis research is a personal and professional odyssey of creating relevant and meaningful knowledge. I look inwards to investigate experiences and stories that have contributed to my identity formation, and outwards to critically interrogate wider socio-political contexts. I adopt an activist commitment to transform my identity, and to both resist and dismantle injustice.

As *The Crystallizing Teacher*, my doctoral thesis included the development of mystories. Norman Denzin (2013) defines mystory as, "simultaneously a personal mythology, a public story, a personal narrative, and a performance that critiques," (p. 133) and they are a way, "of making visible the oppressive structures of the culture" (p. 139). Denzin's (2008) *Searching for Yellowstone*, is critical autoethnography that strips away layers of whiteness and colonialism from his experiences with First Nations peoples in the USA. Denzin uses his past, present and imagined futures to interrogate layers of his personal, professional, relational, communal, and socio-political. He writes about his construction of knowledge using playscript, poetry, and prose. I pursue similar epistemological constructions of knowledge in *The Crystallizing Teacher*.

As dendritic crystals, the mystories that I developed can be taken singularly, or as a series of texts which construct knowledge by rubbing against/with/through each other, and in a process

that attracts and repels, yields and resists knowledge claims. This non-linear, iterative, and improvisational process, is ever inductively shifting backward and forward, and inviting acts of researcher play with the constraints of various genres and epistemologies by allowing each to inspire and shape the others. Figure 4, below, shows the mysteries that I included in *The Crystallizing Teacher* and the lenses through which they can be viewed in constructions of knowledge.

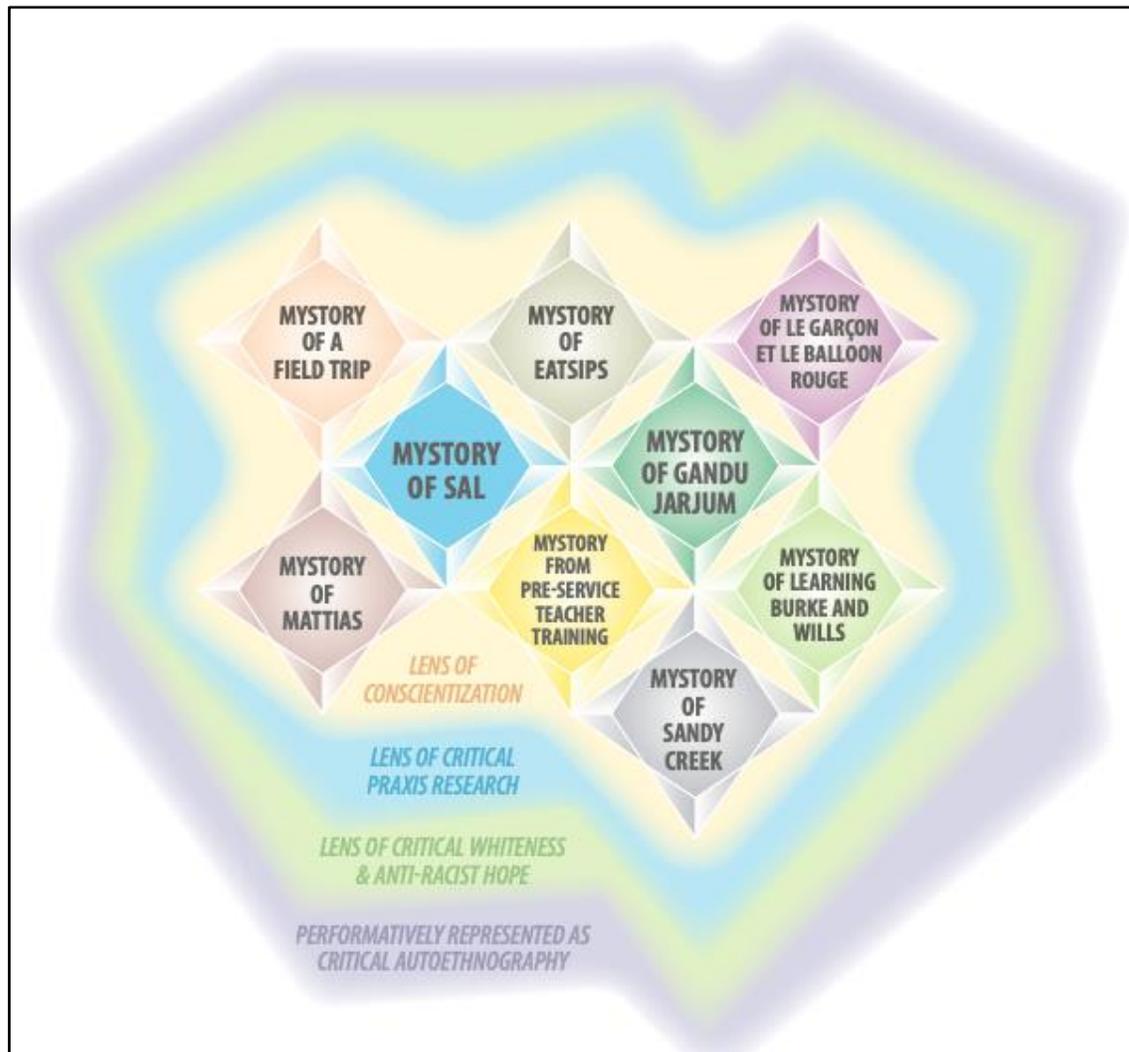


Figure 4: *Mystories and lenses of The Crystallizing Teacher*

From Wood, C. (2021). *The Crystallizing Teacher*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/4222>

Figure 4 shows a series of mysteries that I developed in my research. *Mystery of Sal* and *Mystery of Gandu Jarjum* were the impetus for my research and they are the first crystals from which multiple mystery crystals branch out. In *The Crystallizing Teacher* I continually return to these mysteries, viewing them through a series of lenses that include: Freirean conscientization; critical praxis research; critical whiteness and anti-racist hope; and performative and critical autoethnography.

Three phases of stirring atoms as method

My doctoral research developed understandings of critical whiteness in my teaching praxis, and these understandings emerged through three phases of process. I moved iteratively through the three phases, gathering, representing, and then reflecting and discussing. The first phase began with collecting artefacts and reclaiming stories which generated a data set. The components of this data were like atoms and, as I moved to the second phase, I stirred the atoms, applying catalytic force, to artfully represent the data as mystories. I credit Gillie Bolton's (2010) five stages of through-the-mirror writing as a method to develop the mystories. As the mystories formed crystals, I held each up to examine them in a different light, and this led to the third phase which was critical reflection on the mystories. Figure 5, below, represents the three phases of process.

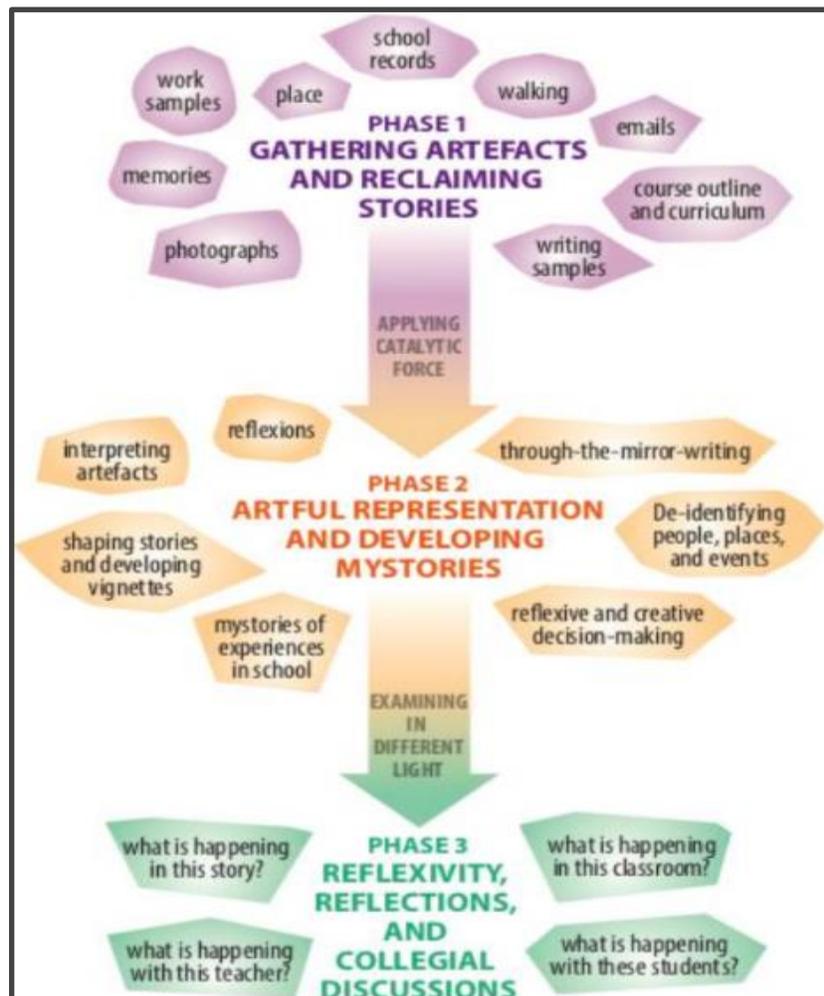


Figure 5: *Three phase process of stirring atoms*

From Wood, C. (2021). *The Crystallizing Teacher*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/4222>

The first phase of my method is gathering artefacts and reclaiming stories. Artefacts could include photographs, emails, official records like, in the case of a teacher, course outlines or curriculum documents. In his book *Essentials of autoethnography*, Christopher Poulos (2021)

describes a baseball as an artefact that triggered autoethnographic writing. As *The Crystallizing Teacher*, examples of reclaiming stories as first phase of method includes walking through place, and memories, such as walking through the streets of primary school years and re-remembering at The Old Gum Tree. Phiona Stanley's (2020) chapter, *Walking home*, describes a similar methodological process of constructing knowledge.

As I shifted to phase 2 of my through-the-mirror method, I began applying catalytic force to my artefacts and stories, pursuing artful representations and the development of mystories. In this phase, I began Bolton's five steps of through-the-mirror-writing and this steps continued as I moved to the third phase. The five stages of through-the-mirror-writing that I applied are:

1. six minute writing,
2. finding the story,
3. reading and responding,
4. sharing with colleagues, and
5. developing the writing.

Six minute writing.

The first step of through-the-mirror writing is the six-minute write that I used to develop the data collected in phase one of my method. The aim of the six minute writing is to allow ideas to emerge, free from constraints of grammar, spelling, punctuation, story structure, and ethical concerns that pertain to identifying people, places, or events.

Bolton (2010) suggests this writing process liberates ideas and stories that might be deeply hidden in layers of sub-conscious. In so doing, writers explore issues that they are otherwise unwilling or unable to articulate, they pursue forgotten memories and, like dendritic crystals, find new connections, thoughts, and ideas. Laurel Richardson theorises that this type of writing can provide insight into how humans construct identity and meaning in the world. Richardson (2000) posits, "I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it" (p. 924). Gloria Anzaldúa concurs, offering "Writing is a process of discovery and perception that produces knowledge and *conocimiento* (insight)" (2015: p. 1).

In my research, having found a focus through photographs, walking, memories, and other gathered artefacts, in step 1 of through-the-mirror-writing I engaged in a stream of consciousness writing on a theme for six minutes without interruption. My preference is to hand-write in a journal, and I begin each six-minute write on a clean page and identify the date, time, location of the writing, and timecodes. I frequently cue songs on my 'six minute writing' Spotify playlist to keep track of time. My playlist ranges from five minute to seven-minute songs, and I often find I don't want to stop after six minutes and will write for 10-12 minutes.

Finding the story.

This purpose of the second step of through-the-mirror-writing is to begin interpreting by sharpening a story's focus that might have emerged through six-minute writings. This step became crucial in shaping reclaimed stories into representations of truth that are subsequently shared in the mystories. Phillips and Bunda (2018) describe this step of process as, "sitting and making emergent meaning with data slowly overtime through stories" (p. 7).

During the second step, I made *what* and *how* choices pertaining to the threads of stories that emerged in my six minute writing. *What* choices relate to the content of the story. In considering *what* stories to pursue, I acted on a hunch to select threads from step 1 that I believed

were more likely to assist me to understand whiteness in my praxis and the wider field of education. For example, writing about my walking and re-remembering learning at The Old Gum Tree, prompted me to interrogate other components of my primary schooling experiences. This has prompted me to continue to interrogate and crystallize layers of understanding about appearing in a grade 2 play with my white and best friend, as British colonial sailors.

How choices related to the mode of writing or genre. In considering *how* to tell each mystery, I was continually troubled by the construction that many of the emerging mysteries presented. I experienced a constant dilemma as I sought to settle tensions between the truth of the story, ethical representations in the story that do no harm, and creating aesthetics that increase the stories' generalisability. This is also the step where I undertook the ethical process of deidentifying people, places, and events. For example, initial drafts of *Mystery of EATSIPS* had the potential to harm individuals, whereas the truth of the story is systemic racism. I concluded *how* I had represented the mystery needed significant revision.

Reading and responding.

The third step of through-the-mirror-writing coincides with a transition to the third phase of my process. Having interpreted and represented artefacts and stories, in the third phase I engaged in reading and responding to the emerging work from new perspectives and I opened my interpretations and representations to a wider audience.

The autoethnographic transition from data collection to data analysis is contested space. Saldana (2009) calls for qualitative researchers to, “start coding as you collect and format your data, not after all the fieldwork has been completed” (p. 20). Hughes and Pennington (2017, p. 66) opine the need for autoethnographers to delineate between data collection and data analysis, noting the former is an emic process, whereas the latter relies on etic rationalisation. Kress (2011) supports the notion of etic thinking, offering that critical praxis researchers, “must be explicit about when and how our interpretations are emerging and we must examine both the possibilities and limitations of our interpretations” (p. 120). As Chang (2008) suggests, my data analysis was initially blurred as I allowed my emic self to influence authorial choices relevant to my through-the-mirror-writing process of generating mysteries.

By the time I commenced the third phase of research I was noticing and taking cognizance of whiteness in curriculum and pedagogy, limitations of initial teacher education and continuing professional development, and moments of joy and hope. The themes emerged from my own etic analysis of the mysteries and were adapted from the questions posed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) to teachers in *Dreamkeepers*. The five questions that prompted analysis of the mysteries were:

1. what is happening here?
2. what is happening in this class?
3. what is happening with this teacher?
4. what is happening with these students? and
5. do you see yourself in this story?

During the third step of through-the-mirror writing, and prompted by the five questions, I reflexively read and responded to the developed mysteries and I recorded my responses in my critical teacher journal, sometimes as additional six-minute writes. Throughout this step I also sought to identify manifestations of whiteness that privilege or silence student voices and social narratives. I have revisited this step to subject my researcher actions to questioning and to

critically self-check for researcher whiteness. Laurel Richardson (1997) notes the importance of writing for the reflexive *I* in research.

The process of rereading one's work and situating it in historical and biographical contexts reveals old storylines, many of which may not have been articulated. Voicing them offers the opportunity to rewrite them, to renarrativise one's life. Writing stories about our "texts" is thus a way of making sense of and changing our lives.

(Richardson, 1997, p. 5)

An example of reflexively reading and responding to the mystories occurred after I had written *Mystory of learning about Burke and Wills*. Through a neo-colonial lens of school curriculum, I learnt about Burke and Wills in grade 5, as two British explorers who sought to establish an inland trade route between Melbourne and Australia's northern coast in 1860-1. I revisited the mystory representation and revealed *what* parts of the story that I had omitted, and I identified whiteness in the experiences of my childhood. In this case, reflexivity became a process of etic data analysis. My additional responses to the text, that recognise privileged Eurocentric histories and negative positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are also reflective analyses of the collected data. My intention was not to create an endless cycle between steps 2 and 3, that risked providing romanticised stories that were stripped of rigour and reliability (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). Rather, after working through step 3, I attempted to examine the mystories in a different light by sharing them with critical friends of the project, seeking their feedback, and making further amendments.

Share with a peer

The fourth step of through-the-mirror writing is *share with a peer* and is process which continues to blur the boundaries between data collection and data analysis. Through-the-mirror-writing can result in a radical dismantling of one's personal and professional assumptions, and Bolton (2010) suggests that inviting peers to open the story to new perspectives yields deeper understandings of praxis.

Peers' responses can open up fresh avenues. They can support towards deeper levels of reflection, and perceive wider institutional, national, social or political contexts.

(Bolton, 2010, p. 142)

In my fourth step of through-the-mirror writing, I set up a blogsite called *thecrystallizingteacher* to share six mystories with colleagues. I subsequently selected two colleagues and conducted interviews that were prompted by emerging themes in the mystories. The purpose of publishing the mystories and inviting comments from peers was to develop additional critical insights into what might have been happening in the classes, with the teacher, and with the students.

My intention with both interviews was to maintain a semi-structure and be guided by the questions adapted from Gloria Ladson-Billings in *Dreamkeepers*. However, I abandoned this plan in both interviews because both of my colleagues provided thick and rich details of their lived experiences as non-Indigenous teachers, artists, and mothers. During the interviews, I considered this material was uncovering greater depth of understanding of teacher praxis than their analysis of the mystories would generate.

Developing the writing.

The final step in through-the-mirror writing is to develop the writing. At the time of the 2022 *International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative*, I have developed the writing into my doctoral thesis, which includes peer reviewed publications. Recognising crystallization as a lifelong odyssey, at the time of writing, I continue to develop writing that emerged in this study, and I continue to interrogate and intervene in my praxis in the field of education, including my praxis as a researcher.

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Who is *Tojisha*?¹

A Collaborative Polyphonic Autoethnography on Our Self-awareness

Miho Zlazli
SOAS University of London
miho.zlazli@gmail.com

Yusuke Katsura
Osaka University

Teppei Tsuchimoto
Ritsumeikan University
tsr29magi@gmail.com

Chihiro Suzuki
Osaka Prefecture University

Yuto Takagi
Kyoto University

Naoko Yokoyama
Ritsumeikan University

Abstract

This is the subsequent practical part of our previous presentation, ‘Autoethnography and *Tojisha-Kenkyu* (Self-Directed Studies) in Japan: Re-thinking positionality’, provided by Yusuke and Yuto. In this presentation, we showcased our individual and collaborative narratives on the concept of *Tojisha* by applying Yamada’s (2018) visual narrative and the Inter-modal Pre-Construction Method (IMPreC) proposed by Valsiner *et al.* (2021). We demonstrated that self as *Tojisha* was not simply a dichotomy of insider and outsider, or researcher and researched, but a complex entity that emerged through relations between involved persons in layers of multiple identities and positionalities.

Keywords

Tojisha, Inter-modal Pre-construction Method (IMPreC), visual narrative

Presentation available on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85qvm1FAd6s>

¹ The term *Tojisha* (当事者) does not have an equivalent term in English. It may be understood as insiders, patients, minorities, research subjects, stakeholders, or persons concerned, depending on the context in which it is used.

1. Introduction

In recent years in Japan, more and more researchers have examined their own *Tojisha*-ness, and so have we. Being autoethnographers, this brought our attention to our own practice: ‘Who is writing about an experience’ and ‘from what perspective the story is told.’ We explored how individuals from different backgrounds understood the concept of *Tojisha* or its related social categories by creating a collage of individual and collaborative narratives on *Tojisha*.

2. Collaborative research process

From July 2021 to November 2021, we periodically met online to discuss ‘Who is *Tojisha*?’ to explore how each of us initially understood the concept of *Tojisha* or its related social categories and to trace how it would evolve over the course of the period as we shared our individual views. Subsequently, we collaboratively created a presentation video to showcase our individual and collaborative narratives on *Tojisha*. We blended different modalities such as visuals, essays, poetry, music, or other qualitative inquiry, based on our preferences.

Yamada (2018) highlights that a visual image allows multiple selves and times to coexist in the same space at the same time as in Mandala.[2] The image allows the audience to decide where to start unfolding the narrative embedded within. Visual narrative is more open to interpretation by the audience and evokes more active reading compared to linguistic expressions which are more narrowly defined. Yamada claims that the audience rather organises their own narrative by interacting with the image.

Valsiner *et al.* (2021) proposed a concept called Hyper-Generalized Affective Meaning Field (HGAMF) in the field of Cultural Psychology of Dynamic Semiosis. HGAMF is a linguistically inexpressible, affective meaning field that overwhelms one’s psyche, for example, *love*. They argued that HGAMF continuously leads human development towards the future. IMPreC is a methodology to explore HGAMF by moving across modalities of expressions, such as poetry and visual narrative. IMPreC is typically conducted alone but can be also done collaboratively.

3. Individual reflections

In this section, we summarise our individual reflections on the collaborative research process and individual work incorporated into our presentation video.

3-1. Miho Zlazli ([from 04:59](#))

A Tojisha in Indigenous land is someone who experiences embodied impact at the intersections of past and future, and the dominant and marginalised. (17 November 2021)

I currently conduct participatory action research with many stakeholders from diverse backgrounds to advocate Indigenous Ryukyuan communities as a PhD student at a UK institution. In my presentation, I made a collage of stakeholders’ voices along with key concepts from Indigenous transformative paradigm (Zlazli 2021). Prior to the current collaborative inquiry, I simply understood the term *Tojisha* as a Japanese translation for stakeholder(s) for the purpose of disseminating my research findings to the Japanese audience as in **Figure 1A**.



Figure 1A (28 July 2021)

Stakeholders (dots) from varied backgrounds and three layers of time frames: the present (coloured, centre), past (monotonous), and future (coloured, outside).

In the process of preparing for our presentation, my perception of Tojisha was modified to include a person's complex inner quality and feelings as in **Figure 1B**. I was initially struck by the images shared by Yusuke (Figure 2A: struggles), Teppei (Figure 3A: complex identity), Chihiro (Figure 6A: plexiglass), and Naoko (Figure 4A: frosted glass), and continued to experience such astonishment every time I encountered unexpected perspectives of the other authors.



Figure 1B (28 September 2021)

Translucent arms extending from the ground of my grandmother's back garden express the agony of Indigenous people and their intergenerational trauma.

Following the completion of our presentation video with several post-event briefings, how I frame Tojisha has further evolved. For example, Yuto's example of a pagoda (Figure 5B) reminded me of Indigenous people's reciprocal relationship with spiritual beings in their cosmology tightly woven with their land and sea. Now, I see Tojisha not only as separate individual people but also as a complex web of relations where we are embedded.

A Tojisha may entail both a person with complex inner dynamics and a complex web of relations among (in)visible and (in)animate entities where we are embedded. (26 January 2022)

3-2. Yusuke Katsura ([from 02:55](#))



Figure 2A (28 July 2021)

I have a layered identity as a Japanese male who converted to Islam several years ago and has struggled to find a right way to situate my Tojisha-ness within the academic context.

I am currently a doctoral student in the field of Human Sciences, researching on multi-faith and multi-cultural aspects of Japanese society. In 2016, I converted to Islam in a mosque in Osaka Japan and became a Tojisha as one of Japanese Muslims. My conversion was the result of more than a decade of deliberation, including encounters with Muslim students in Japan followed by living in Islamic society in West Africa for two years. There was no single reason of any kind. As I was socialised as one among the majority, who grew up in a secular family and received a modern Western education, I began to question my current life at the time and became interested in the meaning of my own life, the idea of sharing, food ethics, and the battle against my own desires. Each of these things led me to Islam in a concrete and comprehensive way.

After drawing **Figure 2A**, I started to look back on my past more consciously and focus on how such an identity had emerged. In this process, I began to re-examine the way I

understood Tojisha as a concept that includes diachronic change, rather than a concept that represents a current state. To illustrate this change, I would like to share a few of my stories. It was only after my conversion that I realised there was another everyday life close to me. It was fun to eat together during the month of Ramadan with other Muslim students from many countries and regions. However, at the same time, I faced the negative aspects of Japanese society. Several days before I attended an Eid-gathering which was held after the month of Ramadan, I got a message that someone made a threatening phone call to the mosque I went to. In the end, nothing happened, but I often hear about such events.

Moreover, since the caricatures by Charlie Hebdo were still the focus of public attention at the time, I noticed how many caricatures were being shown and reproduced in the media, university classrooms, and academic textbooks. During a class in which we had a discussion on the ‘freedom of expression’, the professor put one of the caricatures on the whiteboard with a projector. ‘As I told you before, I’m a Muslim convert and it's hard for me to look at that picture,’ I told him. He pointed to the wall where the caricature was not shown and told me, ‘Then, look over there.’ After a moment's pause, he reconsidered and moved on to the next slide. He did not say anything to me. I find myself getting upset on the emotional and physical level in such situations.

Such a response surprises me myself and then I realize my sense of Tojisha-ness as a Muslim. At the same time, I feel the wonder that such a change has occurred in a previously ‘ordinary’ and secular person. For me as in **Figure 2B**:

Being a Tojisha is to know the path you have worked and will continue to walk.



Figure 2B
(25 September 2021)

3-3. Teppei Tsuchimoto ([from 12:16](#))

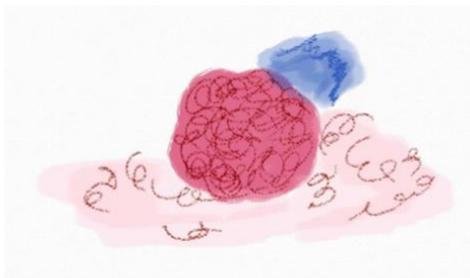


Figure 3A (28 July 2021)

Tojisha may have complex identities.

The blue sprouting horn on the top of Tojisha (red) means that some of the identities assert their Tojisha-ness in a particular direction. The pink carpet indicates the spread of Tojisha.

I drew **Figure 3A** before I applied the Thinking At the Edge (TAE) steps (Gendlin 2004) into my autoethnographic practice to clarify what Tojisha means to a person. TAE is a method of verbalising bodily feelings (*felt sense*). From the perspective of psychology, which is my specialty, I believe that TAE gives the potential to study oneself autoethnographically. This aspect of complex identities was elaborated through discussions with the members.

Applying the TAE steps to the theme of being/becoming a Tojisha, several key terms have emerged: conflict, being entangled, and growth (**Figure 3B**). Eventually, I concluded

that being a Tojisha involves internal and external *conflicts*. These conflicts can lead to *growth* through *becoming a new myself*. For me, the Tojisha-ness is the equivalent of becoming a new myself.

For example, I had a future ahead of me, becoming a father in December 2021 (now, I am a father!). The experience was initially external, but the meaning of it was deeply based on one's subjectivity. Therefore social and personal meaning are 'tangled' (*Motsure*; もつれ) in human development. *Motsure* conceptualised in this study can link subjective human development and social norms.

On the other hand, 'tangle' can limit subjectivity. You may not conduct academic research on yourself unless you are Tojisha yourself. Tojisha sometimes functions as an authority or the use of a social label, such as 'person with something' (e. g. disability, disease), becomes 'evidence' and sometimes limits our understanding of that person's personality. Searching for evidence to tell the story is far from understanding human beings because it does not fit into an epistemology that people are understood in the narrative mode.



Figure 3B (26 October 2021)

Being Tojisha is the vine.

3-4. Chihiro Suzuki ([from 07:48](#))



Figure 4A (28 July 2021)

The word Tojisha is a plexiglass for me.

I conduct research on autoethnography and ethics of care as a PhD student. I study epistemologies about subjectivity and others, and theories about collaboration and communication in the fields of education, social welfare, and social work.

I revisited my previous discussion on Tojisha (Suzuki 2020), which was written about Rombo Ronai (1995) with a question 'Can a non-Tojisha really apprehend the

autoethnography written by a Tojisha?’ By reflecting on that paper, I re-reflected on the question and represented my polyphonic voices in multiple poetic words.

Through our collaborative work for ISAN 2022, my definition of Tojisha has changed dramatically. In my presentation, I represented my own reflections on my experience of reading Rambo Ronai (1995) as an autoethnography in the form of creative dialogue style (Suzuki 2020). When I was writing the paper, despite my attempt to represent myself in several of the characters in the dialogue on the paper, I could not break down the ‘plexiglass’ between Rambo Ronai as Tojisha and myself as non-Tojisha. I thought it was hypocritical of me to state that I understood Rambo Ronai because I was not Tojisha. **Figure 4A** which I drew after the first meeting session of the working group shows the reflection of frustration and embarrassment for my lack of empathy.

At the time of the second meeting session, I was struggling with my own positionality as a housewife and a researcher. While I was reflecting on myself thinking about the word Tojisha after the session, I found myself angry as Tojisha to my own problems (**Figure 4B**).



Figure 4B (25 September 2021)

When I'm obsessed with a huge feeling such as sadness or anger caused by social injustice, I can't be any other Tojisha but me.

Through the process of collaboration with the research group members, my feelings have changed. During meeting sessions, we discussed the word Tojisha in both academic terms and terms based on our own lived-experiences. It was very important for me. I realised that I was both an academic researcher and “Tojisha” to my own problem, and so were the members. Then, I noticed that although the members and I never had the same experience, there was a common ‘something’ between us.

When we were writing collaborative poetry, I felt that there was something warm, empathetic, and free solidarity between us. We are different, but we are not different. We are the same, but we are not the same.

The last scene in my video (**Figure 4C**) expresses the sense of openness that I was able to feel at the moment, a sense of *being in-between* you and me, as *we*.



By going outside,
I can see inside myself.

By listening to you carefully,
I can hear my voice inside you.

By listening to me carefully,
I can hear your voice inside me.

Figure 4C
([from 8:59](#))

3-5. Yuto Takagi (from 10:20)

I have researched and created works on the theme of how *Shogai* (障害 impairment; disability) is experienced by *Kenjoshu* (健全者 able-bodied people; healthy people; normal people). In my presentation, I first shared some of my experiences that blurred the boundaries between self and others, then expanded the concept of *Tojisha* by using a developmental psychologist Takashi Kujiraoka's phenomenological concept of *Setsumen* (接面 contact surface).

During our first meeting, I had various images of *Tojisha* echoing intersubjectivity and intercorporeality (Moran 2017) among our feelings as they existed (**Figure 5A**).

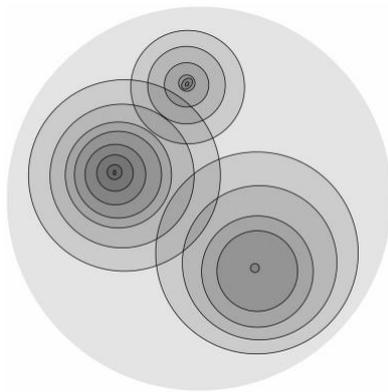


Figure 5A (29 July 2021)

Intersubjectivity and intercorporeality are echoing among individuals.

However, as we continued our discussion on the theme of *Tojisha*, my image gradually became freer and freer. A developmental psychologist, Heinz Werner (1948), argued that infants up to the age of two to four have a characteristic of projecting and perceiving their internal representations and emotions onto the external world, with a blurred distinction between the self and others (the external world). He named this feature physiognomic perception.

As a hobbyist photographer, when I spend a long time taking pictures of a single subject, even if the subject is an inorganic object such as an unspoken tree or an architectural structure, I sometimes experience an ambiguity as to whether I am looking at it or being looked at.

I had such an experience that the boundary between self and others dissolved together when I took the photo used for **Figure 5B** many years ago. In this photo, a small five-storied pagoda inside a temple building was photographed with a telephoto lens to create a large blur. The blur in the background includes various trees, mountains, and even other tourists. They are all gazing at and photographing the pagoda, but by abstracting them with the blur, the subject and object become ambiguous, and it seems as if we are being gazed at by the pagoda. I titled this photograph 'Noxiousness'.



Figure 5B (29 July 2021)

Title: 'Noxiousness'

Tourists were gazing at the five-storied pagoda, but by abstracting them with the blur, the subject and object become ambiguous, and it seems as if we are being gazed at by the pagoda.

The reason that I was able to recall such an image was probably because I was able to relax and imagine freely as the members of the group continued to discuss it. As shown in **Figure 5A**, I was initially thinking in my closed mind, but gradually opened up, which can be said to represent the process of connecting beyond the strong sense of Tojisha-ness.

3-6. Naoko Yokoyama ([from 13:39](#))

A Tojisha is a person who is carrying fetters of life on behalf of someone else. (17 November 2021)

I often receive a letter from a disabled friend of mine who has been in rehabilitation for many years. She wrote about difficulties related to her disability and her struggles in daily life. After many years of correspondence, she seems to have lost the sense of being a Tojisha.

Whenever she sends me a letter, a transaction of Tojisha occurs. We usually lead a separate life, but we cross and overlap each time we exchange a word. Each time I witness delicate scratches marked on her frosted glass from her surrounding relationships, I also get wounded simultaneously. However, I feel that the more we both get hurt, the thicker the separating glass becomes in order to protect ふんわりした小さな彼女 (a fluffy little her) or her fragile being behind the glass as well as myself (**Figure 6A**).



Figure 6A (28 July 2021)

The more we both get hurt, the thicker the separating glass becomes.

When I share these things with Tojisha-concerned friends of mine, or when I listen to people who are called Tojisha, I always see an imaginary landscape with colours changing on the other side of the sky (**Figure 6B**). Many different meanings of the word Tojisha are accumulated and separated inside, and new interpretations of Tojisha pile up again beyond the separation. I do not know how to convey this transition to people around me. I identify inarticulate entities in a medium such as the sky instead as I feel clumsy to express myself in words. This is probably because all people live under the sky and can look up to the sky, no matter what fetters they carry.



Figure 6B (18 October 2021)

Tojisha is like a colour changing on the other side of the sky.

4. Collaborative Poetry on Tojisha ([from 14:57](#))

After showcasing our individual narratives on Tojisha, we concluded our presentation with collaborative poetry accompanied by Chihiro's piano. We recommend the readers to watch the video rather than reading the text cited below to experience its evocative effect.

From October to November 2021 as a final reflection on Tojisha, we added phrases one line at a time on an online platform, and freely edited an accumulating body of the text anonymously. We are therefore no longer able to tell which part was written by who, but we are satisfied and able to identify ourselves with the final product. The original text was written mainly in our most fluent language(s) which was Japanese this time and translated into English for the presentation at ISAN 2022. The original flavour of *felt sense* (Gendlin 2004) therefore might have been partially lost in the process of translation.

Things are tangled up...
Emotion, relation, path, experience, and so on

Self and others, past and future
Who do you mean by 'self'?
Is the present the past?
Happening.
Nature and others as a family form 'わたし (myself)'
Do you recognize yourself as 'yourself'
when you are with your family?
When I touch someone, I know I'm there.
When I touch someone, I know they are there.
My kids feel pain, I feel pain.
If we are the family, we do not regard you as 'others.'

Are you a Tojisha as a child?
Are you a Tojisha as a parent?

What's the difference between
others who are injured next to you
and others being far from you?
Someone who is carrying
someone else's suffering for them.
Where does your pain go away?
Tojisha is who do not intend to take the distance
Categorised pain and uncategorized pain.
I never feel pain when I'm typing the word p-a-i-n.
Please hit me so that I can feel your pain.
Though I know it's not fully possible...

When I imagine that it will be very painful, it feels painful.
I can hit 'you' as an object,
but I can't hit 'you' as a person
Do you know if you don't experience pain?
Can we become a Tojisha of dying?
It reminds me of the phrase...something like
"When we see a grave, it's always someone else's"
Isn't it possible to separate the notion of Tojisha from pain?

I always think it's equal that everyone can die only once
Everyone has a fair chance of dying at the time of their birth.
Where are we heading with this poem of doom?
I couldn't feel sad about the death of the person
I knew who died in the accident.
He was one of the 'others' for me.
I couldn't become Tojisha.
When I feel pain,
When I recognize the pain by the word 'pain',
we can hear the voices of our bodies closest to us.
I don't think it's just sadness to show
the reaction expressed by the word sadness
Maybe sadness can't be expressed by the word sadness.
I don't know what it is about the feeling
that replaces sadness just because it's described as sadness.
I don't want to leave you alone outside me
with pain and sorrow
that I can't understand in my words
A notification that tells
"You are (a certain) Tojisha"
I wish there would be happier research on the people
Why can we only study painful topics?
I was told that it's hard to see someone else's happiness
when I held an Autoethnography workshop.
Happiness and Hardness,
what's the difference between PPI and RD?

I don't know you.
I don't know the faces you've seen,
the sights you've seen.
I don't know the voices you've heard
or the music you've listened to.
I don't know the taste of what you've eaten.
I don't know the scent you've been wearing.
I don't know the people
and things you've touched.
I don't know anything,
and that's why I want to know.

5. Conclusion

We explored how each of us understood the concept of *Tojisha* and how it would evolve as we shared our individual views over the course of the study period. Our collaborative autoethnography demonstrated that 'how we initially perceived Tojisha' and 'how their perceptions evolved' varied across the authors, reflecting our different academic backgrounds and life experiences. Self as Tojisha was not simply a dichotomy of insider and outsider, or researcher and researched but a complex entity that emerged through relations between involved persons in layers of multiple identities and positionalities. The concept of Tojisha is open to our awareness. Instead of drawing a definition of Tojisha, we created collaborative poetry. This may have served as a way to present our collective interpretation of Tojisha at the time.

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What Does “For Life” Mean? The Autoethnography of Motherhood

Colette Szczepaniak (colette.szczepaniak@gmail.com)

Abstract

I had a strong need to take up the subject of the meaning of „for life” slogan, because couple months before the ISAN event, there have been thousands protests against near – total ban on abortion in Poland. Abortion is now allowed only in cases of rape or incest or when the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother. Abortion in cases of severe and irreversible foetal abnormalities is now illegal. In media we could read the headings like: „Pro – life Victory”. But is this law really pro – life?

Keywords

motherhood, pro – life, abortion

I use autoethnography as a method for researching femininity, and I treat it as such in the context of what is socially ignored, to unmask cultural taboos such as puerperium, menopause, menstruation, parental anger, infertility, female exhaustion and frustration. I would like to present to you one of the issues that I have been dealing with recently, which is what the term "for life" actually means. Allen and Piercy (2005: 156) define feminist autoethnography as ‘a method of being, knowing and doing that combines two concerns: telling the stories of those who are marginalized and making good use of our experience’.

I will briefly present the situation that has prompted me to take up this subject. My children were sick, I had to go to the pharmacy with them. I put them in my car, parked 50 meters away from the pharmacy, because there is no car park right at the building. It was raining. I was carrying my one-year-old baby son on my hip, leading my 2.5-year-old daughter by the hand. The children were coughing and sniffing. I couldn't go too fast because my daughter couldn't keep up with me and I was already having a hard time with my 10-kilogram son in my arms. "Mom, my head hurts", Helena said. "Just a little more, sweetie, a few more steps and we'll be at the pharmacy". When we stood in front of the steep stairs (there was no wheelchair ramp), a woman suddenly outwalked us, she jumped up the stairs and entered the pharmacy before us. On the bag which she had on her shoulder I saw the words "for life". And then I realized that there was nothing for life there, nothing for a new life, one of the two that I was leading by the hand and carrying on my hip. Neither the woman's behaviour, nor the lack of a wheelchair ramp (or one for prams), nor the lack of a car park at the pharmacy, nor the waiting in line at the pharmacy - the whole social and cultural atmosphere in which I live cannot be called "for life". All these are elements of symbolic violence as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, in which the mother is a representative of the subordinating class. „The dominant class is the locus of a struggle for the hierarchy of the principles of hierarchization. The dominant fractions, whose power is based on economic and political capital, seek to impose the legitimacy of their domination either through their own symbolic production (discourse, writings, etc) or through the

intermediary of conservative ideologists who serve the interests of dominant fractions – but only incidentally (...)" (Bourdieu 1979).

It's October, it's getting colder, it's raining outside, the temperature doesn't exceed 10 degrees Celsius. I sit down to work in my cozy home, at my comfortable, big, new desk. I start by clicking on the browser icon to read the latest information from my country and the world. I think about my children, about that strange silence in the house when they are out, about my son coughing 3 times that night and whether he will be sick again, and about my daughter finally going out with joy to kindergarten in the morning.

The headlines of news sites pull me out of my thoughts. The previous day, the Nike Literary Prizes were awarded for the best books of the year by contemporary living authors. I open the page and I can see a picture of people sitting in the audience holding sheets of paper with the words "where are the children?" and below "Alas, 4.5 years old, Almand 2.5 years old". The protest that took place at that event concerns the situation that has been taking place on the Polish-Belarusian border since August. Today I have read that there are more and more children at the border: 1.5 years old, 2, 3, 4 years old, and older. Same age as my kids. They are left there without proper clothes, water, shelter from the cold. Collection of clothes and toys (which I gave myself) cannot be handed over to them because of the state of emergency. I shudder. My eyes water with tears. I want to call someone, do something, I get up from my desk, grab the phone, I feel anger, rebellion, grief, and sadness. An irrational thought comes to my mind that I will rent a van, drive there (800 km), and bring a family to my house. I will help them. Later I think about my children, that such a journey would be too far away for them, that we would have to camp out there and wait for someone to manage to escape, that it is unreasonable after all, and that I would put my children in danger. When I am thinking about the fact that a 9-hour car trip is something difficult for 2 and 3-year-old kids, at the same time there are 2 and 3-year-old children living in the forest! Dirty, hungry, cold. Border guards use push-back tactics, that is, they push people camping out in the woods back to Belarus. Hybrid War. So say the politicians. The same people who support the annual "March for Life and for the Family", also advertised by famous actors, priests, and professors. I do not want to comment on political decisions here, I am not a politician. I realize that this matter is not so simple as to tell people "Come to us, you are welcome!" I know that this is a complicated political situation in which the Belarusian government and the European Union are involved and that the decisions made are political. But still, hello?!

A great discussion has just swept down through our country about what life is, when it begins, and who is to decide about it. It happened on the occasion of the tightening of the anti-abortion law. The anti-abortion law in Poland was changed at the height of the pandemic. From now on, abortion is possible only when pregnancy is a result of rape or when it is a threat to the mother's life. When we were not allowed to leave our homes, gather in public places, in the peak of the highest number of Covid cases, people went out to the streets to strike anyway. The time of introducing the changes, so socially and ethically important, so directly affecting the LIVES of people, their introduction in general, caused the rage of both women and men, who flooded the streets of Polish cities despite the threat to their health and life. And now I come back again to the question of what it means to be "for life?" Is it allowing little children to camp out in the woods, without water, food, warm clothes, preventing other people from helping them? Is it an order to give birth to terminally ill children, in a country where the drug for a child suffering from spinal muscular atrophy is not reimbursed and the cost of which is 9 million (over 2 270 000 dollars) Polish zlotys?

”The Deathworld is around us and in our Lifeworld” – Konecki writes (2021). In Schutz’s concept Lifeworld (lebenswelt) is the world taken for granted, that lasts nomatter what. It is the “self-evident”, “pre-scientific”, and “taken-for-granted” world and our “fundamental and paramount reality”. The world of daily life is the world dominated by “eminently practical” interests, the correlate of “wide-awakeness” (Schutz, 1945: 534). According to Bentz and Shapiro, Lifeworld „consists of the whole systems of interactions with others and objects of the environment that is fused with meaning and language and that sustains the life of all creatures from birth through death. This is the fundamental ground of all experience for human beings (1998 : 172).

Lifeworlds function together / along/ beside with the deathworlds, which is visible, among others, in the example of giving birth to terminally ill child. "The Deathworld is located in the Lifeworld but rarely noticed" (Konecki 2021). A friend of mine, while doing me remarks on my presentation, wrote me: „woman are dying during illegal abortion, some killing or leaving the born children on the street. Who is here “for life? I see less and less people, especially politicians and almost half of the society supporting the totalitarian government. Because it is totalitarian suppression in the light of so called democracy (...) Here not only humans are dying, there is dying our lifeworld.” I could see this during our ISAN discussion and presentations of other participants. It was totally visible during the presentation of Cassidy Ellis, in which she showed anti – abortion violence. In her film the Deathworlds and Lifeworlds struggled and the winning world depends on the day. She told us the history of people who, when fighting for anti – abortion in front of the abortion clinic, shot one of the doctors. It was devastating for me that the same people who shouted to women in front of the anti – abortion clinic: „mommy, please, don’t kill your baby!”, could kill a man. Wasn’t he somebody’s baby?

During the ISAN 2022 panel „Regulating [Female] Bodies” I realized that the things that make me feel angry and upset, don’t bother every women in the world. While I wanted to scream about the anti – abortion law in Poland, a girl from Mexico could go to abortion clinic (there is no such a thing like „abortion clinic” in Poland. Abortions are made in public hospitals and women whose pregnancy was terminated, after a treatment, are at the same hospital rooms as women who just gave birth or those with big pregnancy bellies. So all mothers and non- mothers and „don’t want to be a mothers” are together in one room), and just do a procedure. And when Estefania told us about it, I realized that I could go to prison for doing the same thing. And again, the Deathworlds in the Lifeworld happened. How can I analyse and talk about the situation in Poland, wondering what „for life” mean while Cody, one of the panelist, said the obvious thing: „birthing persons matter, have stories”. And those are the words that our polititians don’t understand: yes, birthing person matters and it is valid not only in anti abortion clinic, but also in the public space where people comment on female’s body: belly is too big, too small, too low, too high or finally you have a brest, don’t put too much weight etc. Birthing persons matters! Hey, people! You, leaving in this country: we have stories! Even names!

In our country, which is a country "for life", there are no places in the queue to see a doctor. Even before the pandemic, suspecting Lyme disease in one of my children, I wanted to make an appointment with an infectious diseases specialist. Waiting time: 2 years.

After tightening the anti-abortion law, a mother gives birth to a terminally ill child without any psychological, financial and infrastructural support. Parents of sick children themselves look for doctors, financial resources, seek help abroad - all this is done on their own. In her autoethnographic text "Bad Mommy Litany", Sandra L. Faulkner wrote that upon hearing

comments about how beautiful a time when children are small is, her feminist rage gets muted by the exhaustion caused by chafing at what the role of "mommy" means (2014).

I have decided not to silence my feminist rage, because all these events in my life got intertwined at the same time, that is being a mother of 2 and 3-year-old children, women's strikes, the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border, collecting money for a girl from my region suffering from the SMA. The intertwining of all these events made me come to a conclusion that in my opinion "pro-life" is just a political slogan, and the mother and HER life is a bargaining chip in the hands of politicians.

There are also more strikes in Poland these days, they are called #anijednejwięcej, which means #noonemore. They started after the death of a 30 – year old woman who died because the doctors didn't want to make an abortion on defected fetus. She died in her 22 pregnancy week because of the departure of foetal waters and septic shock as a result of it. There are more and more such a tragic cases. There was supposed to be „no one more”, but there was. Recent days, 37 year old woman died because she was pregnant with siblings and one of the children died. The doctors didn't want to make abortion and they let the woman being 2 days pregnant with the dead child, because they couldn't, by the law, make the abortion. After 2 days, the second child was dead, and again woman got septic shock and died. Everything is by the law, covered by the slogan „for life”.

The situation on the Polish – Belarusian border changed since october. It is still dynamic. Refugees were used by belarusian government as a tool to fight polish guard on the border. Then the EU put some restrictions on belarusian government and belarusian government send some of the refugees back to their countries. But, I think that we sadly got used to the thought that there are people (including little children) dying in the forest. Meanwhile, you can not kill unborn baby, because you can go to prison.

And finally, coming to the end, I am wondering: how to use autoethnography to best show what is missing: the lack of what is so important in the social and cultural space? Is shouting in the articles and during the symposiums a good way to show the silence and the ignorance?

From Learning Anthropology to Teaching Medical Anthropology

Ravinder Singh
University of Delhi

Abstract

It sketches a trajectory wherein the author emphasizes his experiences on learning anthropology in University and continues to trace and explores the various engagements in past two decades where he began to use anthropology in the field situations and finally analyses how he destined to medical anthropology. Is it not interesting to explore this trajectory? Encompassing some of the experiences and learning about the variability in everything. In this note on experiences which he had during his learning the subject, he perceives the Anthropology, as a science of field work. How its culture or traditions of the field work had influenced in the early years of its learning. Then it reveals how he further crafted a his niche in medical anthropology and further highlights the existing challenges teaching medical anthropology in Tertiary neuropsychiatry Facility centre in northern part of India, is central trajectory of this essay.

Keywords

Learning Anthropology, Field work, teaching medical Anthropology, Future Vision

Introduction

I use auto-ethnography and narratives of lived experiences during my early years in learning anthropology (1982-1985) at University then I continue to elaborate on higher academic pursuits in Delhi University. (1986 to 1996) all is discussed in Section-I and II followed by and in the last section deals with positioning and future challenges in teaching of medical anthropology. In brief in this auto-ethnography and narratives I have discussed how I had become the student of anthropology and give a brief of my experiences in Anthropology field work, academic reading of books, influenced much, with my written notes, from my diary, of thoughts in first and second part. Then it further mentions about self-reformation and reflection during the entire period of learning the anthropology during graduation and post-graduation in third part. Last section elaborately mentioned the teaching of medical anthropology and existing challenges in its teaching as the discipline in the premier neuropsychiatry tertiary care facility centre in the north India.

I

Learning Anthropology in early stages at the age of 17 years, when one is just out of the school and joins the core of the University education imposes seldom problem to learner. For example, in University of Delhi where teaching of anthropology falls in the Faculty of Science and its admission is directly under the control of latter and only senior Secondary school examination with science¹ are eligible. In Delhi science students normally pass senior secondary examination with: physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology or mechanical/engineering drawing and a language, preferably English. Anthropology is not the wide choice of the students at the

undergraduate level of the teaching in the University². As one of the professors of Anthropology in Delhi University questions the reader

.... “Why does one join the anthropology degree programme? Do the parents aware about the values of the discipline? Here this professor of social anthropology says that girls opt for anthropology admission in large number as compared to boys and points out its own reasons evidently- nowhere to go; low marks; or failed to get in market driven subjects... etc. (Srivastava 2000, p.179)².

Further he adds many of them had no idea about the discipline or had poor or mis/understanding, I am discussing in following text what had prompted me to study the discipline and *how* I choose and circumstances constraint me to remain in and how at every stage of its learning *affected* my life; the way you think, look others etc...? Finally, it expresses - how did I make my place in where I am now, present engagement in medical anthropology in neuropsychiatric tertiary care Institute.

This trajectory emphasized *how* and *when* I had chosen the Anthropology Honours after my senior secondary schooling in Delhi¹. The following explains that how I opted for Anthropology honors. Was it painful destiny? Was it emotionally disturbing when I began to learn anthropology? How did I feel on coming out after three years of undergraduate learning in Anthropology? It had altogether made me a different person on learning very different, *Anthropology*, at an early age. Further what motivated me to remain in anthropology and how did I finally ended up in my recent engagement in teaching and practicing the medical anthropology, in a neuropsychiatric hospital and future challenges for the discipline at the work place? This is very interesting trajectory, reflects how the learning of the various anthropologies affect you in your daily life, does its learning improve you or give you different perspectives to see the people around you or away you? Do you feel that you have become more concern or sensitive to the people whom you are associated or working in the field or dealing in your engagements? Further how does it affect your personal or interpersonal family relations in the life. I began with these questions examined in the trajectory of my own engagements in past to present during one decade (Srivastava 1999, p.545, *see* also end notes-4 &5)

Beginning in Anthropology!

I recall that I went for admission to Delhi University with my father, who had been acquainted to Delhi University area, as he used to live when he was student of printing technology, in Kingsway Camp with his teacher during 1958-59. We reached University. My father was constraint to leave me alone, on the Probyan road, in front of Law Faculty in Delhi University. As I moved towards the Science Faculty, I saw a small bilingual sign board showing “*Manav Vigyan/ANTHROPOLOGY*”, on that fine day of July, 1982; this day *turned* or rather that *moment turned* my entire life when did I see it; it was lateral side of Department of Anthropology and the *same sign board* had been seen there at same place after 28 years when I began to write on this aspect (Fig.-1 as on 19th Sep. 2010).



Fig-1

Fig.- 2

Fig-1 is a bilingual sign board of the Department' Name *Manav Vigyan (in Hindi)/ANTHROPOLOGY* Department. Fig.- 2 is a closure view of the board photographed on 18th September, 2010. (Department then was in renovation as it had been housed in British period building)

Faculty of Sciences, Delhi University

My senses had lost in these two words “*Manav Vigyan /Anthropology*”. As young student of seventeen I remained under its influence in my deep thoughts while I was moving towards Science Faculty housed in Old Barrack. I made my mind to study it as it appeared more similar to human biology and will definitely help me in studying the Medicine during July, 1982. In those days I was aspirant for pre-medical test in Delhi, as usual in those days and still it continues even today. I reached in Faculty of Sciences in Delhi University. It was housed in old barracks. I began to walk in the corridor while waiting. I inquired a lady, Section Officer, dealing with admission of B.Sc. (Hons) Anthropology. I had decided to seek admission in B.Sc. (Hons) Anthropology, after reading that sign board (Fig.-1 and 2) while going towards science faculty. I told lady officer about my decision to study Anthropology Honours, and then she became very furious, seemingly as if I had said something which I should not. She saw me from *top to bottom* as I was wearing *Kurta* and *pajama* with slipper and one *khadi* bag on left shoulder containing important papers. I was very different in my dress as compared to the contemporary students of my age.

She calmly asked me about my interest and I told the *same*, then again, my answer annoyed her more. For few minutes I could not imagine what went wrong! Then she again questioned me who told you to opt for Anthropology Hons? Then I plainly replied me, myself. Then she was little disturbed and suggested me- ‘you can take admission in other hons: physics, chemistry, botany, zoology and mathematics as you are eligible. But why you wish to take up Anthropology Hons? I could not reply satisfactorily. Finally, she asked me to *wait* and *think* and come after the lunch what you want to study. I waited eagerly. As soon as lunch was over, I went again to her room and she was disturbed again on seeing me. She consulted her some of the

colleagues sitting nearby. They suggested her something positively and finally she gave me the admission slip and advised me to go Hans Raj College(HRC), famous college of time in the University and still it is even today for Sciences Hons. I was very happy and rushed towards the college but I reached late at 4.00pm and college office told me to come with certificates and fee next day in morning. Next day I went to HRC took admission in the Anthropology Honours and happily returned home and influencing friends as I got admission in North Campus, Delhi University, then very prestigious to get admission.

After admission in Anthropology Honors

Few days later I went to the Delhi Public Library, Patel Nagar to return some books. Meanwhile I looked around while gazing for the books on the anthropology. I saw one and picked *first book* on “Anthropology” titled *Anthropology Made Easy* by John Lewis and I glanced through its first few pages. I could see only the harpoons, skeletons, cave pictures, text...more text...only text! I was completely confused and began about *to fell* in hysteric state beside the bookrack as I could not understand a single word and it was in a *different language* for which we were *neither trained nor taught* in school. Then I felt where I have entered in higher academics. Now I felt and realized well that *why* that lady Officer had asked me several times ‘*who told you to opt this stream*’ i.e., Anthropology Honours?

On seeing “Anthropology Made Easy” by John Lewis: first book on Anthropology It was first book in Anthropology which I saw in beginning during August 1982 in Delhi Public Library, Patel Nagar, which I saw but I could purchase this book after I earned M.Sc. Anthropology (1988) and becoming the research fellow of ICMR in 1988. These are following lines which I wrote, *how did I felt* when I tried to read it and these reflect the *pain* in tears which later *turned* into my happiness in later years as follows.

I wrote a note on the internal title page of the *same* book- *Anthropology Made Easy* by Jhon Lewis.

“A book which I saw, two days after of my admission in Anthropology Honors in Delhi University, from the *Delhi Public* Library, Patel Nagar as I turned its first two –three pages then I wept for days and days and made myself to leave it, but I could not *leave* and at last I persuaded in it and gradually I developed interest in it thorough studies and began to devote a large amount of time in it, subsequently within three years I discovered *My Self* and found *Gems and Diamond* out of it which became my innovated life success principles. Today I feel happy, internal peace of mind when I read it critically to broaden my observational (anthropological gaze) process of surroundings.” (1)

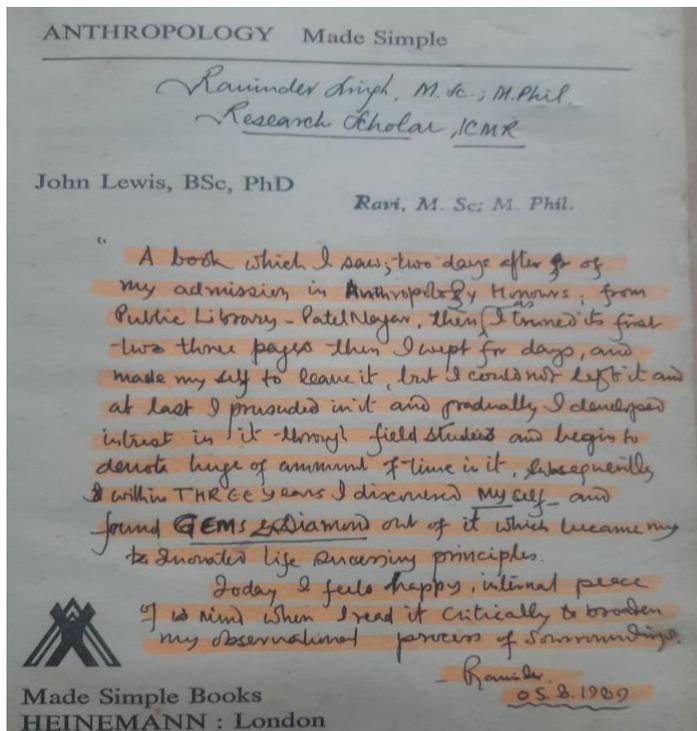


Fig-3: Written note, on 05.8.1989, a quote from his note on the internal title page of *Anthropology Made Easy* by Jhon Lewis, published by Heinemann: London, 1982, a book he could purchase after he became Research fellow of ICMR in 1988.

I was just cursing myself *why* I had ignored her suggestions. From July 1982 to November 1982, I neither *read* a single word in any of the book on anthropology nor did I try to do so, except taking the class room notes. But I enjoyed its practical classes as it involved the drawing of the long and small human bones, seems more closer to as studying the medicine, during the first year. I used to read *Grays' Anatomy*, a bible for the students of medicine, for osteology and osteometry. I used to listen carefully in the class of physical anthropology-primatology as well as primates' behavior.

But on other side, theory classes of my teachers, particularly of Professor J D Mehra, teaching society and culture, were above my head. He used to teach us social anthropology-society, social structure and function, caste, village structure etc. This I could not understood well what it is? Why it is being taught us? Though I had been the student of pure sciences-physics, chemistry, biology, and higher mathematics in my senior secondary level examination and this all making more disturb and uncomfortable in learning anthropology. But somehow, I could understand the Physical anthropology chiefly concerned Primatology and Paleontology as were more similar to biological sciences. In the practical classes, I was interested as I could understand what I am learning. But on other part-chiefly concerned cultural aspects of society were above my head, I was in state of depression and had decided to leave Anthropology honors. In home, my parents, particularly my father was happy but observing me consistently that I am not happy with this course- Anthropology major. After a brief discussion I opened to him, how I had been feeling in its learning, the uncomfortabilities hence suggested either changing to other majors, physics, or chemistry, or dropping the year for further preparation for combined pre-medical examination to choose out a career in medicine. But period for the inter-departmental

change in the University for the other Majors had already been over. Meanwhile I had also tried to for the readmission in the school but all my efforts, as young student failed and were total waste of time and energy. My mother had instructed *me* to be away from the girls and do not go along with girls anywhere, invisible restrictions as *taboos!*

Revisiting School

In the depressing state, I went back to my school for re-admission in 12th Class in October 1982 as I wished to repeat the Senior Secondary school examination in order to better prepare the medical entrance in forth coming year. I met my class teachers and expressed my desire but Principal who refused straight to readmit me as CBSE had declared as successful. But rather they advised me to appear as private student in next year CBSE examination. I was discussing it all in the Office of the Principal, Shri Pyare Kishen Chaddha. Other science subjects' teachers also joined our discussion, but its outcome was not in my favor. Rather a teacher of History and English, Shri Raj Kumar Kakkar, PGT (English) who used to teach us English, told me about Anthropology as it is very good. But I was not in state of its affirmative listening. Rather in the disappointed state I left my school where I spent seven years, 1975-1982. I decided to go to CBSE office near ITO next day. Here I spent one day in filling the form and again it has to be signed by the School Principal. Then I could visualize similar situation of rejection by my School Principal last attended. Then I decided to let it off and continued in Anthropology Honours after discussion with my father who rather suggested to continue in latter, Anthropology Hons.

Alas! I could not leave it. I remained there till November 1982 in the depressive phase. One fine day, one of my teachers, Prof. P. K. Seth (PKS), used to teach Primatology and Paleontology practical in the class of physical anthropology, said to some of my classmates that they all will go to the field on Primate's behavior. I was little hesitant as I thought this field visit might be a kind of the picnic for the fun and of course with girls! It was not easy for me to be with the girls in the picnic. Never! Unfortunately, there were only six students, two boys and four girls, in the entire class of Anthropology Hons in the University. I did not deposit the money for the field visit. Then Professor Seth called me in his room. Following is the conversation which held in his room.

PKS: Come. Ravinder. (*I entered in his room and stood on the side of his table*)

RS: Good morning, sir,

PKS: Good morning. Ravinder, you have not deposited the money. Is there any problem? (*Trying to probe economic strain*)

RS: No.

PKS: Any other problem?

RS: No problem.

PKS: Do you have warm clothes? (*As it was winter season, I used to wear Kurta – Pajama and a slipper in this winter. I had felt an inner transformation in me and wished to live on minimum self expenditure*)

RS: Yes Sir, I have warm clothes.

PKS: Then why you refused to go to the field?

RS: Sir, I think it is a picnic and I do not wish to go with girls!

(Here he might have understood, my cultural choreography, what I intend to say. Actually, I refused to go to field because I thought it was a picnic with the girls,

as I was hesitant to work with girls and it is a kind of picnic and hence, I refused straight)

PKS: What! It is a picnic! No. Ravinder, (*Trying to grasp my ignorance about the subject and its relevance in the fields*) added further, the field work is compulsory. If you do not go then you shall fail in first year. Its field report carries 100 marks. You have to write the field report after the field work. Therefore, you should go to field.

RS: I nodded affirmatively, yes sir. (*I made my mind to go field work while leaving his room*)

This conversation held in his room and finally I planned for this field work on *primates' behavior*, the *virgin* experience of field work changed my destiny. I began my journey in Anthropology and continued as student for more than thirteen years from July, 1982 to January, 1996 till I completed Ph.D. in the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. Then I left the department with those *gems* and *diamond* for a job in the early of 1996. These latter mainly were the understandings of the common and universal principles which bind the human beings together in the Society.

II

First Field Work in Anthropology- November-December, 1982.

I decided to go Dehradun as per instruction of Dr P K Seth, our field teacher for primate's behavior. We were five students in the whole University. I requested my father for 200/- INR and my younger brother helped me in packing-warm clothes, bedding, etc. We reached from our residence, Press Colony, Maya Puri to Subash Nagar where we boarded the first DTC bus for ISBT. We reached there early in the morning at Dehradun Bus Stand. Ealley, my brother waited till I left along with others- Dr P K Seth and class mates by Bus to Dehradun. Then he left the Bus Stand for the home. In my life I went outside Delhi alone for such a different task- field work. We stopped at Forest Guest House, *Mohad range*, in Rajaji Sanctuary before Dehradun. Here there were no light in Night. In day hours we traveled in dense forest to follow the Rhesus Monkey, *Maccacca malltta*, it is common monkey nearby areas. We began to do field work with our senior Ph D research scholars, working on the primate's behaviors. In the evening we enjoyed a lot. Eating and signing together. We also traveled to Mussoorie, Lal Tibba several other places where we all enjoyed the snow. Often, we conduct the observation on *black mouth*, *long tailed languor*. We stayed here for two weeks. This was a virgin experience in my life, changed my life, my thought pattern about the discipline, its impact remained as fresh as of even today. While returning Delhi, I had made my mind to study it further more about primatology and its behaviors. Here *I could learn more about the girls and their behavior*- to care other as they had cooked for me, the vegetarian foods too during this field work. I remained here since 1982 November. After returning from field work, I spent late evening in Central Reference Library (CRL) to work on my field report on Primates Behavior and I submitted in January, 1983 as the Draft of Field Report to Dr Seth and he examined it and expressed his satisfaction. This field work of two week had transformed my inner self. In my life in Delhi, I never went out alone, moreover never with *girls*, it was unique experience- to look, to write and then study same in the books. My teacher and other research Scholars were very affectionate during the field. This field work has not only transformed my perspective to look life in surrounding and understand better the people around. Further it also helped me to understand my Parental family, kinship structure, marriage etc.

Field Work: Soul of Anthropology

I was promoted to Second year in 1983. I learned pre-historic archeology or Indian prehistory. My teacher, Dr D K Bhattacharya (usually popular among students as DKB) used to encourage a lot, as I was only boy among five students in the University. I went on field work in pre-historic archaeology in Dindori tehsil near District Mandla during late November, 1983. Mandla is most primitive tribal district in Madhya Pradesh of Central India. Here I was influenced by this field work- assessing the cultural evolution through the artifacts reflecting the cognitive development of the prehistoric man might have evolved in India. I realized here how do you do field work and do write the report based on different theme particularly in pre-history.

Then in third year of my graduation I went to Udaipur in 1984 where I studied the *Gamaties* and *Dangi*, two agricultural communities of Udaipur. I was working on the dermatoglyphics, somatometric characters and their economic system of the village people in these two communities. By this time, I was exposed to the village life in the anthropological ways. These field works taught me: how *to meet* the “*Other*” people and conduct the anthropological field work. Meanwhile I was learning the new things in anthropology: Religion and Magic, rituals, family, kinship, marriage, primitive laws and rules and regulations governing the simple societies and primitive societies. I was fascinated anthropological literatures whether physical or social, as its reading reveal the society and its structures. It influenced me much and I was the most benefitted as I could care my younger brothers and parents in the better way. I was learning in the class but outside the class on the road it was anthropology in my eyes penetrating the people.

In late November 1984 V K Srivastava (VKS) joined as lecture in Social Anthropology in the Department. He taught Tribe and Peasantry to our Class in Nov 1984 after becoming Lecturer in Social Anthropology in Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. He took our extra classes on *Tribe and Peasantry* during December 1984 to February 1985. He used to take our Class of 3 to 5 students since 9.30 am to 6.30pm in evening with little break. This was his only Classes I had a chance to have. But his guidance and checking/Reading my Draft Third Year Dissertation in Anthropology continued further till my final year’s exam in May 1985. When I was writing my dissertation based on the recently concluded field work in Udaipur for my final year of honors graduation in late 1984. One day I was sitting for the checking my hand written drafts of the Dissertation in late evening with V K Srivatava, a teacher who knows well how to *implant* the anthropological concepts in the tender mind of the students. Here I develop my interest in other anthropologies too. Then I had following short conversation with him.

VKS: Which anthropology do you like?

RS: (*after a deep thought*) I like anthropology as the *whole* rather than its parts. I wish to study as the whole rather than in parts; each part in itself is incomplete. Then after a pause I said the Physical anthropology. I express my desire to learn the other subjects: economics, religion, laws, philosophy etc. But he was interested to listen about the social anthropology!

Here I learned basic rules of writing the dissertation -write something every day, write more every day, then every hour and then every moment. Perhaps anthropology is the science of daily observations of human action in collective or individual human behavior.

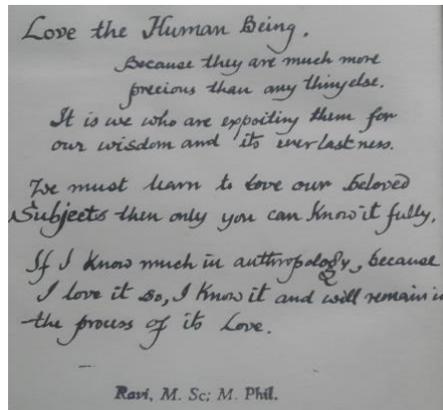


Fig-4: My expression about human beings, our subjects

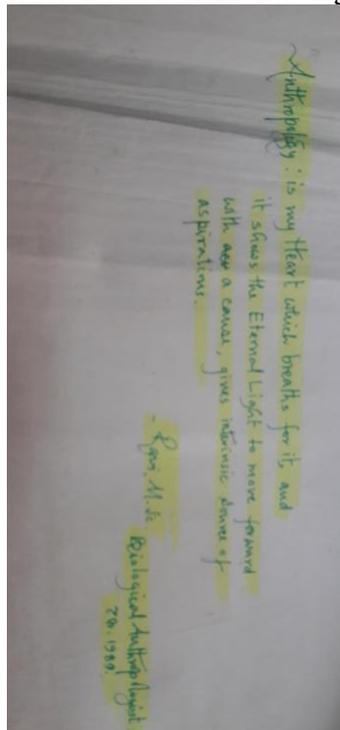


Fig-5: How do I feel about the discipline.

Anthropology and its holistic understanding have a tremendous effect on my thinking to understand the surrounding social life. How the learning anthropology makes you more sensitive to other people, less prejudices and you feel a transformation in looking a life around you (See Srivastava, 1999, p-500, notes-4)

Last field work with my field teachers- November, 1987

I recall my M.Sc. days when our class went to Baiga Chak, in Dindori tehsil of Mandla District, MP in November 1987. After a long road journey from Jabalpur, we reached Chada/Chara and stayed in Primary School, Chada village, Baiga-Chak, Dindori, Mandla. Our teachers stayed nearby Forest Guest House in Chada village. Both teachers, Prof Vinay K Srivastava and Prof Suriender Nath have taught me. Prof Nath had taught me *first time* in the Department *Human growth and Development* in M.Sc. Anthropology in July 1987 while Prof

Srivastava had already taught me *Tribe and Peasantry* during B.Sc. (Hons) Anthropology in November 1984.



Fig-6: (left to Right): Prof Nath, Prof V K Srivatava, me and Harshwardhana in Dindori Forest Guest House in November, Second Week, 1987.



Fig.-7: Speaking on Children's Day (*Bal Divas*), 14th November, 1987 in Primary School, Chada, Baiga Chak. Headmaster sitting on Dias along with other classmates sitting on chairs.

After this we were again together in November 1987 Field work in Baiga Chak in Mandla where we also worked closely on medical anthropology, Possession State, *Guniya*-Local healer. But I was working on Physical Growth of *Baiga* and *Gond* male Children and most of the time spent with late Dr Nath Suriender. My closeness to Dr Nath grew as student-Teacher friendship in Baiga Chak, in November, 1987. I still do not know what qualities my field teachers had noticed in me while working together in Baiga-Chak, Mandla, MP. We returned after two weeks field work and began to analyse the data of growth and development of Baigas and Gond Tribal children. Soon I immersed in writing M.Sc. Anthropology dissertation and finally it was completed with the help of Dr Nath who *unofficially* helped me though Prof Raghbir Singh, Head of Department had been officially supervising me.

As ICMR Research Fellow (1988-1990)

I joined as *ICMR* Research Fellow in the Department of Population Genetics and Human Development (PG&HD) in National Institute of Health and Family Welfare, Govt. of India, New Delhi. Here I had bought several books on anthropology as then I can afford financially most these books after 1988.

Before I continue further on the impact on learning anthropology, let us see more title of books which I could only purchase after 1988 wherein I expressed my observations about the discipline. I purchased another book "*Culture, People, and Nature: An Introduction to General Anthropology(1975)*" by *Marvin Harris* after joining the ICMR Research Fellowship in 1988. Then I wrote the following on its front page the

"First book in Anthropology which I *could* buy after (1982-1989) becoming the Research Scholar (ICMR); before it I was extremely searching pages of books and book, torn pages, even could not find myself to arrange money for photocopying , so in this process of need, a writing has developed which constantly constrained me to read more, write more for *masses* and to learn maximum languages to communicate effectively with an anthropological approaches to masses mainly to reform the people." (2) Ravi, 2.8.1989

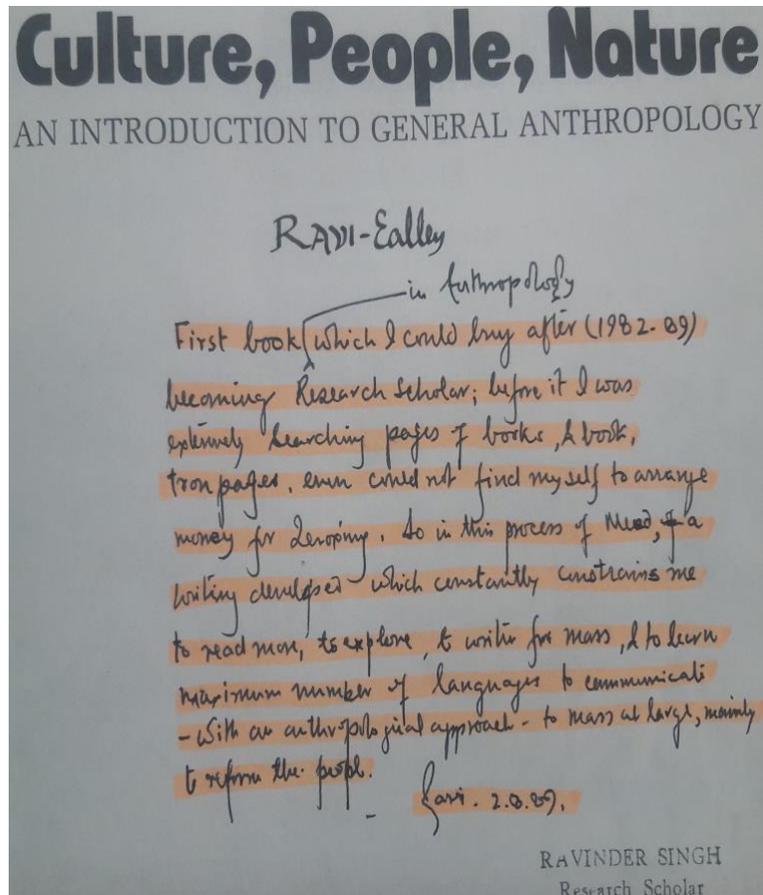


Fig.-8: I could purchase this book after my Master in 1988

Further I wrote some comments on the *presentation* of the female Body Images and emerging semiotic behavioral interpretation in a beautiful representation of her body breast on the second page of "Culture, People, and Nature: An Introduction to General Anthropology by Marvin Harris.

..... exploring the Sexual behavior and visual anthropological principles, the languages of her silence, her staring, and her slim action to invite someone's *attention*. Let create such few moments, O 'friends come together and enjoy it.... Let me explore principal of sexual and visual anthropologies: let pay attention to it, analyze its every detail which is saying something, each conformity and contour of body making a unique call of its own kind. Her staring eyes

Let explore through Visual anthropology of the visible world-"New Frontiers in anthropology" More on the Sexual Anthropology to document on the exotic phenomenon in World of primitive societies ... New Frontiers in Anthropology (3)

Osmosis” a political mechanism for the homogeneity. Ravi,
27.8.1994

Similarly, on the another the covering page of the Book “*Anthropological and Sociological Theories*” By R S Mann (1985). I wrote some of *thoughts* about the Anthropology how it had appealed me

Anthropology: is a mirror of man; a theme of man. A bridge between two giant sciences: social and biological. A study lies on two planes: time and space and this animal can be measured on these two planes. It's my starts to understand the Man, in this Universe and that where he wants to exist... and soon would be my turning point towards the social sciences and humanities. (4)

HLA Typing and *Karamchand Jasoos*: studying the human Serology

I took admission in M.Sc. Anthropology programme in July 1986 in University of Delhi. I found most of the syllabus was same which I had studied during graduation Anthropology Honours programme. While I was making notes for the M.Sc. Programme, one day I was watching television then *Karamchand Jasoos*, a detective serial of Pankaj Kapoor, which was being telecast during the 1984-85. I saw one episode- in which Kidney transplantation was shown and recipients of the kidney died few days after the kidney transplant. It was found that how *mismatching of HLA antigens* converted into matching with the donor. It was transplanted which finally killed the recipient. HLA complex was one of the Sections in Serology papers and I was interested in this paper because of its relevance in transplantation sciences, but its utilities in illuminating the molecular variations in understanding the social structure of the people. It is what had I was fascinated me to be with everyday phenomenon in the anthropological ways. In *Economic Anthropology(1952)* by *Melville Jean Herskovits*, I read it in my third year for Indian primitive economic systems of our simpler people and reading his *Cultural Anthropology(1952)* by also had influenced me about concept of Magic and Religion. The work of *F G Baily* in *Habitat, Culture and Economic Frontier(1957)* and *Caste and Economic Frontier(1964)* among the Bissipara Village of Ganjam District of Orissa which had revealed the social structures of people, castes constructions and local politics or feuds. I made some general observations as

...when I visualize the comparative primitive economics of the world, then supersized by knowing, that how they are efficient in their own ways... eco-niche, we should learn from these world economic systems of simpler societies...how they are maintained and stabilized on inside cover of *Economic Anthropology* by *Melville Jean Herskovits(1957)*, 03.10.1989

Adding further I emphasised

Whatever we see, is not as it appears to us, but our perspective to see it. Here onwards you should make to distinguish between *good* and *evil* / *good* and *bad*; *don'ts* and *dos* etc. You must learn *what to do* and *what not to do*; further more important is # *why it is only to do?* and *why not, it is not to do?*
Economic Anthropology by *Melville J Herskovits*, 10.10.1989

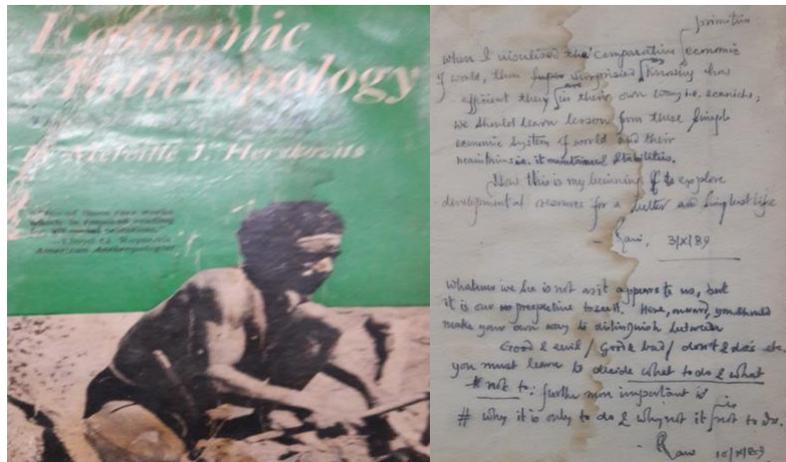


Fig.-11: Inner Cover page of the Book as mentioned above

There was a quest of knowledge about different aspects of human society, particularly my own family and younger siblings. I was recapitulating the inner self development next pages in detail revealing how its learning it has not only reformed me but entire family, particularly younger siblings. Next section emphasized the influences of studying the subject in understanding my own family, its relationship dynamics, interpersonal relationship with young sibling, besides doing entire home chore activities. Whatever being taught in social anthropology class could be seen in my home. This understanding had helped me to face the day-to-day life in family as well as better understanding the needs of sibs, sharing parental responsibilities towards the social obligations for younger people and ailing mother's work in kitchen and cooking for all. These aspects of home as place of calmness, care, self-relationships with things or living space etc. have been examined in recently in five different articles related to housing as space in a journal⁵.

III

Learning Anthropology (1982-1988): Self-Reformation and Reflection

During this period, I was achieving higher goals more focused in anthropology to know more about the family, caste, village structure, marriage, sex, etc. such accounts can be read in the books. Further I decided to learn the human variations: molecular variation among the human beings and hence I opted physical anthropology and other three optional for laboratory-oriented papers such as human cyto-genetics, biochemical genetics and serology. My aim to study these aspects about the man was to acquire the more molecular variation within the body and how do two people vary on one side and other side I wanted to have first hand knowledge about prevailing variations in social institution in simple and socially complex societies. In this sense I observed anthropology as ever moving, always *in action*, a discipline always in action - its engagements always been changing and so often it is difficult to define. For example, *how lived experiences* of one contribute to understanding the people around you *or* at the work which you do in the family or how does it is related to status and role within family? I try to enumerate the rituals being observed in the family which later on resulted into *Dissociative Disorder* and also illuminate the child caring and development in the family in this difficult time. These aspects have been discussed separately elsewhere.

My learning in anthropology during 1982 to 1996 which had been multifaceted mainly concerned to daily life within family or at the work place. I focused on anthropology earlier in

birth defects as research fellow of ICMR, child growth and development as UGC research fellow for research degree programs in Anthropology Department of Delhi university, and then as officer for child care, social policy and legislation in government, and finally I made my place to understand better mental health issues and their teaching, training, treatment in present working place, neuropsychiatry Institute, a tertiary care facility. Situation of teaching system in medical anthropology in Indian Universities has been illuminated along with current situation and challenges in a neuropsychiatric tertiary care facility in next section

IV

Teaching of Medical Anthropology⁴

Let's see Indian situation more about medical anthropology in university teaching, health institutions or super specialty Neuropsychiatry hospital, like IHBAS. There are presently 33 university departments offering the teaching of anthropology. The *Status Report on Anthropology*, published by the University Grants Commission (1982), counted 26 departments in 22 universities teach the Anthropology at post-graduate and research level and medical anthropology is one of the optional papers during the final year of master's degree. Delhi University offer the Teaching of anthropology in the advance manner and award the B.Sc. (Hons) and M.Sc. in Anthropology. In some of the University e.g., Patiala where the degree is given in Human Biology (not as Physical anthropology) rather than of anthropology and work is the same. Anthropological Survey of India (An.S.I), Department of Culture, Ministry of HRD, Govt of India recruits the large number of anthropologists and conduct scientific studies on living human population groups in different ecological zones of the country. 22 Indian universities have the Department of Anthropology and many of them *do not teach* medical anthropology (Srivastava, 2000). Often it is taught as specialized paper of medical anthropology in anthropology as in case of University of Delhi where it is a paper in post-graduate programme in anthropology. In India we have few anthropologists who are actively working for the medical anthropology whereas several anthropologists, psychiatrists, neurologists, and other behavioral scientists from the other western countries are working on health-related issues for their respective projects in our country. But department of medical anthropology is the separate independent department exists as one of thirteen departments in the neuropsychiatry tertiary care hospital- tertiary level teaching and training institution affiliated to University of Delhi under GNCT Delhi.

Vision-2020 for Medical Anthropology⁶

In 2010 I shared my *Vision-2020* after four years of joining as faculty in Department of medical anthropology. The founding visionary, who had been given task to rebuild the Hospital for mental diseases (HMD) to an academic Institute for Behavioral sciences the who himself had been a brilliant psychiatrist and administrator of the Institute might have kept this department for the cross-cultural studies of human behavioral problems in psychiatry and prevalent curing mechanism, myths of various psychological diseases prevalent among the simple communities etc. For the psychiatrist it is necessary to know the normal pattern, prescribed pattern of the community, here lies the anthropology, then only we can understand better the abnormal, non-prescribed pattern understanding the human behavior. I covered scope of medical anthropology with neurosciences, with emphasis on the brain in cultural space

Medical anthropology and Neurosciences

Medical anthropologists explore to what extent is neurological disease culture-bound or bio-logically based are prevalent among the human population groups, particularly in Indian groups, religious groups, and their geographical distribution. Anthropologists have studied how people with neurological disorders live or stay alive. Medical or biological anthropology professor, the original discoverer of a fascinating neurological condition called *kuru*. Paul Cox, studied anthropology of neurological diseases among the Polynesian culture. Medical communications of patients about their experiences reveals interesting patterns in the in the geography communications of patients about their experiences reveals interesting patterns in the geography of this disorder.

I also searched my avenues for new initiative for the department work on the patients with Dementia/Alzheimer and epilepsy. Neurological and mental health disorders are extremely debilitating, and sufferers in developing countries often rely on traditional practitioners for these medical needs. Few studies have focused on botanical remedies used in this context although these offer interesting treatment alternatives. It is investigated plant use for the treatment of neurological and mental health disorders in Q'eqchi' Maya healers of southern Belize. It is found that these healers treat epilepsy/seizures, headache, madness, fright (*susto*), depression, numbness, insomnia, and stress with herbal remedies. Quantitative analyses have shown that there is selection for the use of certain species and botanical families, namely for species of the *Pteridophyta* division and for plants from the *Piperaceae* family. It denotes the importance and selectivity of plant use by *Q'eqchi'* healers of southern Belize for the treatment of neurological and mental conditions and points to a possible under representation of these disorders in the ethnobotanical literature (Natalie B. Spear, 2005).

Recently neurological anthropology among the Kamayura Indians of the Alto Xingu reveals the Illness in Indians is caused by the revenge of the spirit (*mama'e*) of the animal killed by the huntsman. Epilepsy (*Teawurup*) or armadillo disease is caused when a huntsman kills an armadillo. It is treated with two roots, *tsimó* and *wewuru*, kneaded, diluted in water, and applied to the eyes. An infusion of enamum root is also used. Migraine or monkey disease causes a pulsatile headache and vertigo. Mental retardation and infantile cerebral palsy are included in the ant-bear disease. Depression is treated with the plant '*iputumú*'; which is applied diluted in water to the face of the patient so that he no longer sees his dead relations and may be cured. Schizophrenia or *apuayat* (owl disease) also occurs, but not Parkinsonism or stroke. The Kamayura *pajes* have established a system of health-care based on magic folklore, transmitted orally and making use of traditional plants (Carod and Carbrea, 2001). These studies indicate that medical anthropology has its own relevance in the neurological diseases.

The Brain and Cultural Space: Towards Integration- Cultural Neurosciences

Neuroanthropology integrates anthropology, social theory, and the brain sciences. Neuroscience has increasingly produced basic research and theoretical models that are surprisingly amenable to anthropology. Rather than “neuro-reductionist” or determinist approaches, research has increasingly emphasized the role of environment, body, experience, evolution, and behavior in shaping, even driving organic brain development and function. At the same time, the complexity of the brain makes a mockery of attempts to pry apart “nature” from “nurture,” or to apportion credit for specific traits. Research on gene expression, endocrine variability, mirror neurons, and neural plasticity all beg for comparative data from across the range of *human variations* — biological and cultural.

Neuroscientists and other social scientists are already actively working on these sorts of integrated models; books like Wexler's *Brain and Culture: Neurobiology, Ideology, and Social Change* (2006) which shows that between birth and early adulthood the brain requires sensory stimulation for physical growth and development. The nature of the stimulation shapes the connections among neurons that create the neuronal networks necessary for thought and behavior. By changing the cultural environment, each generation shapes the brains of the next. By early adulthood, the neuroplasticity of the brain is greatly reduced, and this leads to a fundamental shift in the relationship between the individual and the environment: during the first part of life, the brain and mind shape themselves to the major recurring features of their environment; by early adulthood, the individual attempts to make the environment conform to the established internal structures of the brain and mind. It further explores the social implications of the close and changing neurobiological relationship between the individual and the environment, with particular attention to the difficulties individuals face in adulthood when the environment changes beyond their ability to maintain the fit between existing internal structure and external reality. These difficulties are evident in bereavement, the meeting of different cultures, the experience of immigrants (in which children of immigrant families are more successful than their parents at the necessary internal transformations), and the phenomenon of interethnic violence. Integrating recent neurobiological research with major experimental findings in cognitive and developmental psychology—with illuminating references to psychoanalysis, literature, anthropology, history, and politics—Wexler presents a wealth of detail to support his arguments. The groundbreaking connections he makes allow for reconceptualization of the effect of cultural change on the brain and provide a new biological base from which to consider such social issues as "culture wars" and *ethnic violence*.

Similarly, Quartz and Sejnowski's *Liars, Lovers, and Heroes: What the New Brain Science Reveals About How We Become Who We Are* (2003) actively incorporate anthropological materials. This combines cutting-edge results in neuroscience with examples from history and the headlines to introduce the new science of *cultural biology*, born of advances in brain imaging, computer modeling, and genetics. Further it also reveals how both our noblest and darkest traits are rooted in brain systems so ancient that we share them with insects. They then demystify the dynamic engagement between brain and world that makes us something far beyond the sum of our parts. Both writers show how our humanity unfolds in precise stages as brain and world engage on increasingly complex levels. Their discussion embraces shaping forces as ancient as climate change over millennia and events as recent as the terrorism and heroism and offers intriguing answers to some of our most enduring questions, including why we live together, love, kill and sometimes lay down our lives for others.

Further Stephen P. Turner's *Brains/Practices/Relativism* (2002) aim to bring neuroscience into social theory, often with critical intent. It presents the first major rethinking of social theory in light of cognitive science which focuses especially on connectionism, views learning as a process of adaptation to input that, in turn, leads to patterns of response distinct to each individual. This means that there is no common "server" from which people download shared frameworks that enable them to cooperate or communicate. Therefore, argues Turner, "practices"—in the sense that the term is widely used in the social sciences and humanities—is a myth, and so are the "cultures" that are central to anthropological and sociological thought. Turner traces out the implications that discarding the notion of shared frameworks has for relativism, social constructionism, normativity, and a number of other concepts in these essays. Similarly, the work of Oliver W Sack, a neurologist turned anthropologist, *Anthropologist on the*

Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales (1995) explains paradoxical portraits of seven neurological patients also reveals the neurological patients in their cultural realms.

However, these works often leave out the best of anthropology. Although its research is being borrowed, we are being left out of the conversation precisely at a time when we should speak with authority. In the present round of integration, simplistic understandings of culture dominate, and, at times, outside authors read our research through unsettling ideological lenses. And, given the emphasis on experience, behavior, context and development, the absence of ethnographic research and insight into precisely those domains that impact our neural function is startling.

Anthropology has much to offer to and much to learn from engagement with neuroscience. An apt model is just how important genetics has become in anthropology, cutting across the entire discipline. A similar revolution is waiting with neurobiology, if we can draw on our strengths and build neuro-anthropology on inclusion, collaboration, and engagement, both within and outside anthropology. To this end, this session explores areas of anthropological research related to the brain where heredity, environment, culture, and biology are in complex relations, with human variation emerging from their nexus rather than being determined by a single variable. Participants explore addiction, motor skill, autism, mental disability, and other brain-related phenomena that can only be explained by dynamic models including both “bottom-up” (biological, neural, and psychological levels) and “top-down” (cultural, social, and ideological) factors.

Terrorism, War, Communal violence: Neuro-anthropology may address critical issues

Neuro-anthropology is an upcoming area in Anthropology to understand the human behavior across the world-wide societies. It aims here to focus these emerging areas which primarily focused on the *Neurosciences approach* in medical anthropology. Neuro-anthropology and its new engagements one can see in their book *The Encultured Brain: Neuroanthropology and Interdisciplinary Engagement* by Daniel Lende, and Greg Downey(2012). It explains the basic concepts and case studies from an emerging field that investigates human capacities and pathologies at the intersection of brain and culture. The brain and the nervous system are our most cultural organs. Our nervous system is especially immature at birth, our brain disproportionately small in relation to its adult size and open to cultural sculpting at multiple levels. In this sense, the new field of neuro-anthropology focus on the brain at in discussions about human nature and culture. Anthropology offers brain science more robust accounts of enculturation to explain observable difference in brain function; neuroscience offers anthropology evidence of neuroplasticity's role in social and cultural dynamics. This book provides a foundational text for neuro-anthropology, offering basic concepts and case studies at the intersection of brain and culture.

Similarly, sensorial anthropology being mentioned *Transcultural Psychiatry* August 2008 issue has been devoted to study the human sensations. Mark Nichter, Medical Anthropologist working different parts of the world including South India his work *Coming to Our Senses: Appreciating the Sensorial in Medical Anthropology* (2008) in *Transcultural Psychiatry* has been devoted to study the human sensations. Another article “Reconsidering the Placebo Response from a Broad Anthropological Perspective (2009) in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* with Jennifer Jo Thompson and Cheryl Ritenbaugh keeps you on the hold.

Now contemporary and recent work which being carried out in medical anthropology have been in focus on the use of neurosciences in Anthropology and some of the interesting areas are

following where the Department *propose* to design some new Working/Training Programmes/projects in this vision.

1. Anthropology of Body Movements: Body Movements in Cultural space, Dance Anthropology, Healing sensations in Cultural neurosciences

2. Pharmaceutical Anthropology: Study of Drug and other substances uses and Abuses
Anthropological work on alcohol and other drug has been well documented and form the one of the important areas in medical anthropology. Anthropologists whose work often useful to policy makers and the treatment providers and in past, during seventies, the studies were chiefly were the part of the broad spectrum of the ethnographical studies of the small societies. Here the anthropologists focus on use of the mind-altering substances. Now the area of their studies have shifted as Bennett and Cook(1990) summaries the prevailing trend in the anthropological enquiry in following areas i) Drug and other substances studies with colleagues in sociology or psychology ii) use mainly the qualitative and quantitative methods of their research iii) try to focus more on the problem of drug uses and the application of the solution to the abusers in the particular cultural setting and iv) pattern of change in drug abuses from alcohol to substances in the community. Other studies on hallucinogens-role of sacred plants in traditional societies (Frust,1976; Weston,1980; Dobkin,1984), cannabis use functional or dysfunctional (Meline Dreher,1983; Carter,1980; True *et al*,1980), alcohol (Levey,1984; Bennett,1988) have acted as mediators and significantly contributed to find out the culturally appropriate treatment (Hall,1986; Westermeyer,1982) and Bio-cultural synthesis of alcoholism etiology. Department look forward for the similar research work in near future in following areas too.

3. Diagnostic Sciences-an emerging industry and Critical Medical Anthropology

4. Contemporary Human Sexual Behavior, Gender, Marriage, and family

Anthropologists have examined that how people experience gender – what it means to be a *man* or a *woman* – and sexuality in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. Anthropology explores how gender and sexuality relate to other categories of social identity and difference, such as race and ethnicity, economic and social standing, urban or rural life, etc. One goal of such clinic is to learn how to critically assess media and other popular representations of gender roles and stereotypes. Another is to gain a greater sense of the diversity of human social practices and beliefs in the different communities. Marriage, as an institution, is under threat in present scenario and impact of the legislation on marriage must be explored.

Department would start M.Phil. and Ph.D. in Medical anthropology for the Anthropology graduates. For achieving this we will design new training programme in view of contemporary needs of teaching and training facility fully equipped research facilities for the future students. Then while concluding the *Vision-2020* as a vision depends up on how are we, thirteen departments of the Institute, related to each other? The number of inter departmental programmes will reflect upon this Vision-2020. Now it is the time to start interdepartmental programmes to achieve the excellence in “*Human Behavior and Neuropsychiatric sciences*”. If we fail to cultivate its basic rubric of Inter-disciplinary nature of faculties and their work in the Institute, *as it has been happening in the past as I have felt in these three years*, during 2009-10, if it continues then we, the Institute is on segmentation of super specializations alone and inter-disciplinarity will remains a distant dream to achieve. This was my vision which I had shared in 2010 to all faculty colleagues of all specialties and still while writing these thoughts I feel same now-not fulfilled or not materialized yet.

Looking forward for an inclusive teachings/training in Medical Anthropology

Now while writing further, as the student of anthropology I have firm believe in anthropological perspective with analytic abilities and it give us a better understanding of human society -in a holistic manner to view society as the whole with its dynamic equilibrium. Often, I feel concerns on observing where are we again going? It seems on looking back as *hospital for mental diseases* (HMD) where we began in 1993 to make excellent neuropsychiatric tertiary care hospital under Supreme Court direction to consider all human Rights and treaties of contemporary times. These all-contemporary situations have been the resulted into Institute of *Human Behavior and Allied Sciences* (IHBAS). I am heading this department of medical anthropology and responsible to cultivate further for various academic activities as mentioned earlier and much more concerned to the *future* of medical anthropology department in neuropsychiatry tertiary care hospital in the capital of the country, remains a challenge. I am still looking forwards for my earlier vision of medical anthropology.

Notes

1. Normally the eligibility for B.Sc. (Hons) Anthropology is students who have passed senior school examination with Physics, Chemistry, Biology and/or Mathematics. Therefore, students while entering in the University for the first degree tries all option for the admission and hence most of these students choose anthropology too but they leave out when they get admission in the stream of their own choice. But it is interesting to reveal how I entered in Anthropology Hons? Is it by choice or by chance? Today I look at I feel it both ways, first as an accident then by choice made me to remain here
- 2 I remember when I took admission in this stream, B.Sc(Hons) Anthropology, there were only six student-four girls and two boys and ultimately by end of first year we remained five students in the class of 1982 batch and in my previous batch there were five(1981batch) and two students (1980 Batch) in the Delhi University.
- 3 At that time, I thought to learn the Laboratory subjects- serology, human cytogenetic, and Biochemical genetics besides the Population Genetics, Human Growth and Development and Paleoanthropology as the compulsory subjects. But I was equally interested in social anthropology. I had to choose the one either Groups-A or B . So, I opted for Groups-A of Physical with serology, human cytogenetic, and Biochemical genetics as the main optional subjects. I was well aware about my decision and knew that I can only learn these subjects here in the Laboratory. But social anthropology can be learned through self reading or under the supervision of a teacher.
- 4 The Department of Medical Anthropology is one of 13 departments-Psychiatry, Neurology, Neurosurgery, Radiology, clinical psychology, psychiatric social work, Epidemiology, biostatistics, pathology, Neuro-biochemistry, Neuro-psychopharmacology, Microbiology, and Medical Anthropology all have been setup in this super specialty hospital and was renamed from Hospital for Mental Diseases (HMD) to Institute of Human Behavior and Allied Sciences (IHBAS) on the direction of Supreme Court of India. Once I had enquired and discussed with Dr Gautam Sharma during 2008, a MD psychiatry student, *why* and *how* this department came into existence in this Institute. He told me about this department which was the result of discussion during 1993 when his father, Dr Sri Dhar Sharma, was assigned to restructure the *Hospital for Mental Diseases (HMD)*, Shahdara, Delhi and was main instrument to make *Institute of Human Behavior and Allied Sciences (IHBAS)*. The main idea might have been to reduce the associated public stigma to HMD (1965) due to mental illnesses. Dr Gautam Sharma told, further, about the emergence of the department of medical anthropology on the suggestion of Dr Mitchell G. Weiss, a cultural psychiatrist, medical anthropologist, and health social science researcher, well trained in Harvard Medical School under the mentorship of Arthur Kleinman of Harvard Medical School. Further Dr Gautam Sharma told it was Dr Mitchell G. Weiss, who had suggested Dr S D Sharma to include as separate academic Department of Medical Anthropology. So, this way this Medical Anthropology Department officially established in the Institute-IHBAS, Delhi. Finally, it was approved in IHBAS Project Report-1993 as one of the Thirteen Academic Departments (Personal communication/Talk to Dr Gautam Sharma, a MD Psychiatry student).
- 5 Recent issue of *Cultural Anthropology* features a Colloquy, as well as five original research articles. The Colloquy introduces the field of "*Oikography*," an ethnographic method that proposes we think of housing not from the technical perspective of such institutions as the state and NGOs, but rather as a practice—

“house-ing.” This focuses our attention on the fluidity of forms and materials that constitute relations of dwelling, and the dialectics (impermanence and stability, mobility and fixity, boundaries, and openings) that define them. Works in this collection explore such diverse contexts as the 2010 Haitian earthquake and cholera outbreak, Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, and public health measures in Tanzania. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol.34, No.4, 2021.

- 6 Vision 2020 is the about the plan for further growth of Department of Medical Anthropology in Institute during July 2010 and all departments presented it.

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Moving Forward and Looking Back: Reflections from the Road

Lisa P. Z. Spinazola (LisaPSpinazola@gmail.com)

Abstract

In this proceeding, Lisa explores how she will use photography to facilitate remembering and can be used as a frame for writing autoethnography and narrative. She incorporates images taken while she traveled throughout the US driving more than 14,000 miles over a span of eleven weeks to demonstrate how concepts from photography can be used to write and reflect on life and living.

Keywords

Autoethnography, photography, memory, perspective, travel

During the sweltering months of Summer 2021, I drove over 14,000 miles in my 2019 Kia Rio, traveling through 35 States and visiting about 20 different friends all over the country. I drove through Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, New York, Washington, Oregon, California, Texas—you get the picture. I almost went to Canada, but the borders were closed because of COVID-19 making it impossible to visit my family in Toronto.

There are so many reasons I took the trip. The first was to reorient myself after having been through isolation and lockdown. I needed to get out into the world and reconnect to life and living. So many of my friends have moved away from Tampa which is where they once resided and where I still do. I wanted to go visit them in their new places and be a witness to their new lives. I also wanted to explore places I'd only seen in magazines and on postcards: Yellowstone, Blue Ridge Mountains, Luray Caverns, Yosemite, Arches, and Horseshoe Bend. My adventure lasted eleven weeks and fulfilled a lifelong dream of mine—to road trip all over the US.

As I drove and explored and hiked, I was struck by how bizarre it felt to look behind me and not recognize a thing, to look backwards at the places I'd already been and wonder how I'd missed some of the sights: a patch of vibrant blue wildflowers now starkly contrasted against a sea of yellow buttercups, a surprise waterfall bursting through the carved rock face of a roadway, or a windblown gnarled tree reaching toward both the sky and earth simultaneously. Where was I looking when I missed these sights? How had I missed what now seems as obvious as a lone cottony-white cumulus cloud set adrift in the bluest Florida sky?

So much of what I thought I'd already seen, already been through, somehow looked unfamiliar, unrecognizable. I started thinking about how where we focus as we move through a space, move through life, where we focus and what we see as we move, can be lost, or distorted, and even exaggerated if we take the time to look backwards. Entire scenes I'd missed because I glanced here instead of there, were different, brand new. Places I'd already been, called out to me, beckoning me back, demanding that I return and take it all in again, and see it from a different perspective.

I started thinking about how I could apply what I was discovering about the ways a landscape shifts, morphs, and changes based on where I'm looking, where I'm standing, or how I'm moving; I wondered if I could use these concepts to think differently about where I've been,

not only situationally but also mentally, chronologically, spatially, emotionally. How can I use these concepts and apply them when I reflect upon on key moments in my life or to the way I write and rewrite stories about my life?

There's a saying about how what we see behind us in the rearview mirror is much less important than what we see ahead of us in the windshield. While there's merit to the saying, I don't think that's entirely true. The way we think about ourselves has everything to do with where we've been and what we've experienced. What we think we're capable of achieving is dependent upon how we see ourselves. Looking back, reflecting upon our lives, observing from new vantage points, restorying our past with knowledge we didn't initially have, can help us heal old wounds and work through residual trauma. When pain from our past lingers within us, the present and future cannot help but be stained or tinted with that pain. Past traumas can make it difficult to see potential opportunities and experiences we might encounter as we move forward.

Photography is one way of documenting and preserving moments in time. Before heading out on my adventure, I mounted a remote-controlled dashboard camera. I did not want to take that chance that I'd forget where I'd been or miss the entirety of the experience. I regret that I did not think to mount another facing behind me.

Click. Click. Click. More than five thousand clicks. I pressed every time I thought I needed to remember the moment I was driving into, trying to preserve an image of life sprawled out ahead of me. I've yet to look at each image in detail but I have shuffled through a few and some have left me wondering what exactly I was trying to capture.

This proceeding of my ISAN presentation is the seed, inception, foundation for a multimodal, multidimensional, mixed media arts-based project brewing within me. I will use paint, clay, epoxy, glue, photography, and writing to explore stories from my life within the frame of my summertime driving adventure. I will discuss photography and how being behind the camera lens can be used to evaluate, interrogate, and write through my life.

While I traveled, I update my loved ones through Instagram and Facebook posts. I will contemplate how I decided on what pictures to post, what words I wrote, what I shared with others, my performance as traveler, as tourist, as friend, as explorer. Instagram limits us to just ten images. I will find a way to emphasize my process of choosing my favorite pictures from the hundreds I'd taken. Could I remember what I was thinking back then and how does that differ from each new time I look? What impact will it have on how I remember those moments? How might the choices I made back then impact how I'll feel about my experiences in the future?

I took pictures to memorialize I'd been in a space or been with friends or done an activity. Would I be able to remember those moments as effectively if did not capture them with my camera? Will I be able to recreate that moment in my mind's eye—taste the stone-baked thick-crust pizza I made in Oneonta, or smell the popcorn aroma of prairie dropseed at Believeau Farm near Roanoke, or reexperience the heart stopping awe I felt as I stood on an Oregon cliff overlooking the turquoise and cerulean swirls of the Pacific Ocean?

Simulation and simulacra come to mind (Baudrillard, 1994). A photograph is a reflection of the basic reality (a digital image of the actual moment as I lived it). My memory of the moment, inspired by the photograph, could be considered a masking or perversion of the basic reality. Can I ever remember it accurately or do I write a new image on top of what really "was" each time I look at the photograph? When look at the photograph years later, my memory of the moment is now inspired by the photograph and not the actual moment as I lived it. So, there's the absence of a basic reality. And ultimately, time and memory can warp or change or alter the original moment so much that it bears no relation to reality at all. Strange et al (2005) found that

retouched or altered photos can create false memories. I think about the filters I used before posting to social media.

There's a saying you can never step into the same river twice because you're not the same person and it's not the same river (Heraclitus). By taking on this project, I will dip my toes into the water of it all. My project will take on many shapes and will shift and change and morph and flow as I discuss the intersections of authenticity, experience, memory, and photography.

I'll use the photos I took as I drove, walked, hiked, and explored to talk about my road trip, experiences and interactions along the way, and interplay of memory and photography. Fawns (2020) writes "engagement with photography extends beyond *viewing* (looking at photos). It also involves *capturing* (taking photos), *organising* (sorting into albums, editing, annotating, etc.), and *sharing* (showing, talking about or sending photos to other people)" (pgs. 901-902). Koutstaal et al (1998) wrote that photographs with written descriptions can aid in memory retention for older adults. I missed the opportunity to write about each photo in the moment because I focused on being in the moment instead of reflecting on yesterday while living through today. I'll take time to write about the photos as I work on my project.

My final project will use autoethnography and narrative to write about writing, living, and remembering. I will use art to enhance the textures and context of my photos. I will write about how we can use photography and memory to craft a reality, to recreate or reframe a reality, for us. I'll discuss photography and identity formation, how the reframing or manipulation of images and memory can help us, can alter how we live in the world, maybe help us move through space or move through a particular time, move through a memory of grief or trauma.

I now provide examples of what I might do, of how I might talk about living, seeing, understanding our lives through the lens of photography—reflection, context, goal, manipulation, lighting, distortion, foregrounding, backgrounding, framing, lenses, direction, motion, belonging, perspective, point of view, positionality.

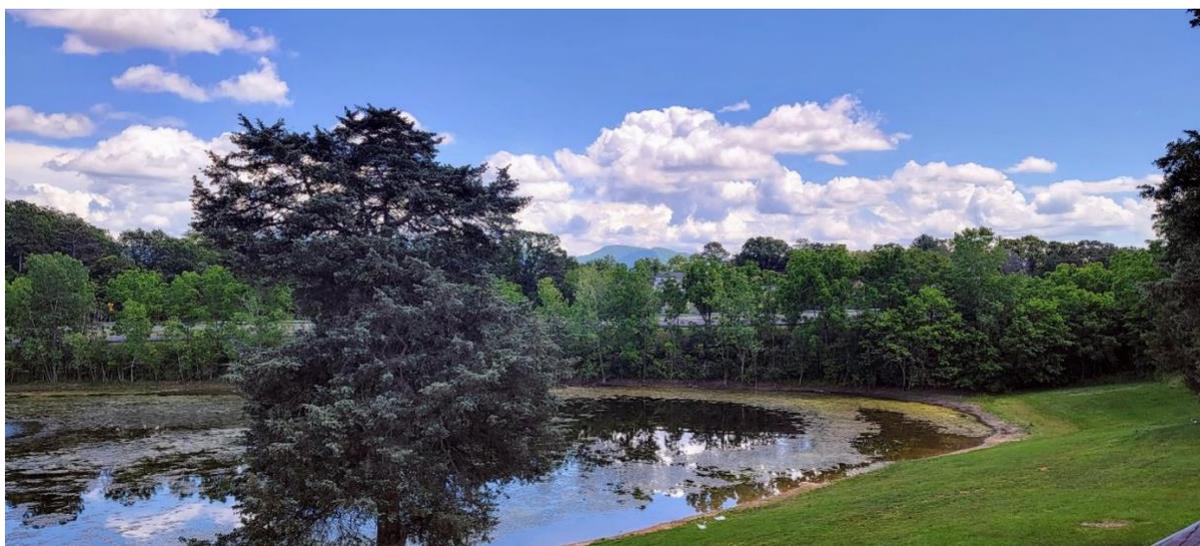
Here are images and corresponding ideas that are forming:



Here you see one building reflected in another building. I think about when we write and reflect on living—are we reflecting through somebody else's experience or is it through our own experience? What does our reflecting do to the original memories or the original experiences? Can it distort or mar what has happened and can we in fact find our way to an understanding?



Here is a picture taken at Luray Caverns. This is deep underground. You'll see an underground lake. Where the lake is calm, you see reflections of stalagmites and stalactites. Closer to the lower right corner though, the lake is churning, disturbed. I think about when we reflect upon our lives, are we are doing it from a state of calm reflection, or in a state of chaos? If we are going to write about or reflect upon our experiences, it matters the state we are in when we reflect and write.



This is a picture taken above ground at Luray Caverns. Taking into account and understanding our positionality, the direction from which we are looking at a situation, our distance from the situation when we do the looking and reflecting is vital—are we above, within, or outside the situation as we write about and reflect upon moments in our lives?



This is a photograph taken at Yellowstone National Park. So much is happening here. The sorbet sunset reflects off a faraway mountain, The blues of the sky are reflected in the steaming, bubbling pools. The composition, context, intricacies, and complexities of life and living, the chaos of each moment, impacts what we think we are seeing, and frames our understanding.



Yellowstone again. To capture the whole crested pool, I used a wide lens. Note the distortions (of the walkway on the upper left and the trees on the upper right). When we try to include every feature or element of a story, we detract from the point. It's best to maintain a purposeful focus and clarify the objective of the story, include what's relevant, leave out what distorts.



I use this picture of a bison resting by the side of the road as an example of framing. If I zoomed in a little bit, it might have seemed like I was closer to the bison, maybe standing on the road, with nothing separating me from the thousand plus pounds of muscle, horns, and fur.



Distance and perspective brought to you by the Desert View Watchtower at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. How far removed are we from the stories we are telling? Are there ways to get closer? To lean in? Are there times we should zoom out to show context and reveal our POV?



This is Horseshoe Bend near Page, Arizona. I include this final set of images to exemplify what it means to rewrite the narrative. The area was crawling with tourists, but I wanted to capture the beauty of the place without any people. I did not erase them from the photo, but I positioned myself so I could hide the fact that they were everywhere. Does this mean I am lying or fabricating the experience? Is the image any less true because I've positioned myself strategically? How do we position ourselves in our stories? Do we tell the whole truth, or do we focus on what we think is important?

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope to work on this project for the next year or two and imagine that when I finish, I will have created an art installation as well as a book on writing, living, and remembering.

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Autoethnography of Japanese Suicide

Hayate Hosenji (hayate.hosenji@gmail.com)



Abstract

In this autoethnographic research project, Hayate, the primary investigator, utilizes confessional and analytic autoethnography in learning how suicide is a significant Japanese public health issue and how Japanese culture relates to a high rate of suicide. On top of that, he discloses and reflects on his experience as a suicide survivor to observe the social problem of suicide in Japan. This autoethnography is his first attempt to understand and overcome his uncle's suicide and his trauma.

Keywords

disclosure, Seken, suicide, suicide survivor, trauma

Introduction

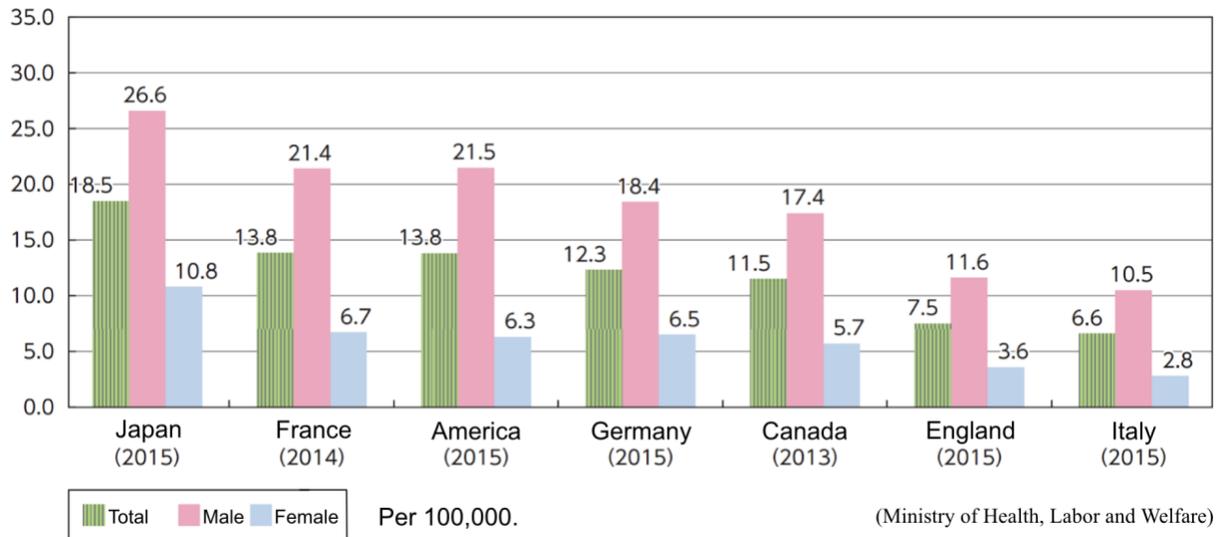
Suicide is a major public health issue in Japan. I am a family member of an uncle who committed suicide. He killed himself in March 2015, when I was 15 years old. He died alone in his private room by strangling his neck with rope at noon. His name was Tadashi Hosenji, a single 50 years old Japanese man. He lived with his parents in a rural area of Hyogo prefecture in Japan. I met with him a few days before his suicide. The tremendous regret that I could not help him has made me suffer from trauma. The execution of suicide is not the only serious problem of the person committing suicide but also of people around him or her. This confessional and analytical autoethnographic research paper examines the learning of how suicide is a significant public health issue in Japan and how Japanese culture relates to the high rate of suicide, disclosing Hayate's, the author, experience as a family member of Japanese uncle committing suicide to reflect himself. I expect understanding of the social problem will allow me to grasp a new perspective towards my uncle's suicide and my trauma.

What is autoethnography?

Autoethnography is the qualitative research data collection method that seeks to describe and systematically interpret (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences (ethno) (Ellis and Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographic researchers express “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). According to the article “Autoethnography,” Heider began to use the term “auto-ethnography” in the 1970s. It became an academic research method using personal experience and reflexivity to consider cultural experiences since the 1990s. In 2021, the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry promoted autoethnography, and at the conference, more than 100 qualitative research presentations were held in 2016 (Adam, Ellis, and Jones, 2017). Autoethnography has become popular as one of the credible qualitative research methods. Autoethnography has been criticized as considered too self-indulgent, introspective, and individualized (Sparkes, 2000). In addition, using personal experience, there is suspicion towards the accuracy of the experience and if the data is biased (Anderson, 2006).

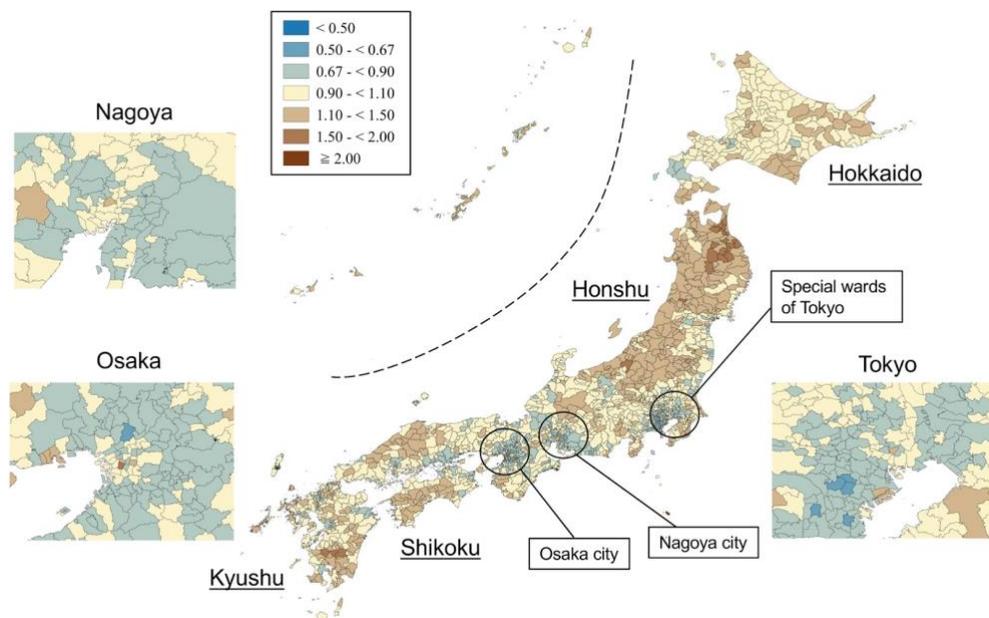
Suicide in Japan

According to the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the most prevalent cause of death in Japan among 15 to 39 years-old Japanese is suicide (2015). Also, suicide is the 1st rank cause of death among 10 to 44 years-old Japanese men and 15 to 34 years-old Japanese women. The high rate of suicide is also remarkable as compared to foreign countries. Crude Japan's suicide rate in 2015 was 18.5 per 100,000 population. Japan's suicide rate is the 9th rank among all countries in terms of a sum of men's and women's rate, 15th rank in terms of rate of men's suicide, and 4th rank in terms of rate of women's suicide. Among Group 7 (G7), the group of major developed countries, Japan's suicide rate, 18.5, is highest as France's rate is 13.8, America's rate is 13.8, Germany's rate is 12.3, Canada's rate is 11.5, England's rate is 7.5, and Italy's rate is 6.6.



Suicide in Japanese Rural Area

According to the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 0 to 39 and 40 to 59 years old rural residents tend to have a higher suicide risk than urban ones (2020). Eiji Yoshikawa, an associate professor at Asahikawa Medical University, mentioned three main reasons. First, living in a rural area can cause social isolation, leading to less intimate face-to-face contact with family and friends, which increases suicide risk. Secondly, due to the distance and shortage of providers, lack of access to mental health or emergency care can also increase suicide risk in rural areas. Finally, socio-economic deprivation in rural areas may harm the mental health of rural area dwellers (Yoshioka 2020). An increase in rural suicide rates in many countries may reflect adverse socio-economic trends in the areas, which slower economic development has been seen than urban areas, leading to wider inequalities (Hirsch, 2014).



Maps of smoothed standardized mortality ratios (sSMRs) for suicide in males of all ages across 1887 municipalities in Japan, 2009–2017

(Yoshioka 2020)

Japanese Culture Associated with Suicide

Japanese distinct culture and historical background deeply relate to the prevalence of suicide. One concept unique to Japan, which is a vital foundation of the Japanese way of thinking, is "Seken" (Kogami, 2020, p. 30). Roxanne Russel, a doctor at the University of New Mexico, explained the concept of Seken and how it relates to Japanese people's lives in this way:

"In Japanese society, the group takes precedence as the most important social unit over the individual. Maintaining group harmony, even at the expense of personal freedom, is considered virtuous and generally Japanese are very conscious of how they are viewed by their peers (Russel 2016)."

Seken makes people prioritize not causing trouble and inconvenience to other people, which makes them have an intense fear of criticism from others towards their mistakes, resulting in suicide as compensation for the inconvenience (Kogami, 2020, p. 97). According to BBC news, Wataru Ochi, a psychologist at Tokyo's Temple University, said: "Japan has no history of Christianity," and he says, "so here suicide is not a sin. In fact, some look at it as a way of taking responsibility" (Rupert, 2015).

Kogami gives this case in his book. If people have too much debt to pay back, the concept of Seken can affect them not to choose to default on their debt. That leads them to decide to commit suicide as an apology for the harm caused to other people. Moreover, they leave the suicide note, the letter, in which the phrase "sorry for the inconvenience" is written. Seken can give them the common sense that they cannot live if they make any severe trouble offending people (Kogami, 2020, p.98).

The historical background, suicide as self-sacrifice, was conducted as a lofty observance by Samurai, hereditary military nobility, and the officer from 12 century to 18 century (Russel, 2016). Samurai considered suicide as a demonstration of loyalty, honorable execution, and a generally acceptable way to clear one's name of guilt. The suicide was called Seppuku, cutting stomach open with a sword by themselves, which was the traditional form of suicide only allowed to the upper-class Samurai (Russel, 2016). Therefore, Japan has a cultural and historical background that can explain why suicide has been a severe and prevalent social problem over decades.

Data Collection

As the procedure of this research project, I utilized a literature review of suicide in Japan and the data collection method through self-reflection as a suicide survivor. For the self-reflection part, I visited my uncle's house in January 2021, reflected on my own diaries, and collected photographs in which I and my uncle are, to recall the events. I wrote down the narrative, thoughts, and emotional variation on the note in Japanese, my first language, and afterwards, I translated it to English. Also, I took mental counseling sessions at LaGuardia Community College to understand the shape of my trauma and get the hang of the psychological phenomenon to secure my own life and to move forward.

The Story of My Uncle's Suicide

In March 2015, my uncle died a few days after we met at his house located in the rural area of Hyogo prefecture in Japan. I was excited to see him as we met for the first time in the year. When we arrived at the station, the uncle was waiting for us in a car to pick us up as always. Right after we met, I found he looked a little bit more exhausted than usual.

During the three-days stay at his house, there was one chance that uncle invited only me to go for a drive at night. I was sitting on the seat beside him, a driver. The road without street lights was dark, making it hard to see his face. There were not any people and cars on the street during our driving. As I told him that I got accepted by my dream high school, he congratulated me and showed a smile. It was a smile, but his way of smiling gave me the sense that he forced himself to smile for me. I felt strange and was surprised because the feeling of distress had never occurred to me before while being with my uncle. At that time, I realized he was weird compared to usual, and he struggled with something he could not disclose to me. There was a moment, a silence, I attempted to say "What happens to you?", but I left out the strangeness and missed the opportunity. At night after we were back from the car drive, I asked my mother and father if they found something different in him, but they did not. Even though there were opportunities to ask him what struggle he currently had, I did not ask, ignoring my negative consideration during the whole stay. I was the only one who could find the difference in his behavior.

A few days after leaving his house, my parents and I were in Tokyo. When I was lying on the bed in my private room at noon, my mom suddenly knocked on my door. When she opened the door, she was crying and said, "Your uncle is dead. He killed himself in his room." At that moment, the news made me stunned for a few ten seconds. There was not an emotion in my mind. My mind went blank.

Once my uncle's funeral was done, I did not truly realize his death and it happened by his will. There was an envelope in my uncle's private room in which his suicide note, message, was included. When I noticed the suicide note, it had already been opened and read by other family members. In the letter, messages towards my grandmother, my grandfather, and my father were handwritten, and in the epilogue, he wrote, "I am sorry, I am sorry. I am sorry. I am sorry." As my grandmother told me, my uncle suffered from clinical depression and often went for mental counseling. There is no way anymore to find if his suicide was due to solely depression or other reasons on top of that, such as an apology for any serious faults he occurred.

Hayate's Trauma Due to Uncle's Suicide

"I didn't want to wake up. I was having a much better time asleep. And that's really sad. It was almost like a reverse nightmare, like when you wake up from a nightmare you're so relieved. I woke up into a nightmare."

— **Ned Vizzini, It's Kind of a Funny Story**

A few months after his funeral, my mental condition gradually became fragile and unstable. I realized my irreparable mistake I missed a chance to help my uncle during my stay at his house. Since the realization of the responsibility settled, I came to blame and consider myself a culprit who did not attempt to save his life. "I could not help him. No, I killed him." I could not restrain myself from thinking his death had occurred due to my falsehood. This way of thinking might be the easiest way to convince myself of the scheme and reason for his death. Loneliness in my room always and easily made me feel like a criminal who does not confess his crime to society. I came to desire to alienate myself from reality, the immutable fact of his death, and my relevancy with his suicide. The direct way of escaping from reality is committing suicide. I was stunned when I found the attempt and impulse of suicide exist in my side.

While at high school, I had had problems in friendship with my friends, which further negatively influenced my precarious mental condition. Since then, it had become my habit,

attributing the precarious mental balance and troubles in friendships to the negative affection caused by my uncle's suicide. When I wanted to consider myself the heroine of the tragedy, I intentionally recalled my uncle's death so often to cry and recover my mental health. However, of course, I knew how idiotic the act was and would be a betrayal and insult towards my uncle. That led me to hate myself and spurred worsening my mental condition. Since that time, to abolish the habit, I made it my rule to never contemplate my uncle. However, As I reflect, it was definitely an incongruous countermeasure considering the affection to the future-myself.

The recurrent urge to commit suicide suddenly, unexpectedly, occurred to me. Every time I suffer from that, it tells me that my life is not under my control. Therefore, imagining my future self was all but impossible for me as I knew the possibility of committing suicide in practice tomorrow due to an unexpected impulse. Every time I had new friends and new significant people, tremendous fear suffered me. As they were significant for me, I was also meaningful to them. If I disclosed my trauma to them, I am sure that they would start taking care of me seriously, and the anxiety towards my life would start obsessing their minds. I did not want to be an existence that negatively influences my significance. In addition, if I told them about the existence of my suicide impulse, and if I eventually gave up my life down the road, they could have trauma, as well as me, because they would consider as they could not save my life even though they knew the possibility. On the other hand, even if I did not disclose to them and committed suicide in practice, they would come to blame themselves who could not find my torture. My life was volatile and fragile. I was always anxious about my life in my daily life. Therefore, before working on this autoethnographic research project, I could not tell anyone, even my family, that I seriously struggled with his death. Now, as I have learned the concept of *Seiken*, this way of thinking, not to cause any inconvenience to people, could be established upon the idea of *Seiken*.

How Hayate came to disclose the trauma

I spent five years without disclosing my trauma and conflict to others and kept it my secret. I intentionally minded not to think about my uncle and trauma, but it did not lead to getting rid of their existence from my mind. It indicates I just kept avoiding grappling with the hardship. But that was the only thing that I could do at that time, ignoring the emotional disorder as if pretending to be indifferent towards that. As I looked back on, there was not even one moment that I attempted to resolve the difficulty with courage. The shape and outlines of them were vague and did not allow me to catch them, so it further enhanced my fear of facing them.

However, continuing the habit had gradually undermined my mental conditions to be further unstable. I, of course, realized that there would be no odds to pull through it if I would not forsake the detrimental practice. It relinquished my expectations towards being myself truly smiling without the psychological disorder.

While attending LaGuardia Community College in New York, not the area of Japan's culture, I took the course LIB 200: Humanism, Science and Technology in the 2021 Spring semester. In the class, I learned about Autoethnography, a style of research project. Dr. Joni Schwartz, who conducted the class, showed me a book written by her, in which she confessed the real story about her, a white, and her adopted daughter, a black. The book established upon autoethnography included the journey as a family not related by blood and social norms and history of particular places relevant to their stories. When she introduced the work, she told me that it took herculean efforts and courage to disclose. The book was an accumulation of her

challenges towards herself. Her behavior towards her own hardships was an inspiration for me which actuated me to disclose my own as well as she did.

At the end of the course, students were expected to perform oral presentations established upon their own autoethnographic research, which shows the connection between any social phenomenon and their own experience regarding the topic. I chose to deal with Japan's culture of suicide and my own journey as a suicide survivor. It required me to persevere in incorporating my hardships into words that evoked great sorrow and to have enormous courage to disclose them.

It was a ten-minute presentation. While giving the oral presentation on zoom, all audiences turned off their cameras and muted the mic to not interfere with students' performance so that the presenter could not see their reactions and responses. That made me further anxious, but I seriously gave my own sensuous one to fascinate the audience and tell them how suicide is a serious social problem for Japan and people there. After my presentation, it was an unexpected surprise for me to receive many comments from audiences, including the phrase "Thank you for sharing." Even though the phrase is a kind of template for any stories of adversity, it infused me with the tremendous pleasure that audiences recognized and appreciated my disclosure. On top of that, the professor also kindly told me that it was a great learning opportunity for the audience. Before my presentation, I expected, even if I could get any responses, these would be solely to show sorrow and sympathy. Therefore, the reactions showing appreciation and justification were a delightful surprise. After the comment and conversation with the professor and audience about my presentation, I was convinced that my mind states became healthier than before the presentation. The way of disclosing my own torture to the community was expedient and appropriate for me to realize moving forward. Afterwards, I could have a conversation about my trauma with my significant people in Japan.

Conclusion / Summary

Throughout this autoethnographic research paper, I expressed the current Japanese situation regarding suicide, Japanese culture and history associated with suicide, memories of my uncle's suicide, and my trauma.

As I disclosed and shared my experience, I felt accomplished as I finally started to face my own trauma. Also, I realized my life and mental condition are now much more supported since I shared with other people. My trauma also became the concern of other people. Of course, there is a fear towards the risk of giving trauma to them. I am still not sure if I should disclose or not. In addition, as I realized the seriousness of Japan's suicide prevalence, this project led me to have enthusiasm contributing to the social problem of suicide and potential suicides and suicide survivors. As I am an artist, I started to draw artworks of self-portrait which visualize my mind states. I will keep working on this research project and drawing self-portraits to disclose myself verbally and visually. In the long run, I believe it will be a learning experience for both myself and others. I hope my artistic efforts will make a positive contribution to the social problem of suicide; not only in Japan, but worldwide. But first of all, I especially want to be a person who can say "Thank you for sharing" when someone discloses one's hardships and asks for help.



Self portrait by Hayate Hosenji
2021
Digital Art



Self portrait by Hayate Hosenji
2021
Digital Art

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Narrating “Suicidality”: What Happens to Our Stories?

Kristina Shrank Dernbach (k.dernbach@gmx.de)

Abstract

This paper is a reflection on the freedom we as suicidal people have to tell our stories and be heard. It is also about the many instances of loss of agency in telling our stories and the many risks of appropriation of our stories. I discuss issues of ethics in the context of using suicidal people’s stories for journalistic or research purposes. The concept of suicidism (Baril, 2018, 2020) helps me understand the various forms of epistemic injustice suicidal people face. Briefly, I explore the potential of collaborative autoethnography for emancipatory suicidal research.

Keywords

suicide, suicidality, epistemic injustice, sanism

When speaking of suicidal people’s stories, or suicidal stories, I conceive of suicidality as a conglomerate of social experiences as opposed to individual pathology. I hope that this understanding will become traceable throughout the paper. I distinguish this social experience of suicidality from the individual experience of thoughts, wishes or urges to die, and the individual suffering that may be associated with the former, often in complex ways. When referring to my own thoughts, wishes, or urges, I use the phrase “not wanting to be”. Other people will use different expressions. I encourage everyone to find their own words to story their experiences and liberate their stories.

For the aim of problematizing the vulnerability of the suicidal story, I am trying to weave together three lines of learning on my journey. The first line is my own lived experience of not wanting to be and of suicidal existence in a society that does not approve of these experiences. The second line is reading and learning from so many folks who have lived with not wanting to be, and for whom these experiences have informed their academic and/or activist work. Finally, the third line of learning is through conversations with other “suicidal soul mates”, as David Webb (2002) would say, and through thereby discovering parallels in our social experiences. Some of these conversations were informal. Others took place in a mutual support project called “Mit Suizidgedanken leben” – “Living with Suicidal Thoughts” between the years of 2018 and 2020.

The Vulnerability of Suicidal Stories

To begin with, I want to share with you my first conscious memory of my not-wanting-to-be. I remember it being a bright autumn day. I was maybe five or six years old and was on a walk in the forest with my mother, younger brother, and my mother’s friend. And I had this intense pain inside of me, as though my soul was being teared apart. I had no words for my suffering, so I refrained to the modes of expression I had available at that time: Sounds and screams and tears. I was suffering, and I wanted not only the suffering, but everything, to end. Unfortunately, the adults who were with me, as so many of us, did not know to respond compassionately to suffering. My mother must have been very upset, and I remember her friend telling me: “You are just a horrible child. Your poor mother, your poor brother, that they have to deal with this.”

Today, this memory is so illustrative for me of how vulnerable a story of suffering is in the moment one tries to express it. Even though I can give you a coherent account of that moment, I still don't know what story the child would have told had she been listened to. So, instead of telling her story, the child's attempts at communication were overwritten with a story of a problem-child, a misbehaving girl. I tentatively call this phenomenon the *vulnerability of the suicidal story*. I believe that what made my yet unspoken story so vulnerable was the unspeakability of intense suffering. Sociologist Arthur Frank writes that “[s]uffering is the unspeakable, as opposed to what can be spoken.” (2001, p. 355).

I re-encountered this vulnerability of the suicidal story when I came into contact with psychiatric institutions in my late teens. Here, I learned how psychopathologization¹ and psychiatrization² function as an authoritative overwriting of stories. In these instances, I experienced what Arthur Frank calls *narrative surrender* (Frank, 2013): “The ill³ person [. . .] agrees, tacitly but with no less implication, to tell her story in medical terms. ‘How are you?’ now requires that personal feelings are contextualized within a secondhand medical report.” (p. 6). Here, I believe, another vulnerability entered the story: For the first time, I had verbalized my solution for my suffering, and that solution, not wanting to be, is unacceptable in our society. To acknowledge suicide as a valid solution, however desperate, became possible for me through the works of David Webb (2010) and the Wildflower Alliance (Davidow and Mazel-Carlton, 2020). The works of Alexandre Baril (2018, 2020) made visible to me the ideology behind our culture's devaluation of suicide as a path some of us choose. I thereby arrive at a threefold understanding of the vulnerability of the suicidal story in western culture, consisting of:

- the unspeakability of suffering (Frank, 2001)
- the solution some of us find or seek (Davidow and Mazel-Carlton; Webb, 2010)
- and the unacceptability of that solution (Baril, 2018, 2020).

The vulnerability I speak of is thus not inherent to the suicidal story or the suicidal person. I understand it as a function of norms and power relations, discourses and social practices which render our stories vulnerable to overwriting.

Suicidal Stories, Vulnerability, and Ethics

David Webb (2010) offers a profound critique of suicidology's ignorance of what he calls the *first-person voice*, that is, the voice of living suicidal people: our perspectives and our insights. Rather than seeking mutual dialogue with us, suicidology hopes to find “clues” to the “causes of suicide” in their analyses of epidemiological and clinical data, and of suicide notes. The use of suicide notes is a practice performed by non-suicidal people which robs the author of their final communicative effort. Here, the vulnerability of suicidal stories becomes painfully clear. Arthur Frank's writings helped me understand more deeply the ethical problems in that. Offering an understanding of research ethics as rooted in relationships, he calls to social science researchers that “[s]torytellers do not call for their narratives to be analyzed; they call for other stories in which experiences are shared, commonalities discovered, and relationships built.” (Frank, 2000, p. 355). As other storytellers, persons who

¹ I follow the definition of Lauff (2020) of psychopathologization as “[being] constituted as ‘mentally ill’ by means of diagnostic attribution” (my translation, p. 64, fn. 7).

² I again follow the definition of Lauff (2020) of psychiatrization as “[p]rocess which submits persons under the psychiatric system and as a consequence of which persons are being formed and determined by the psychiatric treatment” (my translation, p. 63, fn. 3).

³ Persons who identify as psychiatric survivors often object to *having* an “illness”. So do I. However, Arthur Frank's works on illness experience have enriched my understanding of “illness”. Although I oppose attributions of disease or disorder, I would say that I made an “illness experience” simply as a function of living through the patient role in the psychiatric system. The framing as “illness experience” is especially resonant with episodes in which I experienced sickening and disorienting effects of psychiatric drugs, all the while pursuing my desire for relief or a “cure” by pharmacological means.

die by suicide do not leave notes for suicidology to analyze. They leave notes for other human beings. This purpose is equally valid after a person's passing. Frank (2013) also reminds us that "[. . .] the master text of the medical journal article needs the suffering person, but the individuality of that suffering cannot be acknowledged." (p. 12). Analysis of suicide notes satisfies the needs of suicidologists, not those of the deceased authors or any living suicidal person. Frank (2013) conceives of medical writing as discursive colonization wherein the suffering person is used and needed by the medical text without the text acknowledging this need. Whereas Frank is concerned with illness experience in the somatic domain, the resistance to being used as "'clinical material' in the construction of the medical text" (Frank, 2013, p. 12) is also a key theme in Mad Studies. Mad people have a long history of their experiences being used as data to be analyzed to generate "knowledge", or "added value", as defined by psychiatric or social science researchers (Russo & Beresford, 2015). This is also true for conventional narrative research, argues Jasna Russo (2016), and points to various forms of epistemic violence proliferating the works of qualitative researchers *on* psychiatric survivors.

The use of suicidal persons' communications as material for research is thus not just a misunderstanding of our "call for other stories" (Frank, 2000, p. 355), but epistemic violence and misuse⁴. It is one extreme example of how suicidal persons' experiences are appropriated by those who have built their professional careers around defining us, the other.

Terminology, Vulnerability, and Internality

One constitutive part of stories are the words that make them. When I read in my medical charts today, I do not see myself and my experiences in them. To go even further, when I think about how the word "suicidality" came to me, I realize that the first person who called me that was a psychiatrist. It is not a name I have chosen for myself. Yet it came to constitute my subjectivity in many ways. This included a replacement of some other expressions I had once used for my experiences. So, the terminology of suicidality itself may be seen as an overwriting of the diversity of experiences which get so named, but which had never asked for clinical language, if any language at all. I believe this is a consequence of "suicidality" being used to refer to an assumed inner state as opposed to social experiences. I would like to thank Sonja Lauff for helping me understand this. Lauff (2020, 2021) conceptualizes *psychism*⁵ in analogy to genderism, drawing on theories of Judith Butler. Butler (1997b, as cited by Lauff, 2021) questions the preexistence of a "psyche" into which norms are internalized. Alternatively, they propose that the "psyche" itself, as a distinction between interior and exterior, is socially produced by the process of internalization. Lauff points to the "difficulty to grasp the psyche as socially constructed". This is because not only are norms about "internality" internalized, but the "psyche" or "internality" itself (Lauff, 2020, 2021). It is this idea of internality which at the same time implies and allows for the individualization of the causes and conditions⁶ of perception, thinking, feeling, behavior – and for the individualization of suffering. It is the precondition for attaching terms and notions to

⁴ I use the word misuse here to stress that the use is unethical. From my standpoint there is no such thing as an ethical *use* of suicide notes.

⁵ Discrimination based on the category "psyche", known as "sanism" in English-speaking activism, Mad and anti-oppressive scholarship (e.g., LeBlanc and Kinsella, 2016; Poole et al., 2012). Lauff (2020, 2021) developed the notion of psychism for the German-speaking psychiatric-experienced as she realized it is more accessible. Above that, naming the category upon which the discrimination is based invites to its deconstruction.

⁶ I took up "causes and conditions" from Buddhism in the Tradition of Zen-Master Thich Nhat Hanh. As far as my understanding reaches, observing causes and conditions transcends any idea of separation. Whatever arises and manifests does so because of causes and conditions. A thought may cause a feeling to arise, or another thought, or cause one to act a certain way, only under innumerable other causes and conditions. Psychocentrism (Rimke, 2016), however, assumes simplistic and individualizing cause-and-effect relationships, with individual abnormality/deficit as "cause" and non-normative thinking, feeling, behavior, or suffering as "effect".

individualized “psyches”. In the case of not wanting to be, that is the terminology of suicidality, risk, danger. These become the terms and notions by which many of us come to conceive of themselves and with which we tell our stories. In my experience, it takes mutual exchange and analytical work to recognize this and start to develop tools for narrative liberation.

Suicidism (Baril, 2018; 2020)

In many instances of sharing stories with other suicidal people, I was surprised not to find much similarity between the kinds of our experiences which get labelled “suicidality”. Rather, it was our social experiences tied to that designation where we saw patterns. These social experiences are such of invisibility and hiding, of exclusion and of vulnerability to unwanted intervention into our lives. In my reading of David Webb (2010), he described similar experiences in his autoethnographic work long before I started to explore mine. I would like to thank Jasna Russo for drawing my attention to David’s brilliant methodology: For his dissertation, he used his own lived experience to test the assumptions of contemporary suicidology and suicide prevention. One of his conclusions is that both contribute to the precarious situation of suicidal people. David writes that: “In the current environment of fear, ignorance and prejudice, talking about your suicidal feelings runs the very real risk of finding yourself being judged, locked up and drugged. Suicidal people know this and, like most people, will do their best to prevent it happening to them. We hide our feelings from others, go underground. And the deadly cycle of silence, taboo and prejudice is reinforced.” (Webb, 2010, p. 5).

Recently, Alexandre Baril (2018, 2020) conceptualized such experiences of invisibility, hiding, and marginalization as elements of a specific form of oppression faced by suicidal people, which he coins *suicidism*. Baril elaborates on the epistemic injustices done by silencing suicidal perspectives. He draws attention to the literal absence of suicidal voices from the public sphere. By mobilizing the notions of testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007) and testimonial smothering (Dotson, 2011), he argues that suicidal people’s voices are either not invited as contributions to public discourse, or suicidal people alter their accounts in such a way that they become more palatable to non-suicidal audiences. Drawing on an analogy to popular portrayals of disability, he writes that: „In a similar fashion, suicidal people experience pre-emptive testimonial injustice when, instead of their voices being dismissed entirely, their testimonials are solicited only to present a tragic/overcoming narrative.” (Baril, 2020, p. 16/41).

Suicidal Intelligibility

I have followed media reports and suicide prevention campaigns for around a decade. To share with you some of my conclusions, I would like to refer to Judith Butler’s (1997a) notion of having a place in language and then come back to Baril’s concept of suicidism. First, I notice that much of the time suicidal people are not the primary addressees of media reports on the topic of suicide. The common mode of writing is third-person discourse, and if there is an explicit addressee, it is usually family, friends, or teachers, who are taught how to support a suicidal person, normally by referring us to expert intervention. Then, in the marginal space at the bottom of such articles, suicidal people are addressed as to call a helpline if we feel suicidal. We are addressed ways that do not invite our response. So here, speaking with Butler, we are not being offered a “place within the community of speakers” (Butler, 1997a, p. 4): “one can be ‘put in one’s place’ by such speech, but such a place may be no place.” (ibid).⁷

⁷ Butler (1997x) describes the effects of injurious speech as disorienting, being put out of control. In the case of suicidality, speech acts of “putting one in one’s place” are performed in context of power imbalance *and* presumed benevolence. This can be particularly disorienting.

Second, as suicidal people don't appear as speaking subjects, it is at most ex-suicidal people who are invited to contribute their perspectives (Baril, 2020). The very fact of speaking indeed may call into question our suicidality. For example, when I have spoken about my suicidal experience, people have consistently assumed that I am either a "professional" or someone who has overcome their suicidal feelings. Often, the conversation moved on in third person, speaking *about* suicidal people, as though they were *something* unreachably positioned outside the conversation.

Thirdly, the more deeply I have desired not being alive or been making plans, the less I desired to speak about it. I try to view these experiences in light of Butler's idea that the rules of discourse that constrain my intelligibility also structure me, the subject. I *know* that – and I quote Butler (1997a):

“If the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech or as the speech of a subject, then that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject called into question. The consequences of such an irruption of the unspeakable may range from a sense that one is ‘falling apart’ to the intervention of the state to secure criminal or psychiatric incarceration.” (p. 136)

So, not only is it impossible to speak as a suicidal subject and be (heard as) a suicidal subject, also does the seriousness of one's urge to die diminish its speakability. If spoken, it is thrown back into the realms of unspeakability, as it is pathologized and intervened on. The suicidal subject becomes the object of intervention and is instantly excluded from the “community of speakers”. In a discursive sense, the suicidal subject dies once the suicidality is spoken.

To phrase it less poetically, there are certain norms of speakability and intelligibility around not-wanting-to-be which result in censorship and self-censorship. To refer back to Alexandre Baril's introduction to suicidism, he proposes that there is a system of intelligibility which renders suicidal subjects unintelligible. He calls this system the *injunction to live and to futurity*. This system functions in a way similar to the injunction to able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. Baril (2020) writes that:

“[. . .] is based on the presumption that life should be preserved at almost ‘any cost’, except, I would add, when the subjects are deemed unproductive and irrecupable from a neoliberal, capitalist, ageist and ableist point of view.” (p. 13/41)

Therefore, reasons and causes of suicidality have to be sought which are intelligible from the dominant (non-suicidal) perspective. These reasons are found in ableist norms, such that suicidality is legitimized from the outside on ideological grounds. Alternatively, they are found in individual pathology and/or in social circumstances and injustices (Baril, 2020). Neither explanation can acknowledge the will to die as a legitimate and intelligible will.

Collaborative Autoethnography to Recover Stories of Not-Wanting-To-Be

These explorations are important, I believe, to appreciate how our own attempts at meaning-making are enabled and constrained by dominant discourse. I believe that this acknowledgement could be implied as one starting point of emancipatory suicidal research. I love the notion of „Recovering our Stories“, which Lucy Costa, Jijian Voronka and others (Costa et al., 2012) chose for a public act of resistance: telling their stories of surviving psychiatry. I would like to borrow this as a compass for suicidal people who may or may not have been psychiatrized.

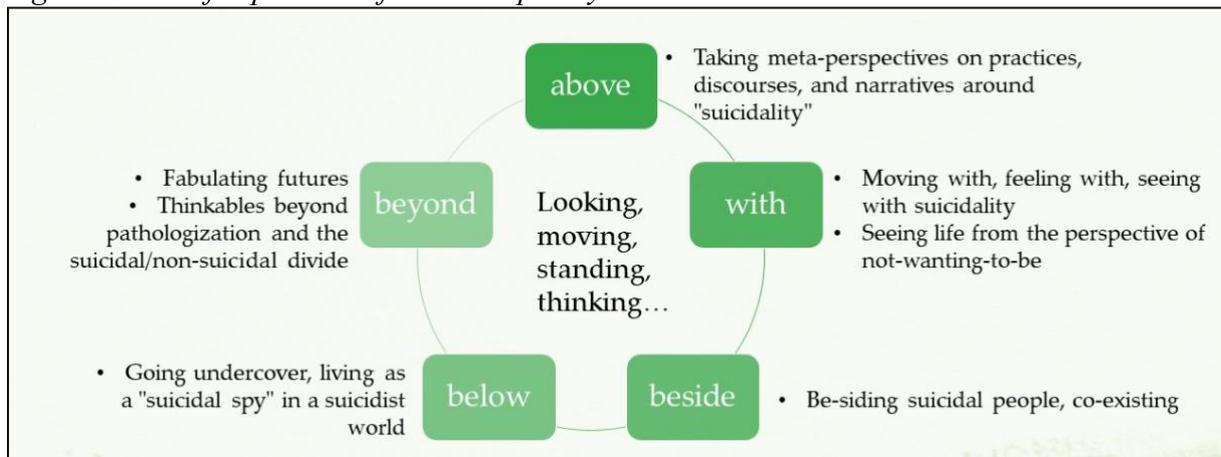
Struggling with the positivist research tradition I was taught in, I have been searching for a research methodology with emancipatory potential. I found collaborative autoethnography, which I am still learning about, to be a more systematic version of what happens already in many mutual support contexts. For example, in our project “Mit Suizidgedanken leben”, I experienced how a project that was initially designed to adhere to

funding guidelines and expectations to professionalism became a space of mutual sharing and knowledge generation. Also, the work of the Alternatives to Suicide support groups has over the years generated a vast body of knowledge about the causes and conditions of not wanting to be, and ways to be with each other through dark times (Davidow & Mazel-Carlton, 2020).

Collaborative Exploration of “Suicidality” as a Social Experience

I personally like to think with spatial metaphors, so here are some ideas for paths of exploration. I give an overview of these in the figure below. All of them aim at understanding suicidality as a social experience. You may look above “suicidality” to observe the practices, discourses and narratives which we encounter – how do they shape our own lives and the stories we tell? And what if, instead of seeing life from the perspective of wanting to be, we looked through the lens of not wanting to be. What do we discover that we did not see before? Or what if, instead of desiring to help suicidal people become less suicidal, or intervening on them, we stood beside them, we be-sided them, and told stories about our co-existence? We may also tell stories from below suicidality, as we live as “suicidal spies” in a suicidist world. What observations do we make about normalcy? (This point is inspired by Lucy Costa’s (2014) suggestion to “Flip the Micro-Scope”.) Or finally, how about fabulating post-suicidist futures (and this one is inspired by Donna Haraway⁸, as you may notice), and thinkables beyond the suicidal/non-suicidal divide. Baril (2020) reminds us that in times when a form of oppression is not yet recognized, it is strategically important to name categories. Whereas, when it has gained wider recognition, grounds are more solid for a deconstruction of these binaries.

Figure: Paths of exploration for emancipatory suicidal research



Final Words and Encouragements⁹

As suicidal people we live under an umbrella of silence that often prevents us from finding each other. David Webb has noticed this before in “The many languages of suicide” (2002). I believe that collaborative autoethnography has great potential here. We need to come together, share, and explore together in order to discover parallels in how our stories have been shaped by oppressive practices and discourses. Above that, it may help us reveal how we are already resisting this.

⁸ Haraway, D. (2016). *Speculative fabulation*. Youtube video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFGXTQnJETg>

⁹ In memory of Dorothea Buck (1917-2019), a German author, sculptor, activist, psychiatric survivor and survivor of forced sterilization under the Nazi Regime. Throughout her life Dorothea encouraged her fellow psychiatric survivors to speak out about our lived realities and reclaim ownership over our experiences. A publication of selected texts authored by Dorothea was titled “Ermutigungen” –“Encouragements” (published 2012).

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De-registration and Suicide Prevention: A Poetic Representation

Porsotam Leal
pscience693@gmail.com

Abstract

In this autoethnography, I invite the reader into my embodied experience of removal from professional practice by my statutory regulatory body. The villanelle explores learning to cope with shame, labelling and stigma following de-registration that became a personal quest – to stay alive when my mind was trying to kill me. The poetry form helped me to face the ensuing disruption, distress and uncertainty in the aftermath of losing my work identity and career. Within professional groups de-registration remains a taboo, so having to go through the traumatic event while professionally isolated can lead an individual to cease to cope.

Keywords

professional, de-registration, coping, suicide, poem

It is a thrill for me to be part of a conference such as this. My autoethnographic story, like many others, underlines the valuable ‘new knowledge’ that can emerge from this form of representation that in my case also included poetry. Autoethnographic research projects raise understanding of previously taboo subjects and help bring about changes that improve people’s lives. Taboos by their very nature are often hidden, complex, difficult to talk about and incredibly challenging to change. The title of my completed PhD thesis is ‘Cast-out: An autoethnography of a care professional who became de-registered following regulatory body fitness-to-practise proceedings’. It describes and brings meaning to twenty-two years of professional work as a pharmacist that culminated in my name being removed from the professional register, largely for running two rural pharmacies in southern England without adequate pharmacist staffing as required by Law. It is standard practice for United Kingdom (UK) regulators to find fault with individual practitioners and not explore the multi-factorial origin of professional misconduct.

The UK National Health Service (NHS) is currently experiencing severe staff shortages with some 100,000 vacancies in all sectors. NHS staff report high stress levels, low morale and burnout. They feel unsupported and devalued by our Government and its institutions, including professional regulatory bodies. Though I am sitting outside professional practice right now, I have compassion for my health care colleagues who face unprecedented challenges at work at this time. Although my experience of going through fitness-to-practise proceedings was almost a decade ago, the difficulties I faced in my own business seem now to have become the norm throughout our NHS.

Three years after de-registration, I felt ready to look back at the regulatory process that I had experienced and to try to understand my personal journey as I began to work towards restoring my name to the professional register, only possible under the rules after five years. The personal

and spiritual impacts of this journey have been poignant and life changing. I felt strongly that my story was important to the field of professional regulation for three reasons, (in spite of the likelihood of re-experiencing a host of negative emotions all over again – depression, anxiety, guilt, anger, humiliation, shame alongside suicidal ideation thoughts). First, few research designs concerning the experience of health and social care professionals (HSCPs) are longitudinal. My study might provide the only full five-year perspective of one de-registered pharmacist's struggle to search for meaning. Second, most research into the regulation of the HSCP workforce is conducted by those outside the process – my research focuses on the first-person experience. Finally, my work reflects the lived experience of a marginalised, stigmatised and erased population. This felt to me more than a rejection of my professional career, - it felt like a rejection of me as a human being.

I reflected on a question asked of qualitative research by Richardson (1995, p198) “How should we write research?” I turned to poetry to express all that I had learned and to inspire other HSCPs similarly cast-out of work and societal relationships and to spread hope to all those affected. Poetry can be understood as the pre-eminent language of soul – containing the kind of knowledge that the soul thirsts for. Mary Oliver's (1935-2019) ‘The Journey’ is poetry that demands we look again at how honestly we are living our lives while Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) described poetry as that which makes her whole body so cold no fire can warm her. Great poetry voices the language of the spirit and our deep desires – the desire for meaning, for a sense of belonging, for wisdom, and for love. The essence of all poetry lies ultimately in the meeting of poet and reader – that is where it truly comes alive. It is an agent of transformation. Through my villanelle I offer glimpses into my personal journey and invite you to contemplate the importance of the poem's message in your own lives.

Poetry is embodied. Both form and content move us emotionally. Filled with metaphor and symbols, poetry honours mystery and helps teach us about injustice, encouraging us to join in the struggle. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p23) suggest that “there is no single interpretive truth”. The lives of those professionals removed following fitness-to-practise proceedings are complex, fluid and in flux – something the poem attempted to encapsulate. My professional career became suddenly disrupted as a result of fitness-to-practise proceedings brought against me. By choosing the villanelle poetic form I force myself to see my situation from many different angles, with two powerful repetends implacably returning me to my starting place. The attraction to the form for me, then, is that ‘in my end is my beginning’. Technically, the villanelle consists of five three-line stanzas and a final four-line one. The first and third lines of the initial stanza recur, alternately, as refrains and make a concluding couplet to the last stanza. The intent of this presentation is to evoke in the audience the emotions of those individuals who live on the margins of the profession to which they once belonged and who are living with career loss. Above all else, perhaps, all that I really seek is to be heard and to be treated with dignity and inclusion as a fellow human being. Here is the poem I wrote.

Do Not Lose Hope
A Villanelle

Do not lose hope when all is black as night.
Darkness may just be holding a new day.
Search, search and you will surely find the light.

When Winter finds you in a sorry plight,
Struck down, abandoned, left a castaway,
Do not lose hope when all is black as night.

Take your rest in silent earth and catch sight,
The primordial ache for life, come what may.
Search, search and you will surely find the light.

In nature's eternal chain, new delight.
Come pain, my power, but you mustn't stay.
Do not lose hope when all is black as night.

Choose to forgive those who act with sleight,
And sense the leap in heart, dismiss hearsay.
Search, search and you will surely find the light.

Winter, the season of our growth and might.
To heal the pain of homesick souls, I pray.
Do not lose hope when all is black as night.
Search, search and you will surely find the light.

My PhD thesis is ripe with reflections concerning disenfranchisement and my struggles to understand those who use legislation and regulatory rules to control care professionals, and how the lives of care professionals are impacted by such control. The voices of professionals who have gone through regulatory proceedings must be heard and added into the ongoing discussion to improve our System of Regulation so that fitness-to-practise may soon become something regulators do *with* care professionals, rather than *to* them.

I hope this short overview gives you the flavour of my autoethnographic study. Thank you for letting me share it with you.

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A Transformative Journey of a Brick Worker (Labor) to Brick Pedagogue: An Evocative Autoethnographic Exploration

Netra Kumar Manandhar (netra@kusoed.edu.np)

Bal Chandra Luitel

Binod Prasad Pant

Indra Mani Shrestha

Kathmandu University, School of Education

Abstract

Being a member of an economically underprivileged and deprived family, my journey during my childhood, as a student in school, my teenage was challenging and filled with struggles, adversities, and vulnerabilities. Besides working as a labor in brick factories, I completed my formal schooling and higher education. So, this paper is a portrayal of my journey of becoming an educator or brick pedagogue from a brick worker (labor). I used evocative autoethnography to craft my stories of pain, pleasure, struggles, and lesson that life taught. Also, this paper explores the educational context of Nepal and beyond.

Keywords

Brick worker, brick pedagogue, evocative autoethnography

Acknowledgments

This paper is based on the research conducted by the first author. The second author is the supervisor of the first research. The third and fourth authors are “critical friends” of the researcher who offered critical suggestions throughout the research process.

The Context

I was born and raised in an economically deprived family whose only profession was going to brick factories to make raw bricks using clay and mud (sand) for every six months (December to April) of the year to earn for survival. I was born in one of the brick factories of Nepal and started experiencing the context of brick kilns wherein I had to help my parents in brick-making procedures as a child labor. For almost 18 years, I was involved in more than a dozen brick kilns in the different parts of Nepal to produce bricks which helped our family to at least survive and fulfill the very basic human needs. For another six months of every year, we had to be in our hometown (in one of the villages of Nepal), where we had different household tasks to perform. I had to do the regular household work, work in other's homes, and the field to earn. There is one question unanswered – when did I continue my education? When I was in the village or my hometown, I had opportunities to go to school. At the age of six, I enrolled in grade one in a school nearby from where I completed my primary education (grades 1 through 5). In brick kilns, there were no such opportunities to go to schools because there were/are considered to be the places for earning for survival by fulfilling basic human needs. So, for me, attending school was only possible when I was in my hometown.

By attending schools only for six months, I had to pass a certain grade level. I used to attend the final examination to pass the grades at the school level. The economic vulnerabilities were the extreme obstacles for my journey as a human being and as a student.

I could not get sufficient study materials such as books, pens, and copies because we did not have money to buy them. I had to continue everything in a minimum available resource for my study. However, my parents understood the meaning of education as a means to eradicate our difficulties by solving economic challenges. Thus, they always encouraged me to study hard and continue my education. I continued taking my school education and labor work in the brick kilns side by side ($\frac{1}{2}$ year in brick kiln and $\frac{1}{2}$ year in school). Moreover, my excellent academic performance might be one reason that always encouraged me and pushed me one step ahead to continue my formal education. I used to be first or second in every grade. Mathematics, Science, etc., were my favorite subjects. After completing my school education (SLC, now SEE) with distinction, I decided to do my intermediate (+2). During this period, I quit going to brick kilns but started the work of waiter in hotels and restaurants to earn money for survival and pay the fees of college. As a waiter, I accumulated other experiences of serving people, and this helped me to continue my education. At the same time, I got opportunities to take private tuition classes in private institutions, and I started my journey of being a teacher. Mathematics was my favorite subject, and this encouraged me to continue my intermediate in mathematics education. Similarly, I did my bachelor (under graduation) in the same faculty. I did my master's in mathematics education in 2018 and completed my MPhil in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) in 2021. After my master's in mathematics education, I became a teacher educator, resource and curriculum developer, instructor of mathematics and STEAM education, etc. So, this is a journey of mine in a nutshell.

The Research Issue

Besides my devastating journey in the brick factories as a child labor and later labor, the educational journey was another painful journey for me. The conventional/traditional model of education seemed to emphasize rote-memorization, routine problem-solving, decontextualization, and desert-like pedagogical approaches (e.g., lecture method) (Luitel, 2009; Pant, 2015; Shrestha, 2018; Manandhar, 2021) guided by Western Modern Worldview (Luitel & Taylor, 2005) made my journey more difficult since the learning was not meaningful, and I could not relate them in my day-to-day practices. These academic contents and concepts were far from my reality of being a brick worker, or labor and learning were not accessible to my real-world scenario. For example, I was learning profit and loss in mathematics, but I was not able to solve my economic challenges. The contents taught in the school did not provide me the opportunities to solve the existing problems I was facing in my life. It seemed that life was separated from textbooks and curriculum as if they were just materials or means to deliver contents developed by so-called experts, outsiders, foreign people, or people from other planets. Specht (2008) argued that contextualized learning emphasizes solving problems related to the life of people in society by motivating students to acquire knowledge by problem-solving approach. However, the instructional practices were not designed to connect the learning and context (life) of the students.

As a teacher, for many years, I followed the footsteps of my teachers to deliver content knowledge by promoting curriculum as a list of contents or subject matter to be taught (Schubert, 1986), pedagogy as delivering contents, and assessment as a reproduction of the contents taught. This might be the reason behind several emerging problems students' underachieving performance in the examination, negative attitudes towards learning (Pant et al., 2020), lack of connection of education and practical applications in life (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2020), and lower cognitive abilities (Education Review Office [ERO], 2018).

My educational journey in the master's in mathematics education has become critical turning points from when I started transforming my beliefs, values, and assumptions of our

education system to promote context-based, life-integrated, and progressive cum holistic notions of education. In doing so, I started valuing my brick-making world, which had/have a place for holistic learning for the people who are/are not working in the brick kilns. From this on, I happened to become a brick pedagogue by promoting contextualization of non-academic pursuits of students in meaningful learning.

The Research Question

The research question for this project was: How did I transform myself from brick worker to brick pedagogue?

The Guiding Theory: Transformative Learning Theory

What might be the best way/s to change me and my entire society for the betterment? What might be the thing that I can use to make my future bright? And most importantly, what can be that thing that I can work with to heighten my and others' consciousness to become an aware citizen? What are the beliefs, values, assumptions, and traditions that are associated with my lifeworld and educational practices? These questions helped me make myself a better self and my practices. These questions seem to be the extension of my present reality in which I am thinking about myself and others. In this context, I used the theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) in this research which appears to lie in communicative learning rather than instrumental worldview where we can make sense of our experiences with the world from subjective judgments.

In an educational context, every learner can be critically reflective on the deep-seated and long-rooted underlying beliefs, values, intentions, and attributes (Mezirow, 1997, as cited in Pant, 2017). Here, the critical reflection can be helpful in understanding and raising the questions against existing dominant but unhelpful schemas and set of beliefs and always seek better alternatives. Mezirow (1991) states that transformative learning theory is a process by which we transform our 'taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (p. 133). With this, I always try to improve my pedagogical practices by critically reflecting on my deep-rooted false consciousness about the nature of the curriculum, pedagogy, and the whole education which I have experienced as a learner, teacher, and teacher educator. In this regard, I believe that meaning is constructed through learning, reflecting, and dialogue. Transformative researchers 'draw on constructivist, critical, social and arts-based epistemologies to examine reflectively, critically and imaginatively their lived experiences revealing the historical and sociocultural framing of their personal lives and professional practices' (Taylor, 2013, p. 2). In this paper, the devastating and critical instances, adversities, economic vulnerabilities, etc. can be helpful for perspective transformation, which is a paradigmatic shift to become a critical conscious human being and agent of changes.

Evocative Autoethnography as a Method

As a victim of child labor, I have painful stories to tell the world. These stories have been filed with emotional attributes, pains, sufferings, life in extreme poverty and deprivation, etc. These are the lived and living experiences. So, the narratives I have explored and depicted in this paper were the representation of my world and the culture associated with it. I perceived the meaning of culture as 'a group-oriented concept by which self is always connected with others' (Chang, 2016, p. 13). This shows my role as an autoethnographer lies in the intersection of my cultures and myself. I have to be a storyteller, narrator, and interpreter to depict my scenarios to the reader considering 'self is subject to look into and a lens to look through to gain an understanding of societal culture' (Duckart, 2005, as cited in Chang, 2016,

p. 49). I have selected evocative autoethnography as a research methodology to provide justice to this research project. Made by three interconnected triadic terms auto (self), ethno (culture), and graphy (research process), I use autoethnography to portray 'selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience ("auto") to describe, interpret, and represent ("graphy") beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture ("ethno")' (Adams & Herrmann, 2020, p. 2). Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as 'research, writing, story, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political' (p. xix). I used evocative autoethnography to portray my experiences within my culture of education being critically reflective, believing that this method serves concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection to craft my journey as an autoethnographer (Ellis, 2004; Chang, 2016). As a method, autoethnography combines autobiography with ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011, as cited in Cohen et al., 2018), and Chang (2016) argues that it should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation. This may include writing about moments of existential crisis, turning points ('epiphanies'), and life-changing moments.

The Discussions

In this section, I presented some of my potential narratives to provide justice to this research project. In the process of discussion and argumentation, I tried to provide a thick description with a review of relevant literature and respond to the research question.

The Context of Brick Factory

Till the age of seven years, as a child labor I had to support my parents in arranging sand, flipping the raw bricks, carrying raw bricks to the piles, and sometimes making raw bricks in the process of producing raw bricks. I had several tasks to support my parents at that time. It means that I started earning from my childhood. I had to support my parents in those cold seasons and environments. The brick-making business used to (still is running) run in the winter season. In these cold and freezing seasons, I had to do clay and mud-related work with hands without clothes on them. I cannot exactly describe the pain and suffering I experienced as a child labor in that time. My hands and hearts used to tremble when working with clay and sand early in the morning in that extremely cold season. However, I had no other options except for supporting my parents to survive.

At the age of eight, I started involving myself in the full-fledged brick-making process. Now, my responsibilities increased to earn for the purpose of our survival. There used to be exactly the same procedures for making raw bricks. We used to do almost similar activities every day in the process. To represent my experience of 18 years in brick several brick factories, I am sharing activities here of one day.

It could be any day in January 2002. My family was in a brick factory from December to produce raw bricks. We had a small cottage/home (5fk[f]_ made up of raw bricks, bamboos, and tin. The home in this brick factory had only one door. For brick making purposes, we had three or four pieces of small land as shown in the figure where people need to prepare it to make bricks, make clay, keep clay on the land, producing bricks, and after one or two days of time, bricks need to be piled up at the side of each piece of land. Around 4'o clock in the morning, my father forcefully made me wake up to support him in digging out the clay from the ditch which was finalized yesterday by mixing mud and water and accumulated in the ditch. In the extremely cold season, I was sleeping in the blanket, wishing not to go outside,



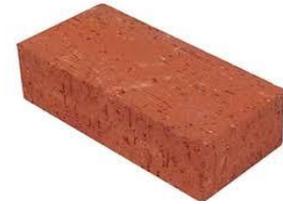
Kodali

keeping my legs and hands in the clay, and digging out the clay on the land. However, I had no option other than helping my father at work. My mother, who was cooking food to have in the morning



Brick making tool

before starting the raw producing work, also insisted me wake up and help the father. Unwillingly, I had to make myself wake up. The

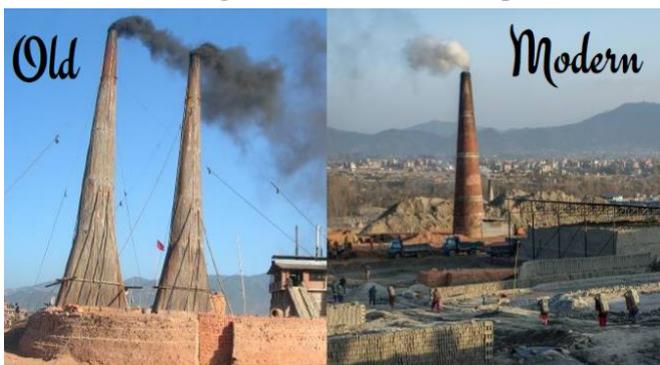


Finalized brick

environment outside that small house was unpredictable, freezing, and extremely cold because of fog, cold waves, and ice crystals on the ground. Can you imagine what could be the situation of a 10-year-old child? Can you

explain my condition? I forcefully made me follow my parents' instructions and went to the ditch to dig out the clay. You can now express how much I was suffered from cold at that time. After 2 hours of work, we finished digging out the clay on the floor. My mother prepared food for the morning. We all the members had it. The next task was to produce raw bricks from the clay. Now, my father kept the clay in lines, and we had to start making bricks. For keeping clay, tools such as Kodali to dig the mud and fields and carry the clay, a bucket made by tin for keeping mud, sand, clay, etc., were/are used. Similarly, for making bricks, we used tools such as a tool made of wood and iron, a wire made by tin, particular sand, etc. Early in the morning of the cold season, we started producing bricks from the clay. In this process as well, we had to use our hands without clothes. The task of making bricks took 6 to 7 hours of time to finish the clay made. Now, the task was to have another lunch. After lunch, there were two tasks: making clay for the next day and carrying developed bricks in the respecting piles of the bricks. Carrying the bricks, making clay, flipping bricks to make it ready for keeping them in the piles, etc. were the work. After finishing these tasks, we had dinner and went to sleep.

This was one particular day I presented here. For six months, we had to repeat the same tasks. Thus, the tasks of clay, mud, sand, water, bricks, etc., were the most difficult and painful for both young children and other labors. The cold season was/is the most challenging for this work, and labors need to work in a minimum wage. A particular group of people is involved in taking raw bricks from the piles to the final brick making place (A particular



Brick factories in two different times

place where raw bricks are kept systematically; coals and woods are kept with these bricks, and the fire is used to burn those coals and woods to finalize the bricks). It used to have two chimneys (movable chimneys) in the major brick-finalizing place, but nowadays, only one chimney (fixed

chimney) is attached to exterminate the smoke that comes out of burnt coals and woods. Similarly, a group of people who work inside this place keep the brick inside the factory, prepare them, and bring them out for the final use. Finally, the prepared



Child labor in a brick factory

bricks are supplied as per the demand of people for the construction such as houses, bridges, etc. via vehicles like trucks. Reflecting on it, I feel that a brick factory is like hell, a place where you go to earn some money by making bricks and doing other related jobs. In brick factories, work conditions are inhumane (in the polluted environment). More than 175,000 workers in about 1100 brick factories, of whom as many as 60,000 are children, labor in unhealthy and unsafe conditions in Nepal's brick kilns (Health Research and Social Development Forum, 2016). Coming to education, brick factories do not seem to be supportive for educating people; they are the only sources of income of economically marginalized and poor people for their survival. They go to brick factories when they might not get other options to survive. Still, people from my village, even my relatives, go for a brick-making business. *How can children go to school in such a situation? Do/did children have any other opportunities/provisions to complete their education in brick factories?* This is an absurd question because children were/are not likely to get opportunities to go to school. There were/are few organizations, including Save the Children, advocate for child rights, thereby taking steps to free them from child labor. But these organizations have also claimed that children were/are deprived of education (Save the Children, 2016). Save the Children has claimed that around 37% of children aged 5 – 17 in Nepal are forced to work in brick factories. In Nepal, people from disadvantaged groups – internally displaced by armed conflict, natural disasters victims, landless, and having no source of income to survive in their village go to brick kilns to manufacture bricks (UKEssays, 2018). I still remember my painful childhood and teenage in which I had to survive as child labor and later labor in those brick factories. In this disruptive and devastating situation, I dared to complete my school education.

The context of brick factories was the learning environment for me from where I learned to live life in poverty and hunger. I spent 18 years in those brick factories by accepting the culture, values, lifestyles of people who came from different parts of the country, rituals and by sharing the common problem that is an economic difficulty. We shared the same painful experiences. This was one community that taught me to fight against hunger, poverty, and difficulties in life. This made me strong to become hardworking and responsible for being economically independent. This taught me the value of money in life. So, I experienced that struggle is the force that makes people make effective changes in their life.

The Educational Context

Besides my journey with several brick factories, I traveled a painful journey of schooling and in other higher education till bachelor's mathematics education. In brick factories, I would have about two to three hours at night for my study before going to bed. During this time, I mostly studied the so-called difficult subjects like mathematics, science, and English. I rarely studied other subjects like social studies, population, etc. While studying mathematics, I used to copy the solutions from the guidebook and examples done in the textbooks and do them repeatedly until and unless I completely understood/memorized the solutions. Only after excelling in one particular problem, I used to solve others too. At that time, my teachers' statement 'practice makes a man perfect' was pertinent to me. In the case of science, I used to memorize the provided information. By doing this, I tried to understand the meaning, but I failed many times because that was beyond my self-learning or self-directed learning abilities since I did not get support from teachers as well as MKO who could scaffold my learning (Hall, 2007). I used to revise those contents which I had already studied. In this manner, I sharpened my brain to think and memorize and also widened for storing information. The very next day, I used to recall those solutions, definitions, and facts of science, and rules of grammar and words of English while doing my work. While making

bricks, I used to stop in the row and try to do those algorithmic problems or recollect the words, formulae, or definitions. I also used to write them on the ground or in mud. I used to draw the figures to solve the problems or get a picture of the contents that I read previously. While working, I used to cognitively revise those solutions revise the notes and contents taught me when I was in school. This time, my parents used to shout at me, '*what nonsense are you doing, boy? Finish the work first.*'

In my schooling, learning through memorization, rote-recall, etc., of truths, laws, formulas, information kept in the textbooks, and notes given by teachers were extremely challenging and difficult for me. Not only in mathematics and science, learning in other subjects such as social study, Nepali, etc., used to follow the memorization as a divine method of learning or godly given method to get good marks and pass the current grade level. The work of memory or mind and its power to keep the information provided in the textbook used to be the most important things in learning. So, it was accepted that students are successful, or they are called successful learners or good students if they have a container-sized mind (Luitel, 2013). In such a context, studying various subjects and memorizing them was beyond the imagination. For me, getting an education was challenging because I had only six months every year to study and attend school.

The spoon-feeding culture was the main pedagogical approach in my primary grades. Teachers used to use a routine problem-solving approach to solve the problems given in the textbooks and guidebooks, and students were forced to follow the step-by-step method to copy the solution. This helped me and other students to produce procedural knowledge in mathematics which is about using mechanical steps and given algorithms methods to find out the exact objective answer (Manandhar, 2018, 2022/in press; Rittle-Johnson, 2019). This is also true in other subjects. While using an algorithmic approach to solving problems, I did have opportunities to think, reflect, use my own creativity, etc., and in classroom teaching process, I had to kill my curiosity and stop asking the question because students were/are not allowed to ask the question in the traditionally designed teacher-centric classroom. In this way, I accepted teachers and textbooks are the only sources of knowledge and they know everything, and I did not value my own real-life experiences and problems in the context of learning. I have realized that my teachers probably were spoon-feeding us, assuming that children come to the school with an empty brain and non-academic experiences similar to what one of the empiricists John Locke called blank slate or *tabula rasa*, and eventually, the teachers' role thereby remains to fill it with knowledge, attitudes, and wisdom without considering the diverse need, abilities, background, and level of students. The spoon-feeding pedagogy appears to be the product of the banking concept of pedagogy as discussed by Freire (1993), in which students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor. Such pedagogy is similar to a highly teacher-centered approach to education; as a result, students' job extends to receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (knowledge) for the future.

Similarly, making mistakes in learning used to be committing crimes, and I was punished by teachers when I made mistakes in algorithmic problem-solving. In middle school grades, one of the teachers had the rule to punish students, and that was one wrong solution to a problem = 1 stick. The physical and psychological punishments were prevalent that forced me to afraid of making mistakes. However, as far as progressive learning is concerned, how can a student or anyone learn without making mistakes. It is considered that people best learn from their mistakes, and they are the real teachers for authentic learning (Hattie, 2012). Also, I was a part of the education system where three-hour examination and test is everything for evaluating the academic performance of students in an academic year. This means that summative assessment such as final cognitive test or examination used to (still prevalent in our education system) be the test the knowledge. Moreover, copying and pasting the information business flourished in these educational settings. For example, textbook writers

are copying information from foreign writer's books, teachers and copying information from textbooks and producing on black/whiteboards, and students are copying from teachers' notes or whiteboards and pasting them on papers just to pass the examination. In this narrowly conceived education context, I completed my school and bachelor's in mathematics education.

After changing my university and I enrolled in Kathmandu University (one of the reputed universities in Nepal for its quality education and leadership for transforming society) for my master's in mathematics education, I started understanding the principles, taken-for-granted assumptions, values, beliefs, etc. of the people and our education system that guided our practices of teaching and learning. After involving in discourse related to progressive education, curriculum, pedagogical practices such as project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, transformative learning, culturally relevant pedagogical practices, etc. I realized that our education system was/is heavily guided by the conventional and disempowering educational model, which mainly focused on the reproduction of the available knowledge. This education system is primarily preventive for developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, etc., in students to survive and thrive in the 21st-century world. In this context, I researched that education and life have been separated and disintegrated. Due to this, students are not able to connect their day-to-day life with whatever they are learning in school. When critically reflecting on my experience, I too followed the footsteps of my teachers by considering those conventional methods as a legacy and perfect practices for all human beings. I was completely guided by Habermas' Technical interest and insisted my students reproduce the truths and algorithms through rote memorization and the practice-makes-perfect method. I was the victim of a behavioristic model of education and used learning by using the punishment-response or stimulus-response ideology of knowledge reproduction.

After my MEd, I explored various holistic approaches to teaching and learning. Among them, I found that the approaches which focus on the integration of the life of students outside the classroom and academic contents were/are my favorites. After becoming a teacher, teacher educator of mathematics and STEAM education, I started promoting these educational approaches and paradigms for bringing transformative changes in mindsets of the people and education. These approaches are also closed to my reality because, as I explored, my experiences in brick factories could be effective in learning the academic contents meaningfully if my teachers could connect them in the teaching practices. After understanding the huge benefits of some progressive methodologies, I transformed into becoming a brick pedagogue, which refers to a teacher and teacher educator who thinks and works for context-based and life-integrated education and educational practices.

A Brick Pedagogy

I named this term to represent a pedagogical model that connects the life of students to academic content and vice versa. When I realized that I was victimized by some disempowering, disengaged, and desert-like (boring) pedagogical approaches governed by conventional hegemonic and banking models of education, I started exploring learning methods that have the potential to make learning meaningful by connecting real-world of students. Here, the life-integrated pedagogy seems to be essential, which emphasizes on conducting instructional practices by including the day-to-day activities of students.

Reflecting on my experiences as a child labor and labor in more than dozen brick factories, I discuss some of the contexts focusing on mathematics learning to make you understand about brick pedagogy. The brick-making world used to be (or is) a place for my learning from where I could learn mathematics in a meaningful way. There were contexts, materials, various practices, tools, etc., that could be helpful to learn mathematics effectively.

For example, clay can be used to teach various contents such as arts and crafts, different mathematical models, and models of various living and non-living beings. Thus, authentic learning can be enhanced by using real-world materials, and models, and students can learn conceptually by using the learning-by-doing method. Here, clay can be used as a tool for arts-based learning which can enhance students' creativity and innovative abilities. Another example is that we can use 'Kodali' to teach mathematics contents such as angles, lines, planes, cylinders, etc. Similarly, the chimney available in brick factories to finalize the bricks can be an effective model to teach concepts related to cylinder conceptually. The piles and lines of bricks, bricks, and brick-making tools, etc., can be extremely helpful for developing knowledge of mathematics in a progressive and authentic way. Authentic and context-based learning is possible through learning by modeling the materials available in our surroundings (Yu et al., 2015). These are some of the examples that clarify the use of contextual and life-related materials, and examples are effective in developing the foundation of various academic subjects. If my teachers could connect these contexts and materials, I could have learned mathematics and other subjects in meaningful ways by relating my real-world and academic contents. However, I faced several challenges and difficulties which were painful while learning.

The brick pedagogy promotes some authentic approaches of learning in which students can explore the life they are living and experiencing. For example, project-based learning can be one of the pedagogical approaches that focus on the projects for solving real-world problems faced by people and other beings. I consider project-based learning as an umbrella term for empowering pedagogical approaches such as inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, problem-solving approach, etc. Subscribing to the view of Goodman and Stivers (2010) view, project-based learning is built upon learning activities and real-world-centered tasks that have brought challenges for students to solve. By doing this, students are likely to become reflective and responsible for the outcomes, foster decision-making abilities; become creative and critical, and develop essential knowledge and skills. This might be possible through the use of inquiry to solve real-world issues by developing 21st-century skills, a fusion of the three R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic) with the four C's (communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking) (Goodman & Stivers, 2010, as cited in Tyata et al., 2021). In this context, my brick pedagogy is related to project-based learning. Similarly, learning contextualization is another approach similar to brick pedagogy. Contextualization of learning puts its stress on making learning visible through contextual and life-related examples, problems, models, etc. For this, the curriculum should be designed to include the local knowledge, wisdom and practices without ignoring the global practices. In brick-making pedagogy, students learn concepts and contents by directly experiencing the problems and contexts, interacting with people and objects or materials available around them, developing their own models, analyzing the problems and solving them, etc. Moreover, the makerspace involving the materials available in students' surroundings can be effective where students can develop knowledge and skills through learning by modeling approach. The brick pedagogy also needs an integrated model of curriculum. For example, integrated STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) can be used as a pedagogical approach to teaching.

The experiences I accumulated by implementing context-based and life-integrated brick pedagogy were/are phenomenal. When it comes to authentic learning experiences, experiential learning is necessary. For developing rich experiential learning, the interconnectedness of learning and context appears to be essential. Most of the holistic educators (Dewey, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Steiner, Montessori), who advocated for experiential learning claim for the need of the integrated, interdependent, and interrelated learning for holistic learning. They claim that learning occurs naturally in this environment as learners

interact with the world, draw connections, seek relations, and construct meaning. So, I have become a brick pedagogue to promote a progressive methodology of teaching to bring transformative and quality changes in education.

Conclusion and Lesson Learnt

I accept that life teaches everything, and it is the best teacher for a human being to move forward. The brick-making world was essential for my survival as a human being. The world fed me when I was hungry, taught me to fight poverty and vulnerabilities, taught me the most important lesson of life that is how to survive in minimum resources or without having resources at all, etc. I learned how to live a happy life in struggles, how to tackle challenges, how to solve the difficulties and perform better than yesterday. I came from extreme poverty, but I struggled and worked hard to achieve everything I was capable of. I did an excellent performance in my academic area. I topped my school in School Leaving Certificate Examination, I topped intermediate, I topped universities and got several gold medals and certificates of appreciation. Because of my economic difficulties, I always wanted to do extra in my study. I got not have enough time to study because I had to work to earn for survival, but I think I left no stone unturned to get what I always wanted. So, on the one hand, I spent one portion of my life being a victim of child labor and extreme poverty, but on the other hand, my academic performance and achievement kept me motivated.

During my master's and post master's (MPhil) in STEAM education, I realized that our education system was governed by some disempowering beliefs, values, and practices. Without being critically aware about the taken-for-granted assumptions, which emphasizes one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching, disengaged and desert-like pedagogical approaches, examination and cognitive tests for testing the academic performance of students, and curriculum as reproduction model, teachers, teachers, educators, curriculum developers, etc. were/are likely to promote conventional educational practices by taking students as means to fulfill the expert and centrally designed curriculum goals and objectives. I was the victim of the same system as a teacher and students. In such a practice system, learning and life were/are disintegrated and separated as if they have nothing in common. When a student is studying the academic contents, s/he may not be able to connect them in her/his life, and consequently, they are likely to take learning separated from life and do not see the value of studying. For me, I know I did excellent academically, but when it comes to the practical application of those knowledge and skills, I did not know the usage of most of the things until I completed my BEd in Mathematics Education. Even I could not use whatever I learned in those many years to solve my economic challenges. With this realization, I started critically reflecting on the practices and decided to bring changes in my practices and encourage others to join this journey of educational transformation. Being a teacher and teacher educator, I started advocating for brick making pedagogy which is a place-based, context-based, life-integrated, local-knowledge wisdom integrated model and pedagogical approach to make learning visible where students can learn things by doing, experimenting with their day-to-day life, modeling, solving real-world and complex problems.

The journey from being a brickmaker or child labor or labor in the brick factories to becoming a transformative Brick Pedagogue was not easy for me. Solving economic challenges and continuing my educational journey was extremely difficult for me. However, by accepting the challenges put in front of me by my life and tackling them, I have now become an educator. Among many, one of my responsibilities is to work on encouraging and helping people to improve our educational practices to embrace constructivist cum transformative paradigms of education by focusing on knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, etc. useful for today and tomorrow.

Finally, methodologically I learned how to craft the personal narratives and lived experiences filled with emotional attributes, experiences, values, beliefs, assumptions, feelings, knowledge, etc., by connecting them with culture (ethno). Evocative autoethnography became extremely helpful in this journey to depict my autobiographical and personal experiences by connecting the discourses of the various cultural perspectives (life in the brick factories, education system, etc.). Therefore, evocative autoethnography as a method give justice to this research.

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Troubling Tolichism in Several Voices: Resisting Epistemic Violence in Creative Analytical and Critical Autoethnographic Practice

Alec Grant (alecgrant32@yahoo.co.uk)
Susan Young (susan.young@network.rca.ac.uk)

Abstract

Tacitly informed by the voices of friends, colleagues and respected others, the authors have a conversation with and between themselves, and with readers, in their critical reaction to the ‘Tolichist’ voice. This is regarded as promoting epistemic violence towards critical and creative analytical autoethnographers, in the areas of relational ethics and methodology. Other – back, subsidiary and implicit – stories emerging include: alienation from the insidious cultural backdrop of patriarchy and misogyny; two conceptions of ‘autonomy’; the development of a neophyte critical autoethnographer; colonization and resistance; the bifurcation of assumptions about autoethnographic writing; and the importance of philosophy for autoethnographic scholarship.

Keywords

Tolichism, Epistemic Violence, Misogyny, Relational Ethics, Philosophical Autoethnography

Susan: In 2010, the sociologist Martin Tolich strongly advocated the need for authors to always seek consent from those written about in autoethnographic work, whenever authors perceive a risk that the latter group may be hurt or offended by what is written about them (Tolich, 2010). What we’re going to do today is selectively present from our much longer, more detailed and comprehensive Journal of Autoethnography in-press critical response to Tolich’s influential paper (Grant and Young, In press). The thrust of our position is that ‘Tolichism’ constitutes epistemic violence. We define this as dogmatic inflexibility around the need to secure consent, and authoritarian sanctions over what kind of knowledge should and shouldn’t be disseminated.

We’ll now read selected excerpts from our paper.

Alec: Susan and I began discussing Tolich’s critique back in November last year, in the context of our relationship where I function as her PhD external advisor. Grounded in an institutional and disciplinary normative perspective, Tolich takes issue with what he sees as a violation of relational ethics in the work of prominent narrative autoethnographers. As a highly committed autoethnographer myself, his article triggered anger in me when it was first published. These feelings haven’t gone away. Because Susan was also triggered by the article, I asked if she would make a contribution as second author in crafting a response to it. Happily for me, she agreed.

Susan: My research focuses on animation’s potential as a vehicle for the investigation of psychological trauma and its associated symptoms. I’m using autoethnography as a methodology to explore my experiences as a survivor of both domestic violence and sexual violence, and epistemic injustice perpetrated on me while I was in the UK mental health system.

I take issue in my doctoral thesis with the admonishment in Tolich’s article that novice autoethnographers wishing to write about ‘stigmatized experience’ such as suicide and

mental health difficulties should think carefully of the consequences. His warning that such material is like a permanent ‘inked tattoo’ could be experienced as shaming and silencing.

Alec: Silencing is evident in Tolich’s proscriptions on choice of topic and displays of identity. Choosing the topic very carefully in regard to whether or not it might harm someone, as Tolich advocates, carries with it the message to avoid relationally challenging issues. Many autoethnographers feel driven to story their experiences precisely because of such challenges. If the Tolichist message is taken to its logical conclusion, risk-averse autoethnographic inquiry would result in anodyne, unexciting and unengaging work.

Susan: In the aftermath of my sexual abuse by a psychiatrist, it took years before I felt able to disclose what had happened, partly due to him blackmailing me into silence by insisting that it would devastate his mother if the truth was revealed, and partly due to my fear of being disbelieved due to my mental health label. So I take issue with Tolich’s warning that those with ‘stigmatized experience’ should think twice about revealing it.

His exhortation to respect the needs of abusers is troubling, given that abusers have so little respect for their victims. Moreover, the act of autoethnographers seeking consent from their abusers might precipitate further abuse or harm. As the philosopher Kate Manne argues, confronted abusers tend to deflect responsibility onto their victims in the attempt to gaslight-discredit them. This is something I personally experienced when my psychiatrist tried in court to use my diagnostic label as ‘evidence’ that I was a manipulative fantasist. Ultimately, my testimony was believed, but such vindication seems rare in the face of the general perception of psychiatric service users as non-credible witnesses.

The ethical imperative to challenge destructive silencing overrides the rights of abusers to be respected. When victims can’t access justice through the courts, it is essential they have an outlet where they can tell their truth, and autoethnography fulfils this function.

Alec: A major problem I have with Tolichist authoritarian moralising is in its ‘musterbation’. The cognitive psychotherapist Albert Ellis coined this term to characterise trying to live up to unrealistic and absolutistic demands. In Ellis’s terms, should-ought-must living amounts to self-abuse. Now, of course, words such as ‘should’ and ‘must’ sometimes add necessary emphasis to narratives. However, equally, they exploit rhetorical authority when overused, making readers come to believe that they *should and must* live according to shoulds and musts.

Susan Survivors speaking about abuse issues still run the risk of being shamed, silenced and disbelieved by those who wish to help or harm, in social media, academia and other institutions. In this regard, Tolich’s admonition to avoid parading ‘stigmatized experience’ amounts to yet another belittling of the powerless by those in power. In the ethical foundations of the Western legal system, prosecution and defence, testimony and cross-examination, and the expectation that testimony be based on reality and not speculation, are all in place to maintain integrity, dissuade false allegations, and arrive at the truth. Theoretically there is an ethical imperative in law that all voices have the right to be heard, but, in practice, power imbalances and societal prejudices promote and maintain epistemic injustice through many aspects of the system.

My own experience of this occurred during my psychiatric litigation when the defence barrister attempted to weaponize my diagnosis, suggesting that I was disturbed and unreliable, and therefore without credibility. I was ultimately believed, and won my case, but will always wonder what would have happened had that barrister successfully invalidated my testimony. Would I have been able to survive such psychic annihilation? Conversely, if I had

listened to advice to stay silent and not risk the trauma of litigation and the possibility – given my psychiatric label and the nature of my case – of not being believed, how would that have affected me psychologically?

I use this example of my courtroom experience to emphasize the huge risks those who have experienced stigma and injustice must often take if they wish to be heard. We may be accused of lying and slander, face ridicule and rejection, and experience further harm through acts of revenge. But for those of us entrapped within dehumanizing and invalidating power structures, the process of restorying ourselves through autoethnographic testimony allows us to challenge these oppressive master narratives and prejudices. In the interests of witnessing and social justice, many of us refuse to be silenced. For my part I am willing to take responsibility for the ethical decisions I make, such as naming abusers without seeking informed consent in my autoethnographic practice.

Alec: Our philosophical position in our paper is influenced by feminist philosophy. Kate Manne argues that misogyny functions as the institutional systemic policing arm of patriarchal culture. The victims of misogyny – women – are punished for stepping out of normative line by refusing the tacit patriarchal expectations placed on them to suffer abuse in silence. We believe that Tolichist epistemic violence works in the service of academic patriarchal culture.

Seerene Khader, states a difference between the neo-Kantian rational, or institutional, fixed rule-based autonomy advocated in Tolichism, and relational autonomy. When necessarily and flexibly used in the service of critically reflexive researcher self-governance, relational autonomy poses a challenge to the sufficiency of rational, autonomy. We believe that in trying to police researchers regarding what they should and shouldn't do, Tolich functions as a methodological coloniser in the service of the inflexible rational ethics of his discipline (sociology), and the institutional norms of mainstream qualitative inquiry informing academic research ethics committees. We think that these committees need to broaden their focus to sympathetically encompass relational as well as fixed-rule ethics

Susan: In our view, the most damaging thing about Tolichism is in the silencing of all who want to speak out about abuse experiences. We wonder how many excellent autoethnographies have never happened due to Tolich's paper? It is our hope that our paper will go some way towards redressing this state of affairs.

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Journeying to Visibility: An Autoethnography of Self-harm Scars in the Therapy Room

Fiona Stirling (f.stirling@abertay.ac.uk)

Abstract

This research explores the experience of a therapist negotiating the visibility of their self-harm scars in the therapy room and, in doing so, considers the reality of navigating lived experience of mental health difficulties as a counselling professional. It highlights the personal meaning-making journey required by those with lived experience of mental health difficulties engaging with the counselling profession and explores how the construction of the therapist identity for such individuals can involve finding ways to resist fear and shame. The wounded healer paradigm and the navigation of self-disclosure are considered as useful tools in supporting such a journey.

Keywords

Self-harm; Counselling; Identity

Introduction

My video presentation is called journeying to visibility and it explores what it was like to train as a counsellor with self-harm scars, and how I made the decision to have my scars visible in professional contexts. I've published the paper the presentation is based on so that's available open access online if you'd like to check out the full thing. It was originally titled the dilemma of visibility because I was approaching it as an ethical dilemma, the presence of my own body was an ethical dilemma. And when I started writing and really thinking that through, it didn't feel right, to be establishing myself as a problem to be resolved or negotiated. So I shifted to a journey, a becoming, a realisation and resistance of the discourses which positioned my scarred body as potentially offensive. How can I, how have I, constructed a professional identity which accepts the 'unacceptable'?

This piece is part of a larger body of work I'm slowly building up with an aim to disrupt narratives about self-harm, and hopefully reduce stigma. This larger body is coming together quite erratically, limbs on a sporadic Frankenstein's monster, because I've found it involves engaging with a lot of shame and self-doubt which is challenging but also incredibly valuable so I will keep stuttering forwards when and where I can.

I also want to take the opportunity to say thanks to the other speakers in this session, I really enjoyed your videos, and I was struck by the theme of boxes, being boxed into identities and finding ways to resist that.

Presentation

For the first time as a counsellor, I walk into the therapy room with my scars visible. There is a bubbling, trickling tension in my chest. I'm too exposed. Is this how my client feels, being in therapy for the first time?

She glances down at my arms and ... nothing. No acknowledgment of even noticing. A complete non-event. I feel relief. And a little foolish for building it up so much, for so long.

She rolls her own sleeves up. Are our scars having their own dialogue now? I verbally acknowledge her wounds. I consider verbally acknowledging mine as well, but I don't. I've said what I need to say by having them present.

This presentation is about a paper I published in 2020 exploring the journey to having my self-harm scars visible to clients in the therapy room. I began by calling it the dilemma of visibility, focusing on the dilemma of self-disclosure, but in the process of writing came to understand it was not a dilemma, but a journey.

Writing it was inspired by the realisation that it was exactly the aspect of my professional self I was afraid to write about. Becoming aware of this fear was a powerful moment, and a realisation that I still carry an expectation that I will be judged poorly if I reveal my scars or openly discuss my experiences of self-harm. This appears to be a common phenomenon, as 82% of Rosenrot and Lewis's respondents reported shame as a prominent factor in preventing disclosure of self-harm, with interviews reflecting “a fear about what their self-injury meant about them and the type of people they were” (2018, p. 19). That self-harm might invite particular judgement is also commented on by Chaney (2019), who explains “the description of someone as a self-harmer leads immediately to other assumptions about them.” This is in addition to the “judgement, debate, observation, and ridicule” the female body has long been vulnerable to (Russell-Mayhew, 2018, p. 144) which encourages habitual self-surveillance to ensure adherence to accepted norms (Bordo, 1993). If my body equals my worth, then perhaps I am unworthy—a frightening prospect. Overall, as Chandler (2016, p. 110) surmised, there are “social and moral risks borne by those whose self-injury becomes seen.” In creating this paper, then, there is a fear around taking these risks.

In deciding what to share in autoethnographic work Tenni, Smyth, and Boucher (2003, p. 4) assert “we must write about what we really prefer not to write about . . . the messy stuff—the self-doubts, the mistakes, the embarrassments, the inconsistencies, the projections and that which may be distasteful”. Similarly, Martin (2010, p. 10) states that therapists “stand a better chance of making an authentic relationship with those we seek to help if we are prepared to celebrate our scarred, glorious, mis-shapenly successful, and often faulty selves for what we are.” It is precisely the “limitations, flaws and vulnerabilities [that] can discourage and shame us [that] are also an opportunity to go beyond what we thought were our limitations to change and grow” (Aponte & Kissil, 2016, p. xii).

While not every therapist will have self-harm scars, all therapists have a body which plays “a significant part of his or her unique contribution to therapy” (Burka, 2013, p. 257). This paper is, therefore, potentially valuable to any therapist, at any stage of development, who seeks to reflect on the role of the body and use of the self.

The paper takes the shape of my personal meaning-making journey, beginning by exploring the construction of my therapist identity before going on to consider the wounded healer paradigm and navigation of self-disclosure. A thread throughout is finding ways to resist fear and shame as both a researcher and counsellor. I conclude by recounting fragments of sessions from the first client I worked with while having my scars visible. It is one of these fragments I opened this presentation, and it is with another fragment that I will end on.

I hold open the door for my client to leave for the final time. She pauses, staring at my arms. “Your scars are like mine,” she says, pulling her finger across her own arm in a cutting motion. The way she asks is more of a statement, making me think she has been considering my—our—scars for some time. “Yes,” I reply.

She is quiet again, and I resist the urge to cover or obstruct my arms, resist the urge to fill the silence. I'd forgotten, really, truly, I'd forgotten my scars were there. I wonder why she has chosen this moment, after five weeks together, this in-between of moving from the therapy room to the hall for the final time. Perhaps I could have done more to make a space

for this conversation in our sessions, or perhaps this was the right space—neither inside or out. Perhaps there's no right space. “Maybe, when I go home, I can help people like me. I could be a counsellor.” I am curious about how this has become possible for her, this movement from feeling totally overwhelmed by life to the strength to consider helping others.

I want more time. I think she wants more time too—in therapy, in the UK, in the places that feel safe. But our time together is over, I have to trust we have produced enough “fuel” to sustain her, whatever it is made of. “I think you could be very good at that.” I say.

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Enseñar y Aprender Autoetnografía en el Contexto Latinoamericano: Un Reto Escrito a Cuatro Manos

Silvia M. Bénard Calva (smbenardc@gmail.com)
Elda Monetti (emonettibarce@gmail.com)

Resumen

El último día del International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative (ISAN) 2021, Silvia se atrevió a lanzar la pregunta: si es internacional, ¿cómo puede no haber espacio para hispanoparlantes que no dominan el inglés? A Elda, que estaba en la audiencia, le pareció que sería muy importante crear un espacio para hacer y difundir el trabajo de investigación autoetnográfica en el mundo hispanoparlante. Así, dos investigadoras de este mundo se aventuraron a buscar maneras de acercar la autoetnografía a sus conciudadanos. Y encontraron una: armar un curso. He aquí su recorrido.

Palabras clave

enseñar autoetnografía, América Latina, redes de colaboración

Abstract

The last day of the International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative (ISAN) 2021, Silvia dared to ask the following question: if this is an international academic event, how can there not be room for Spanish speaking researchers that are not fluid in the English language? Elda, who was in the audience, thought it would be very important to create a space to carry on and disseminate autoethnographic research in the Spanish-speaking world. Thus, two researchers of this world ventured to look for ways to bring autoethnography closer to their fellow citizens. And they found one: to put together a workshop. Here is their journey.

Keywords

teaching autoethnography, Latin America, collaboration networks

Puentes

El último día del International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative (ISAN) 2021, realizado en línea y en colaboración con participantes de un gran número de países, surgió un tema que ha sido recurrente desde el primer encuentro del ISAN en 2019. En la reunión de trabajo que nos llevó a crear la International Association of Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry (IAANI), Silvia se atrevió a lanzar la pregunta que le ha dado vueltas como un fantasma desde hace muchos años: si es internacional, ¿cómo puede no haber lugar para hispanoparlantes que no dominan el inglés?

A Elda, que en el ISAN virtual celebrado en el 2021 estaba en la audiencia, le pareció que sería muy importante crear un espacio para hacer y difundir el trabajo de investigación autoetnográfica en el mundo hispanoparlante. Elda sabe que en Argentina hacer autoetnografía es hacerlo en soledad. Muchos de sus colegas a quienes les interesaría este enfoque se ven limitados en el acceso a la bibliografía específica y a participar en los congresos ya que estos aceptan casi siempre solamente ponencias en idioma inglés.

Un tiempo después, conversando, ambas compartieron la pregunta acerca de qué tan trivial es nuestra preocupación por participar en ISAN. Silvia ha constatado que responder a esta pregunta implica toda una historia de desencuentros entre el mundo hispano parlante,

particularmente entre aquel que se denomina América Latina, y el de Estados Unidos. Ello sin considerar a Brasil, que en sí mismo es casi un continente, y aunque su idioma –piensan los brasileños– se parece mucho al español muchos latinoamericanos pensamos que en realidad no se parece tanto.

Silvia recuerda que a lo largo de los días que duró el ISAN-2021 buscó estar presente en todas las mesas en las que encontró participantes que sabía que eran de Latinoamérica o que por sus apellidos parecían serlo. Uno de ellos fue Igor, brasileño de origen y a quien había conocido en persona en ICQI-2019. Durante ISAN-2021, Silvia e Igor se reconectaron y coincidieron en buscar alternativas para cerrar esa brecha, que por cierto se abre entre el español y el inglés, pero no se cierra del todo entre el resto de la mayoría de los países latinoamericanos y Brasil.

Silvia asegura que no ha encontrado cómo puedan resolverse estos dilemas que en principio son lingüísticos, pero que le parecen bastante más complejos. Por eso mejor se aventuró a dar pequeños y quizá simples pasos para construir puentes entre personas de dos mundos contrapuestos por sus historias contemporáneas, al mismo tiempo que temporalmente pospuso la colaboración con Igor, ya que entonces sus propuestas le parecían imposibles de lograr.

Así, dos investigadoras del mundo hispanoparlante se aventuraron a buscar maneras de acercar la autoetnografía a sus conciudadanos. Y encontraron una: armar un curso. He aquí nuestro recorrido.

Silvia

¿Debo dar ese seminario con Elda de Argentina? Ya estoy dando un curso de autoetnografía en este momento como parte de mi carga de trabajo en la universidad. Si doy más horas de clase distraeré mi atención de la investigación, que en teoría es mi principal actividad como académica. Sí, pero –sigo en mi diálogo interno– es muy importante que contribuya a extender el uso de la autoetnografía en los países de habla hispana, además es posible que dentro de un par de años me jubile y quisiera colaborar lo más que pueda para que se consolide esta forma de hacer investigación y se considere como legítima en la academia dentro del contexto latinoamericano. ¡Sí, lo haré!

Preparar el curso

Elda

Preparar el curso de autoetnografía en Argentina fue un desafío. Al principio estuve muy pendiente de la respuesta de Silvia, si contestaba o no mis mails. Me preguntaba si Silvia aceptaría dar un curso en mi país, con una persona que apenas conocía y con la que solamente podía vincularse por medios virtuales. El encuentro cara a cara en el cual una puede ver y sentir a la otra persona estaba vedado por la pandemia. También pensé si estaría a la altura de las circunstancias al ir tomando conciencia de la formación y la trayectoria de Silvia.

Comenzamos a reunirnos un par de veces por *Zoom*. Me parecía que ya no estaba sola, me sentí acompañada en un camino que había recorrido en mucha soledad. Iba a poder mostrar a mis compañeros de trabajo en la universidad en qué consiste la autoetnografía, una forma de investigar que me apasiona. Ese enfoque de investigación, del que repetidas veces les había hablado, pero sobre el que no muchos de ellos podían leer, ya que los trabajos y la bibliografía específica están en inglés y no todos lo hablan.

Rápidamente acordamos que sería un curso de posgrado. Mientras lo íbamos perfilando me di cuenta de la trayectoria de Silvia, su formación y experiencia en los enfoques autoetnográficos: tradujo al español y publicó una selección de algunos de los

principales artículos teóricos de este enfoque, es autora de una compilación de trabajos autoetnográficos y de un libro¹.

Todos estos antecedentes hacen que en ese primer encuentro para armar la clase dude de mí misma. Me preguntaba si estaría en condiciones de acompañarla en este curso, si estaría a la altura de éste, si mis saberes acerca de la autoetnografía serían suficientes. Foucault (1998) plantea que como sujetos nos constituimos a partir de los saberes que vamos construyendo, yo dudo: ¿es posible reconocerse como una investigadora de este campo? Estas ideas están ahí al momento de prender la pantalla y encontrarme con Silvia. Nos saludamos, su hablar pausado y su mirada hacen que mi nerviosismo se atenúe. Me reencuentro con una persona cuya calidez humana me envuelve como un mantra y provoca que mi tendencia a tener todo super organizado y controlado se aplaque.

Quiénes conforman el curso

Elda

Hablé con Raúl, el decano del recientemente creado Departamento de Ciencias de la Educación² acerca de la posibilidad de dar un curso sobre autoetnografía: “Esa manera de investigar con la que yo estuve trabajando después de asistir al congreso en USA. Esa forma que usé para armar el trabajo que presenté en las jornadas que organizaste en 2012... Además Silvia Bénard, que es una investigadora mexicana que sabe un montón sobre autoetnografía va a dar el curso y yo voy a acompañarla”. Así presentaba al curso con cada uno de mis interlocutores, ya sea para preguntar sobre la manera de hacer los trámites administrativos como para invitar personalmente a aquellos/as docentes con los/las que estaba vinculada de alguna forma. Hablé con colegas en diferentes partes de Argentina y también con algunos de mis estudiantes. De igual manera, invité a una terapeuta uruguaya que trabaja en la Universidad de la República (Uruguay) quien, a su vez, me dijo que invitaría a Virginia, otra de sus colegas.

Mientras estas conversaciones se sucedían, Silvia me avisaba que “le dejara” cinco lugares para investigadores de Colombia y México que querían hacer el curso.

Silvia

Había iniciado contacto con dos estudiantes de doctorado en Colombia que encontraron el libro de traducciones *Autoetnografía. Una metodología cualitativa*, ese libro recientemente publicado que ha sido ampliamente consultado a través de *Academia.edu*, *ResearchGate* y otras plataformas digitales. Después de varias pláticas y asesorías sobre los trabajos de tesis doctoral de Adriana (Universidad de Caldas) y Alexander (Universidad del Valle), les invité a participar en este curso y aceptaron gustosos.

También promoví el curso entre colegas y estudiantes en mi universidad. Fue así como se inscribieron una estudiante de doctorado que asesoro en su tesis, un colega de psicología, un alumno del doctorado en psicología que él asesora, y a mi asistente de investigación que tiene ya bastantes conocimientos sobre la metodología.

Así se conformó un grupo bastante diverso en cuanto a lugares de origen, edad, área de especialidad, estudios y actividad profesional.

¹ Bénard (2014, 2019, 2020).

² Este departamento pertenece a la Universidad Nacional del Sur ubicada en Bahía Blanca, Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Comenzamos el curso

Elda

Es un jueves lluvioso de abril acá en Bahía Blanca, y dentro de diez minutos nos vamos a encontrar con Silvia para prepararnos para la primera clase del curso de autoetnografía. Hace dos meses que acordamos con ella su realización. Todavía me maravillo al recordar cómo llegamos a este punto.

Ya teníamos organizados los contenidos y la bibliografía para cada encuentro, así como el trabajo final que les solicitaríamos a las y los participantes, pero faltaba acordar cómo íbamos a dar esas clases. Comenzamos por la primera, puntualizamos los momentos y nuestras intervenciones en cada una de ellas. Sentía que quedaba mucho sin definir, sin embargo, tenía confianza. Como dice Simmel (1906, p. 441) “Todas las relaciones de las personas entre sí descansan, con la condición previa de que sepan algo el uno del otro”. Ahí estaba, confiando por conocer su calidez en los encuentros, sus producciones, era como que el saber acerca de lo que ella hacía estuviera presente en esta confianza en cómo trabajaríamos juntas. Y así sucedió.

Quince minutos antes del inicio nos reunimos por *Zoom* con Silvia. Yo había armado un cronograma tentativo en el que se podían encontrar las fechas de encuentros y la bibliografía respectiva. A mí me sirve para organizar mis clases, no porque lo cumpla al pie de la letra, sino que me permite prever lo que tenemos que hacer la próxima clase y la misma función cumple para los/las asistentes. Funcionaba como esquema a seguir, aunque a veces Silvia me miraba y decía: “Uyyy, qué organizada estás”. Y ambas reíamos. Sentía como que nos complementábamos: ella con mucha calidez y precisión en su decir, yo con la organización...

Abrimos *Google Meet* y comenzamos a esperar que se conecten los/las asistentes. Voy admitiendo a cada uno. Esta primera clase decidimos dedicarla a la forma de trabajo y los contenidos a trabajar. La próxima semana ya trabajaríamos a partir de las lecturas recomendadas. Nos presentamos con Silvia. Les invitamos a que se presenten y que planteen cuáles son sus expectativas con respecto a este curso.

Me emociona escuchar, me doy cuenta de que hay otras personas interesadas en la autoetnografía, no me siento tan sola. Uno a uno se van presentando, algunos ya tienen experiencia en esta forma de investigar, otros vienen a buscar algo que no saben qué es pero que los atrae. Parecería que somos presentadoras de un enfoque de investigación que atrae por lo extraño, lo desconocido.

Silvia y yo planteamos los objetivos del curso que apuntaban a ubicar la autoetnografía dentro de las metodologías cualitativas; comprender este enfoque de investigación; dimensionar la importancia de la comunicación crítica, precisa, clara y cuidada, en particular mediante la escritura en las producciones autoetnográficas; producir escritos autoetnográficos. En especial, a mí me parecía muy importante esto último. Yo me fui formando casi sola en la investigación autoetnográfica y quería ver y aprender de Silvia cómo era enseñar ese proceso a otros.

Creía y aún lo creo, que fue una propuesta de aprendizaje y de vivencia de lo autoetnográfico. En especial por el compartir experiencias, ideas, ir desentrañando entre todos lo que los textos presentan.

Silvia

Durante meses compartimos cuatro horas de los jueves. Una gran parte de nuestro curso, sobre todo las primeras semanas, la dedicamos a discutir textos del libro de traducciones *Autoetnografía. Una metodología cualitativa* y algunos otros escritos por nosotras o traducidos del inglés que yo he considerado fundamentales para hacer investigación autoetnográfica. Por otra parte, iniciamos ejercicios de escritura en los que cada

estudiante iba redactando una epifanía de su vida, a veces relacionada con su tema de investigación, pero no siempre. Fue a partir de ese ejercicio de conexión con la propia historia y de ir compartiéndola con el grupo que fuimos revelando nuestras historias.

Elda

Para pensar nuestras clases se presenta ante nosotras la idea del baile en parejas. En el baile con otro cada uno/a lleva el ritmo, el paso, pero va entretejiendo su manera de pensar, de moverse, de ver el mundo con otros/as y es desde ese punto que algo nuevo surge. Así lo sentí cuando al finalizar el curso los asistentes fueron leyendo sus producciones. Lloramos y reímos con sus lecturas, reflexionamos y opinamos, la coreografía iba surgiendo a medida que avanzábamos. Todos tomamos nuestros lugares y dejamos entrar a los otros en nuestras vidas.

¿Y una vez concluido el curso?

¡Uf! Misión cumplida. Fue mucho trabajo, mucha presión sobre la que ya tenía y en el contexto de esta pandemia que cada vez me dificulta más mantenerme a salvo. Pero bueno, ya terminó y, tal como lo esperaba, tuvo muy buenos frutos.

Siento que pude dar a conocer una forma de hacer autoetnografía, la que se conoce como evocativa, a un grupo de personas de América Latina que puede hacer uso de ella y también, a su vez, enseñarla a otros para así continuar con esta “especie de movimiento”, como le he escuchado decir a Carolyn.

Escribiendo el párrafo anterior me vienen a la memoria hitos de encuentros con latinoamericanos que me indicaban su profunda desaprobación de esta metodología. Once años después, terminé el curso impartido con Elda, sabiendo que hay muchas personas en Latinoamérica volteando sus miradas a la autoetnografía y escribiendo historias conmovedoras desde sus diversas y complejas latitudes y trayectorias de vida.

Otro resultado positivo del curso fue lograr que esos trabajos inicialmente elaborados para nuestro seminario pudieran ser presentados en el ISAN-2022. Creo que este es un paso hacia la posibilidad de construir puentes entre la comunidad de autoetnógrafos a pesar de la barrera del idioma. Por esta vez, y dado el contexto de la pandemia que llevó a realizar este Simposio de manera virtual, se pudieron presentar los trabajos en español de la mayoría de las y los estudiantes de nuestro seminario, con subtítulos en inglés, ya sea que nosotros hagamos ese esfuerzo o que al menos utilicemos la herramienta con la que cuenta *YouTube*, aunque sabemos que no es muy precisa.

Otro logro resultado de nuestro curso fue la idea de crear una red de investigadores/as hispanoparlantes que hagamos autoetnografía. Esta iniciativa es una prueba de lo grato que puede ser el trabajo en colaboración.

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Una Nota en una Agenda de 1982

Laura R. Iriarte (iriartelaurarosana@gmail.com)

Resumen

Esta narrativa es un escrito que me permite recuperar la memoria sobre las opciones educativas a las que he tenido acceso (y a las que no). En 1982 empecé la educación secundaria como pupila en un colegio de monjas. Mi firme propósito era, en algún momento de mi vida, convertirme en profesional..., pero no contaba con las angustias y tristezas que iban a acompañarme por la lejanía de mi hogar, la lucha por mantenerme en un camino que nunca estuve segura de que fuera el correcto o si volver hacia atrás era realmente no avanzar. En esta historia, utilizo el recuerdo de los lunes de mayo de 1982, a la hora de la siesta, para describir lo que voy descubriendo desde mi biografía, respecto de mi intensa relación con la opción educativa a distancia.

Palabras Clave

narrativa, autoetnografía, educación a distancia

Abstract

This narrative is a piece of writing that allows me to recover the memory of the educational options that I have had access to (and those that I have not). In 1982, I started secondary education as a boarder in a convent school. My firm purpose was, at some point in my life, to become a professional..., but I did not count on the anguish and sadness that would accompany me due to the distance from my home, the struggle to stay on a path that I was never sure if it was the right one, or if going back was not to be moving forward. In this story, I use the memory of Mondays in May 1982, at siesta time, to describe what I am discovering from my biography, about my intense relationship with the distance education option.

Keywords

narrative, auto ethnography, distance education



Instituto Niño Jesús¹

¹ Instituto educativo de Nivel Secundario y Nivel Superior “Niño Jesús”, ubicado en la localidad de Pigue, distrito de Saavedra, Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina. Fuente: <https://www.fmaveyron.com.ar/noticia/13176/1.html>

Las gaviotas, como es bien sabido, nunca se atascan, nunca se detienen. Detenerse en medio del vuelo es para ellas vergüenza, y es deshonor. Pero Juan Salvador Gaviota, sin avergonzarse, y al extender otra vez sus alas en aquella temblorosa y ardua torsión –parando, parando, y atascándose de nuevo–, no era un pájaro cualquiera.
Richard Bach

En este escrito intento “partir de lo individual en la investigación, para desde ahí lograr comprender el contexto espacio-temporal en el que se vive la experiencia individual, en sus dimensiones cultural, social y política” (Bénard, 2019, p. 9). Específicamente porque me interesa “detenerme” por un momento, ahondar, bucear, sumergirme de lleno en el objeto de estudio que me ha ocupado y preocupado durante los últimos 20 años..., pero que, por lo que estoy descubriendo desde la autoetnografía, viene desde mucho antes: la educación a distancia como opción educativa que, “mediatizando la mayor parte del tiempo la relación pedagógica entre quienes enseñan y quienes aprenden a través de distintos medios y estrategias, permite establecer una particular forma de presencia institucional más allá de su tradicional cobertura geográfica y poblacional ayudando a superar problemas de tiempo y espacio” (Mena, Rodríguez y Diez, 2010, p. 19).

Entonces, pareciera que escribo un fragmento de mi autobiografía como una forma de hacer conciente la interacción de lo introspectivo, personalmente comprometido, con descripciones culturales mediadas a través de esta escritura, la historia recordada en el marco de la explicación etnográfica.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) definen autoethnography as “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation”. (Chang, 2008, p. 46)

Claramente dan vuelta en mi cabeza muchas ideas y hasta aparece la confusión..., es uno de esos momentos donde me estoy dando cuenta de algo... o, mejor dicho, es como un instante donde se está construyendo una idea o la construcción que estaba latente se está visibilizando.

En esta ensalada de palabras, sentires, ideas, puntos lejanos y cercanos recupero una de las breves escrituras de mis agendas, cuasi diario personal, de la década del ‘80, más precisamente mayo del ‘82, un lunes (17 de mayo) donde escribí en la página “día a día” de esa agenda, denominada *Los 365 días con Cristo*, garabateé esta frase “Faltan 96 horas para irme a mi casa”.

En esa época era una preadolescente de 12 años, proveniente de una familia de clase media baja (por decirlo de alguna manera); nuestra vida transcurría en un pueblito rural muy pequeño (de unos 150 habitantes), Chasicó, ubicado en una zona rural crítica del sudeste bonaerense argentino (entrada a la Patagonia). En este pueblo teníamos escuelita primaria, pero no había posibilidades de continuar el nivel secundario de la escolaridad si no era trasladándonos a alguna ciudad cercana (por lo menos, unos 80/100 km). Es por esta razón, que mis padres decidieron que una buena posibilidad era internarnos (a mi hermana Alejandra y a mi) en un colegio religioso que tomaba “pupilage”, donde nos quedaríamos de lunes a viernes. Los lunes muy temprano mis padres nos llevaban hasta el colegio y los viernes, por fin tomábamos un colectivo de pasajeros, que nos llevaba hacia nuestro hogar... De lunes a viernes contaba esas 96 horas que menciono en mi diario.

De repente me encuentro sentada en el piso helado del baño del Instituto Niño Jesús de Pigue², uno de los baños pequeños que conformaban una hilera de ocho baños alineados enfrente de otras ocho duchas; con paredes revestidas de unos azulejos de tipo calcáreo color verde suave y piso de granito en tonalidades grises y verdosas. También tenía ventiluces pequeños, pero estaban bien arriba y altos, y sólo del lado de las duchas. Había que levantar mucho la cabeza para poder ver esa luz y ni pensar en salir por allí.

A nosotras (mi hermana Alito y yo), mi padre nos había anotado para estudiar pupilas en ese colegio ya que, en nuestro pueblo, Chasicó, no había secundario. Yo, un año menor, cursaba el séptimo grado de la primaria y mi hermana comenzaba el secundario, nos quedábamos en el colegio de lunes a viernes... Los viernes a las 14 horas subíamos al colectivo *El ñandú del Sur* que nos llevaba de regreso a nuestra casa. Ella, Alito, no quería estudiar o al menos cuestionaba esas decisiones desde una mirada muy filosófica... se preguntaba ¿por qué había que estudiar en un contexto formal? ¿Quién lo decía? A ella le gustaba dormir, estar tranquila, mirar tele, acomodar sus muñecas, ir al campo a cocinar con la abuela María y pretendía ser peluquera... se lo pasaba peinando a todo el mundo: los muñecos, a nosotros sus hermanos, a mi mamá y ¡¡¡hasta a mi padre peinaba!!!! (él era tan serio y se dejaba peinar sólo por ella). Además, no entendía el inglés y algunas profesoras no la entendían a ella..., fueron meses muy difíciles para ella que con hondo pesar y muecas de angustia aseguraba que esa decisión del 82 nos llevaría por caminos que ya no podríamos desandar...

En esos tiempos leíamos *Juan Salvador Gaviota* y teníamos como latiguillo una frase de su autor que también estaba escrita en mi agenda del 82... “Di toda mi vida para ser lo que soy en este momento... ¿valió la pena?”. E imaginábamos todos los escenarios posibles a los que podríamos llegar si tomáramos otras decisiones en ese mismo momento... aunque yo, que siempre fui mucho más primitiva, intuitiva y hasta bizarra, no tenía dudas de que teníamos que estudiar... Creo que quería ser médica, y convencí a mis “condescendientes” padres a hacer cualquier tipo de sacrificio para embarcarnos en ese viaje... Éramos clase media, media baja... madre ama de casa, con primario incompleto, padre multi empleado (comisionista de hacienda y de cereales en ese momento y también delegado del pueblo).

Pero esa aventura que empezó en marzo del 82... ya en muy poco tiempo, en ese mismísimo mayo me pesaba muchísimo..., ya me había dado cuenta de que era imposible mantenerme alejada de mis afectos..., era insoportable..., mis padres, mis dos hermanos Martín (compinche eterno) y Lautaro muy pequeñito en ese entonces (4 años) los extrañaba horrores, mis amigas/os, mis tres compañeras de primaria (Coli, Silvia y Mary) Sííí, tres compañeras y ahora tenía casi 30 compañeros de los que ni siquiera podía acordarme sus nombres. Mi prima “la flaquita”, de la misma edad que Alito, cuasi hermana, que había decidido no estudiar (ella o su madre, no sé muy bien) pero que yo notaba que quería haber ido con nosotras, las tres éramos una..., aún hoy, 40 años después, sigo pensando en eso, aunque nunca lo hablamos...

En fin, vuelvo al piso del baño... Frío, helado, ese frío que se siente en la carne y hasta en los huesos, imposible que no te sientas viva y mortal a la vez. 14 horas de un lunes..., los lunes las monjas nos obligaban a dormir la siesta y yo no duermo la siesta, había logrado hacérselo entender a todos en mi casa, para mí es una pérdida de tiempo dormir... Ya bastante con la noche... Además, ¿quién puede dormir un lunes con todos los recuerdos del fin de semana rondando en la cabeza y en la piel, añorando el viernes y sabiendo las eternidades de las 96 horas por delante...? No lo dice la agenda pero recuerdo el calorcito de las lágrimas de todos los lunes a las 14 horas, era ese mi momento de llorar, nadie me veía, había silencio,

² Poblado que quedaba a unos 150 kilómetros de nuestro hogar. En el sudoeste de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina.

estaba yo sola con mis sentires y mi agenda..., hasta las 15..., toda una hora para reconstruirme y salir de la puerta verde del baño (esmalte sintético) ayudar a levantarse a mi hermana, hacer la cama de ella; tomar el flamante portafolios de cuero marrón oscuro, e ir a la sala de estudios o a los simulacros de oscurecimiento, toda una novedad para esos días... Guerra argentino – inglesa (o Argentina contra el mundo) por las Islas Malvinas³. Que sumaba a mi desolación el fantasma de la guerra, la muerte, la juventud truncada, la incertidumbre, la certeza del miedo reflejado en los adultos... Unos versos de Atahualpa golpean en mí “Malvinas, tierra cautiva de un rubio tiempo pirata. Patagonia te suspira, toda la pampa te llama (...) Ay, hermanita perdida, hermanita: vuelve a casa” (Yupanqui, 1971).

El orgullo de ser argentina, de creer poderlo todo, hasta superar esta insoportable lejanía para no traicionar mis metas, esas luchas internas, vivencias que se hacen carne en la memoria y casi que el relato de esta experiencia no solo resuena desde “una dimensión singular, sino que, sin excluirla, me reconozco inscrita en una historia colectiva.” (Monetti, 2014, p. 37) porque yo estaba sumergida en esta angustia junto con Alito... pero también mis compañeras tenían marcas en sus rostros, señales que denotaban el peso de ser pupilas en un colegio de monjas..., ojitos tristes, hombros caídos, caminar cansino..., pienso que nosotras no teníamos otra opción para hacer el secundario, pero ¿las chicas de Casbas, de Guaminí, de Garré, hasta Roxana de Bahía Blanca y Silvia de Tornquist?⁴ En esos lugares había posibilidades... ¿por qué sus padres las depositaban allí? Parecían trastos inútiles o al menos molestos de estar en sus hogares..., tal vez, ¿para que no vieran lo que hacían sus padres?, ¿Como castigo a adolescencias rebeldes?, ¿Por creencias conservadoras de “niñas bien” que estudian en colegios privados, alejados de lo mundano? Cada una de ellas con historias pegadas en jóvenes caritas de porcelana, con huellas de historias pesadas que, les puedo asegurar que los lunes... los lunes, sí, sí, los lunes y a la hora de la siesta, se notaban muy muy claritas, muy muy nítidas y tremendamente cargadas de silencios.

Entonces, ¿por qué no abandonar esta locura, abandonar todo y volver a mi hogar? ¡¡¡Dios!!! ¿por qué no podía estudiar el secundario estando en mi casa como cualquiera de las chicas de mi edad?

Muchos decían que era una experiencia que fortalecía... Claramente sé que eso es verdad, pero ¿quién necesita esas fortalezas a los 12 años? Recuerdo patente que mientras rodaban las lágrimas yo necesitaba sentir la caricia de mi madre sobre mi pelo y les juro que cerraba los ojos y sentía esa caricia, aún hoy cierro los ojos y siento esa caricia. Necesitaba sentirla para no desesperar, pero además porque era real... ella en ese mismo momento debería estar recorriendo nuestro cuarto, rezando el padrenuestro que habitualmente rezábamos juntas y acariciando las almohadas vacías o llenas de muñecos que nosotras dejábamos acomodados y hasta tapados... Ellos también nos extrañaban, pero en su vocabulario no existía el “no podemos”, no existía el egoísmo, no eran miserables ni miedosos... y si lo eran, lo disimulaban muy bien y de alguna manera aprendí a disimularlo... tal vez por eso me detengo en este relato y me animo a desnudar mi alma... casi siento qué es y dónde se encuentra el alma cuando pienso en el dolor de esos días: en lo que llamamos “hogar”, ahí se encuentra el alma y no siempre podemos estar o regresar al hogar... no estoy segura de que el hogar sea algo que se construya, sino que es una sensación que se siente en

³ La guerra de las Malvinas o conflicto del Atlántico Sur, fue un conflicto armado entre la Argentina y el Reino Unido desatado en 1982, en el cual se disputó la soberanía de las islas Malvinas, Georgias del Sur y Sandwich del Sur, ubicadas en el Atlántico Sur. Comenzó en abril con la ocupación de Puerto Stanley por parte de tropas argentinas, bajo órdenes de la Junta Militar. Como respuesta, el gobierno británico desplegó una enorme fuerza expedicionaria que al cabo de 10 semanas de batalla desalojó a las fuerzas argentinas. La Organización de las Naciones Unidas continúa considerando los tres archipiélagos con sus aguas circundantes como territorios disputados.

⁴ Pueblos y ciudades circundantes unos 300 kilómetros del colegio de referencia.

un tiempo y lugar que otras personas crean para esperarte y una vez que la vivenciaste te deja una huella en la memoria emotiva que hace que todo el tiempo busques y busques sentirte en ese lugar.

Releo estas líneas, luego de haber compartido con el grupo del curso de Elda y Silvia, y descubro que me interés por la Educación a Distancia no es tan reciente (20 años). Pareciera que lo que interpreto –desde Laurel Richardson (1997)– acerca de que la sensibilidad posfundacional localiza la construcción de conocimiento dentro de las prácticas sociales humanamente situadas, se hace saber aquí o al menos resuena cuando la autora sostiene que, nuestras prácticas reflejan ubicaciones biográficas, históricas y sociales particulares. En concordancia, cada uno de nosotros ve desde “algún sitio”. Nadie puede estar “en ningún lado” ni “en todos lados”. Siempre estamos en alguna esquina de algún lugar. Y, puesto que todos estamos parados en algún lugar, cada uno de nosotros alberga alguna preferencia ideológica y algún programa político; nuestra escritura es la forma en que exteriorizamos nuestros (con frecuencia ocultos) deseos de afectar el curso de la historia.

Aparentemente en ese sentido va lo que investigamos y lo que producimos en el marco de la academia y las transformaciones que logramos plasmar, si es que en algún momento lo logramos. Algo así como no poder separar el campo del entendimiento del campo de la acción y poder unirlos con hilos de palabras que visibilicen esa coherencia porque, aun siendo incoherente, las palabras lo dejarían al desnudo. Tal vez la impronta de significatividad social de la Educación a Distancia, si hubiese llegado a mi vida en esos momentos, lo que ella representa “como herramienta capaz de ayudar a hacer realidad el ideal de la educación permanente y la democratización del acceso a una educación de calidad” (Mena, Rodríguez y Diez, 2000, p. 22), la historia podría haber sido otra, para Alito, la flaquita y para mí... o no. No podemos saberlo.

Bueno a reconstruirme y a seguir..., ahora ya desde otro/s hogar/es que no quiero dejar de sentir-me y/o preparar para *otros* que conmigo, se sienten alojados, cobijados, acariciados... A reconstruirme una vez más, porque ya ahora sé que las opciones suelen ser un privilegio y que los costos implican que cada tanto me dé cuenta de que no se me ha quitado del todo ese frío intenso del piso helado del baño del Instituto...

Ya tengo 52 años, lejanos a aquellos 12, con muchos recorridos que me han dado pequeñas y grandes revanchas en cuanto a posibilidades y opciones de crecimiento permanente desde la Educación a Distancia, y vuelvo a sentirme en el lunes de aquel entonces, vuelvo a sentir en la carne y en los huesos el frío de ese piso para detenerme a leer la agenda, y “repetir (me)” en este escrito “Di toda mi vida para ser lo que soy ahora, ¿valió la pena?”.

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Mi Encuentro con la Autoetnografía: Proceso de Reconocimiento de la Identidad Marrón como Docente en Jujuy

Fabián Guillermo Galán Peñalva (fgalanpenalva@fhyics.unju.edu.ar)

Resumen

La experiencia que presento emerge como una epifanía que aconteció en mi niñez, durante mis años de escuela primaria que, en estos momentos, después de toda una vida de escuela, de familia, de formación en la universidad, me permite reflexionar sobre la relación entre escuela-sociedad-segregación-identidad. El relato me permite poner, no solo en palabras o pensamientos, sino por escrito, quién soy, de dónde vengo y cómo construyo y visibilizo una identidad marrón como sujeto social y como profesor formador de docentes.

Palabras claves

Autoetnografía, docente, segregación, identidad marrón

Abstract

The experience I am presenting emerges as an epiphany that happened in my childhood, during my primary school years which, at this time, after a lifetime of school, family, university training, allows me to reflect on the relationship between school-society-segregation-identity. The writing lets me to put, not only in words or thoughts, but in writing, who I am, where I come from and how I build and make visible a brown identity as a social subject and as a teacher trainer.

Keywords

autoethnography, teacher, segregation, brown identity

Los inicios de una escritura y una experiencia personal

Hace más de un mes me inscribí en un curso de posgrado, donde una de las primeras cosas que leí a modo de informarme de qué trataría el mismo, fue algo así como: “eso que se escribe, se lee y comparte no sale de este espacio”. En ese momento me dije, qué es lo que podrá pasar o qué cosas llegaremos a hacer en el curso que todo aquello que escribamos o hablemos, no podemos compartirlo fuera del espacio del curso.

Después de semanas de escuchar, de lecturas realizadas, de intervenciones en clase y de momentos de ausencias por mis otras obligaciones, llegó el momento tan temido o que esperaba que no llegara. Comenzar a escribir. Teníamos que comenzar a buscar en nosotros la tan hablada, nombrada y señalada, epifanía. Silvia Bénard, una de las docentes del curso, definió a la epifanía como esa experiencia movilizadora, esa situación vivida, sentida y aún hoy recordada que se encuentra, para nosotros, cargada de significados, de preguntas y quizás de algunas respuestas.

Durante la primera semana, sentía que no surgía nada, que había situaciones vividas pero que desde mi entendimiento no llegaron a marcar mi vida o bien no llegan a la categoría de epifanía. Una y otra vez me pregunto qué situación de mi vida es tan movilizante que marcó mi existencia. Tenía que atreverme a pensarla, verbalizarla, sentirla y escribirla, quizás aquí está uno de los obstáculos, porque tengo que explicitar qué es lo que pienso, qué posicionamientos explícito verbalmente, qué sentimientos me provocan y si esto se refleja en mi hacer cotidiano.

En eso de pensar, de buscar y de recordar, comenzaron a surgir situaciones personales, familiares y también laborales. Después de dos semanas, de días y horas de pensar, de preguntarme, de escucharme en soledad, de mirarme hacia adentro, en mi historia, vino a mi recuerdo, algo que siempre estuvo allí presente. Para Hannah Arendt (2005) no es posible que podamos pensar si es que no tenemos experiencias personales, por ello, desde ese lugar es que puedo comenzar con un proceso de pensamiento, para traer a un aquí y un ahora las cosas que me pasaron, pero que hoy están presentes.

El pensar sobre mis experiencias hace que vuelva a pensar, rememorar, volver sobre mi historia, mis ideas sobre la familia, la escuela, las docentes, la elección de una carrera y las ausencias que estuvieron y aún hoy parece que no regresan. Las experiencias que vivimos nos llevan a pararnos en ellas y desde allí pensar lo que nos provocan y las marcas que dejaron en nosotros.

Notas sobre mi niñez y mis recuerdos de escuela: descubrir lo que es ser marrón

Esta experiencia que siempre regresa a modo de recuerdos, sentimientos y pensamientos, con más o menos detalles, se inició a los 6 años de edad, durante un verano de Jujuy, provincia ubicada en el noroeste de Argentina, frontera con Chile y Bolivia. En ese momento había terminado el primer grado y, como siempre, o por lo menos así lo recuerdo, yo partía hacia el campo, a la casa de mis abuelos paternos. Hasta ese momento mi familia era una madre, un padre y una hermana. Cuando mi padre, por temas de trabajo, se ausentaba por largos periodos para ir a trabajar a Buenos Aires, entonces en casa sólo éramos mi madre, mi hermana y yo. Hoy, después de 43 años, puedo decir que esa era mi familia, pero a los 6 años yo sentía que mi familia se encontraba incompleta por las ausencias de mi padre.

Me viene a la memoria el primer grado del nivel primario, el tema: la familia. El libro Campanitas, desde donde aprendía a leer y escribir y desde donde la maestra nos enseñó que la familia era: papá, mamá e hijos, todos felices dentro de un gran corazón. Esa imagen de familia es la que me persiguió durante muchos años, mi infancia, mi adolescencia y hasta que llegué a la facultad. Durante esos años sentía que no tenía una familia, que mis padres me habían arrebatado la posibilidad de tener una familia.

La facultad, las materias como antropología, sociología, filosofía, psicología social, entre otras, el diálogo con mis compañeros, mi participación en jornadas y charlas, y el tránsito por los pasillos de la Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales me permitieron comprender que ese estereotipo de familia feliz era eso, un modelo que algunos exponen como único, pero que en la práctica existen tantas familias como personas. Estudiar Ciencias de la Educación me llevó a preguntarme: ¿por qué la maestra nos enseñó ese modelo de familia? ¿Por qué nos hizo pensar a los 6 años que si no teníamos a mamá y a papá no teníamos familia? ¿Por qué nos hizo sentir que los niños, como en mi caso, que no teníamos a nuestro padre presente, nos faltaba algo y por lo tanto éramos diferentes?

Regreso a ese diciembre de mi primer grado, a ese verano, y recuerdo que mi padre estaba en casa y me llevó al campo. Yo estaba feliz porque había terminado la escuela, pasé a segundo grado, y porque no era diferente, era como la mayoría de mis compañeros, tenía una familia. Mi padre me llevó al campo, a la casa de sus padres. Por fin podría jugar con mis primos, porque la casa de mis abuelos en verano era el lugar de encuentros de tíos, primos y otros familiares que generalmente regresaban al campo por las vacaciones.

Para mí la casa de los abuelos era no solo el campo, los animales o la familia que nos reencontrábamos; era ese tiempo de estar solo, pero a la vez sentirme cerca de mis abuelos. Una abuela que se preocupaba por sus nietos, que nos cocinaba, que nos hacía participar de la vida del campo, de un abuelo que, con sus silencios y pocas palabras, nos enseñaba a trabajar en la huerta. Y un tío, el más chico de todos los hermanos, que era como el hermano mayor a quien todos los sobrinos seguíamos y tratábamos de imitar en cosas del campo.

Cuando recuerdo el campo, la casa de mis abuelos, esa es la imagen que perdura en mi mente. Quienes no aparecen en esas imágenes son mis padres y mi hermana. No puedo recordar momentos donde todos juntos estuviéramos en esa casa, siempre me veo y recuerdo yo solo. Será que nunca estuvimos como familia o es que no tengo esos recuerdos. Pero ese verano, después de dos meses de campo, de vida con los animales, de juegos con primos, yo sabía que se acercaba el mes de marzo y el tiempo de la escuela, de las clases. Pronto tendría que partir de nuevo a la ciudad, regresar a mi casa, a la vida en familia, volver a la rutina, pero volver con mi familia.

Pasaron los días, ya todos mis primos habían regresado a sus casas, sólo yo quedaba con mis abuelos, no sabía por qué todos habían partido y yo seguía en el campo. Hasta que una tarde apareció mi padre, yo sabía que me venía a buscar. Entre sentimientos de querer regresar y no, me fui a despedir de los animales, de las huertas, de los corrales, del campo donde podía correr. Cuando regresé, las caras de mis abuelos no eran de alegría y la de mi padre tampoco, no sabía qué pasaba, pero pasaba algo que pronto me enteraría. Mi vida comenzaría a cambiar luego de un verano de niñez y pasaría a entender que la vida no era tan fácil y que había problemas muchos más graves que tener que levantarme por las mañanas para ir a la escuela.

Es la primera vez que me atrevo a escribir sobre esta situación. A pensarla desde otro lugar, tratando de buscar respuestas más personales y que expliquen mi vida, mis decisiones, mis miedos, mis indecisiones y por qué sentirme diferente era algo que me incomodaba y trataba de esconder. Lo que sucedió en ese marzo marcó mi vida, crecí, dejé de ser niño y pasé a pensar en temas de grandes, porque como hermano mayor quedé atrapado en la decisión de mis padres. Habían decidido separarse.

Ese día de regreso del campo, no regresé a mi casa. Mi padre me llevó a la casa que mis abuelos tenían en la ciudad. Recuerdo que me dijo: ahora vamos a vivir aquí; tu madre y tu hermana van a vivir en la casa. Las palabras de mi padre fueron más duras: ahora no vas a ver a tu madre, esta va a ser tu casa. No tengo muchos recuerdos de esos días, pero sí aún siento el dolor, la angustia y el miedo de no poder ver a mi madre. Tenía siete años, tenía que comenzar el segundo grado, pero ya no tenía familia, tenía prohibido ir a la casa de mi madre y ver a mi hermana.

La nueva casa quedaba sólo a dos calles de mi antigua casa. En esta casa vivía una tía y sus hijos, yo tenía una habitación que compartía con mi padre, pero generalmente siempre estaba solo porque mi padre casi nunca estaba en casa, entre su trabajo y sus salidas. Aquí comencé a conocer la soledad, las ausencias, sin padre presente y sin poder ver a mi madre. Mi tía era la única que estaba presente, que me alimentaba, me atendía y se preocupaba porque yo fuera a la escuela.

La escuela, el aula del segundo grado del turno mañana comenzó a ser ese espacio sin sentido y donde no aprendía nada. La maestra nueva, no recuerdo su nombre, pero me vienen a mi mente los momentos de gritos, de retos, de pasar a la pizarra y no hacer nada, de enviarme al rincón, de arrancarme las hojas del cuaderno, de ponerme notas con lapicera roja en el cuaderno. Yo no sentía nada, nada de lo que pasaba en esa aula me importaba, todo lo que la maestra pudiera hacer para mí era nada, sus agresiones y gritos no me llegaban, no atravesaban mi cuerpo, yo solo pensaba en cómo escapar de mi casa e ir en búsqueda de mi madre.

La escuela era la del barrio, era un edificio nuevo, recién construido, de dos plantas, con jardines, el patio de juegos y el patio central con el mástil donde izábamos la bandera nacional. Yo el año anterior, en mi primer grado, añoraba ir a la escuela, me levantaba temprano y me iba a clases o me llevaba mi madre, pero la escuela era ese lugar donde aprendía a leer y a escribir. Aún recuerdo el libro Campanita, un libro con grandes dibujos y letras grandes mayúsculas de imprenta. Yo me sentía grande, porque llevaba el guardapolvo

blanco y porque estaba aprendiendo a leer y escribir, mis notas eran muy buenas, 9 y 10. El guardapolvo¹ siempre estaba blanco porque mi madre se encargaba de lavarlo, plancharlo para que todas las mañanas llegara a clases contento y limpio. Hasta ese momento no sabía lo importante que era tener una madre. Mi madre siempre estaba y parecía que estaría, hasta ese final de verano en que no la volví a ver.

El segundo grado fue un año de no hacer nada en la escuela, pasé de grado porque creo que la maestra se apiadó de mí y me dejó pasar de grado. Total, ya habían decidido que por mis reiteradas inasistencias y mis notas bajas el próximo año, el tercero, lo cursaría en el turno tarde. Porque el turno tarde era el lugar de los alumnos de las notas bajas, de los que eran grandes de edad y repetían de grado. En la tarde los guardapolvos no eran tan blancos porque parece que las mamás no los lavaban o, como en mi caso, no estaba.

Qué encontré en esas aulas del turno tarde. Muchos compañeros que venían a las clases, pero nadie estudiaba, las maestras siempre estaban de mal humor, nos retaban y gritaban. Nosotros estábamos en nuestro mundo, allí comencé a conocer que yo no era el único que tenía problemas, estaba mi compañero que vivía con sus cinco o seis hermanitos y que no había dinero para comprar guardapolvo nuevo, había que utilizar el que heredaba o aquel que ya parecía una camisa más que un guardapolvo porque le quedaba chico. Mis otros compañeros también tenían sus problemas, entonces yo no era el único que tenía problemas o bien no era casi un problema. No tenía muchos hermanos, comía en mi casa, tenía útiles escolares, pero no había un padre presente y no podía ver a mi madre.

Esa aula y el turno tarde me hicieron dar cuenta de que no solo los guardapolvos marrones eran algo que nos unía a los niños y niñas, sino que, en general, las madres no nos acompañaban hasta el ingreso de la escuela llevándonos de la mano, porque en casa había otros muchos hermanitos o bien porque estaban trabajando, como la mía. Las aulas en días de calor no olían a colonia o a flores, sino que las maestras abrían las puertas y ventanas y nos decían: “Aquí parece que nadie se baña, no lavan sus zapatillas, no se cortan las uñas”. Esperábamos las horas de los recreos para correr por los patios y pasillos, porque era el momento donde podíamos gritar, jugar entre nosotros, porque era lo único que podíamos hacer en el recreo. En el kiosko del patio mayor no había enormes filas de niños que podían comprar galletas, caramelos o gaseosas; no había filas porque los de la tarde no teníamos dinero para comprar.

En ese tercer grado aprendí que ese sería mi mundo, que se terminó el turno mañana, los guardapolvos blancos, las aulas limpias y alegres, donde todos los alumnos estudiábamos y las madres siempre estaban en las reuniones a las que llamaba la señorita maestra. Ahora pertenecía al turno tarde, al turno de los problemas, de los guardapolvos marrones, sin bolsillos, sin botones y donde aprender no era algo que se esperaba de nosotros. A mis ocho años comprendí que debía comenzar a decidir qué haría de mi vida, vivir solo en la casa de mis abuelos, ir a la escuela, pero no aprender, olvidarme que tenía una madre y una hermana.

Hoy, cuarenta y tantos años después, pensando en ese turno tarde, puedo darme cuenta de que la escuela no es igual para todos y todas. Que esa escuela de barrio tenía dos mundos totalmente diferentes. Desde la pedagogía se lo llama segmentación educativa y se sostiene que la escuela se encuentra atravesada por la situación social, económica, familiar y cultural que vivimos los estudiantes y nuestras familias. Braslavsky (1985) plantea que la segmentación en educación se evidencia a partir de la continuidad entre la fragmentación social y los procesos de diferenciación horizontal en las escuelas, de tal forma que se revelan desigualdades desde el currículo y las condiciones de aprendizaje que se ofrecen en los turnos mañana y tarde.

¹ En la tradición escolar argentina el guardapolvo blanco es la vestimenta de las escuelas públicas que surge a finales del siglo XIX destinada a todo estudiante de las escuelas primarias y secundarias, para que toda diferencia social quede oculta debajo de ese delantal y todos sean tratados del mismo modo.

Porque la escuela, a pesar de ser de barrio, no es igual en los dos turnos, no es lo mismo estudiar en el turno mañana porque allí encontrábamos los guardapolvos blancos, allí las maestras esperaban que sus alumnos aprendan y asistían los niños y niñas más blancos de piel porque sus padres eran el jefe de policía o empleados públicos con rango de jefes. En este turno también asistían los hijos de las maestras, que a pesar de ser morochos van enblanquecidos porque sus madres o padres son docentes o empleados públicos. En fin, el turno mañana es de los alumnos que tenían una familia como aparecía en el libro de texto Campanitas. Mi turno tarde era –y aún hoy es en muchas escuelas– el espacio de los niños y niñas de los guardapolvos marrones, y de los niños y niñas morochos, marrones por nuestro color de piel, que nadie espera que aprendamos, que vamos a la escuela para escapar de los problemas de nuestras casas, de la pobreza y nuestras familias no se encuentran dentro de un corazón como en el libro Campanitas.

Esta situación de diferencias entre el turno mañana y el de la tarde la viví ya siendo docente en mi primera escuela primaria y luego como egresado en Ciencias de la Educación desde mi rol como asesor pedagógico. En ambas situaciones, vuelve a mi hoy esa situación vivida como alumno del turno tarde, del guardapolvo marrón y de ser marrón porque mis padres eran del campo, morochos, hijos de campesinos pobres, como gran parte de este Jujuy rural y de frontera.

Como joven docente me designaron en un cargo en el interior de Jujuy, a unas 4 horas de viaje en autobús. Llegué al pueblo, nunca imaginé que mi provincia fuera tan grande; ese día, después de horas de viaje, aprendí que más allá de la capital había escuelas. Me presento a las 9:00 de la mañana con mi designación, emocionado, el cansancio del viaje no existía, por fin podría comenzar a trabajar y sería llamado maestro. La directora con su guardapolvo blanco, sus zapatos lustrados y de tacos altos me recibe, me saluda, analiza mis credenciales y me dice, bienvenido, esperábamos que llegara, los niños están sin maestro, pero su turno no es a la mañana, usted va a dictar clases a la tarde.

Regresé a la tarde otra vez con mis papeles y me recibe la vicedirectora, ese horario, el calor del momento, estar todo el día con la misma ropa todo transpirado no me hacía sentir cómodo, pero pronto me di cuenta de que ya era parte del paisaje humano. Ya estaba en el turno tarde; cuando ingresé al aula, los niños, todos marrones, me saludaron, lo primero que me llamó la atención fue su color de cabello, no era negro, tenía una capa por encima de una tonalidad rojiza. Me presenté y saludé, y no podía dejar de mirar esos cabellos rojizos, no me resistí y mientras caminaba me decidí a tocar la cabeza de los niños, donde descubrí que el color rojizo era por el efecto de la tierra roja de los campos donde ellos vivían. Después, en la hora del té, en la sala del maestro, me di cuenta de que la mayoría éramos docentes noveles, recién egresados de las aulas del profesorado y designados a esta escuela; todos, incluido yo, estábamos asustados por estar lejos de nuestras casas, pero teníamos que trabajar.

Al pasar las semanas me pude enterar que en el turno mañana estaban los maestros con años de experiencia y los alumnos eran los hijos de los finqueros y de los empleados públicos del pueblo, otra vez todos con sus guardapolvos blancos. A la tarde estábamos los que teníamos que estar, maestros noveles y morochos, los niños con sus guardapolvos marrones y sus cabellos rojizos porque sus padres eran los cosecheros de las fincas.

Tuve que estudiar Ciencias de la Educación para comprender por qué muchos padres y madres realizan filas interminables para inscribir a sus hijos en algunas de las escuelas del centro o de renombre o, si es la escuela del barrio, tienen que ir al turno mañana y si es posible a la división “A”, porque en esas escuelas y en ese turno mañana sí se enseña y sí se aprende. Esta situación la volví a vivir de nuevo siendo asesor pedagógico de una escuela secundaria, de una escuela del interior de Jujuy, allí donde también están por la mañana los guardapolvos blancos, por la tarde los guardapolvos marrones y por la noche ya ni aparecen los guardapolvos, porque los estudiantes asisten a clases con sus ropas de trabajo, a veces

vemos a las estudiantes con sus cochecitos con bebés y donde nadie controla horarios de ingreso o salida o si fuman o no fuman en los pasillos. Pero es la misma escuela, el mismo edificio, los mismos directores y hasta casi los mismos docentes.

En esta escuela no estuve mucho tiempo porque era un reemplazo corto, pero en esto de transitar por los tres turnos, mañana, tarde y noche, pude darme cuenta de que los tres turnos no son iguales y que los docentes también somos parte de esta situación. Desde el primer piso, a las 7:30 horas, veía llegar a los docentes en sus autos, los varones vestían trajes o camisa, corbata y zapatos lustrados, las mujeres chaquetitas, camisas con grandes cuellos e incluso pañuelos al cuello, zapatos de tacos altos y portaban sus maletines o carteras de cuero que brillaban de limpios. En el turno tarde me percaté de que muchos de esos docentes volvían a la escuela, después de las 14:00 horas, algunos con sus autos, pero los varones ya no traían trajes ni las mujeres chaquetas, ahora sólo era una camisa, los zapatos ya no estaban tan lustrados ni eran tan altos, incluso habían desaparecido los pañuelos en el cuello y los maletines o carteras de cuero eran cambiados por tela de avión, un género más de batalla. Por la noche, tipo 19:30 horas, estos profesores también regresaban a dictar clases, pero sin sus autos, llegaban caminando, sus ropas suntuosas del turno mañana fueron reemplazados por los jeans, por las zapatillas, por alguna chomba con cuello o remera, ahora no había zapatos sino zapatillas y portaban sus carpetas en las manos o en algunos morrales, esos bolsos que se cruzan por la espalda.

Regresando a mi niñez, a ese tercer grado del turno tarde, cuando con mis ocho años decidí que tenía que estudiar, que tenía que dedicarme a mis estudios, porque era lo único que me podía salvar. Entendí que la opción no era seguir la historia del segundo grado, porque lo único que había logrado ese año, al no estudiar, al no dedicarme a mis tareas, fue que me pasaran al turno tarde.

La primera decisión que tomé en mi vida fue dejar de vivir con mi padre, porque sus ausencias hacían que prácticamente viviera solo, porque alimentarme no era lo único que necesitaba, me faltaba el amor, ser querido y atendido. Ese año, no recuerdo ni el mes, semana o día, lo único que sé es que un día me aparecí en la puerta de esa casa prefabricada de madera, allí donde habían quedado viviendo mi madre y mi hermana. Allí estaba mi madre y estaba mi hermana menor jugando, llegué y le dije a mi madre: “ya no quiero vivir allá con mi padre, quiero vivir con ustedes”. Mi madre me abrazó y me dijo: “de aquí no te vas más”. Había regresado a la casa de mi niñez, de mis juegos, de la familia. Yo no era el mismo, me sentía grande, había crecido no solo en estatura, sentía que había regresado después de un largo viaje, pero que ya no era el niño pequeño, era una persona grande que comenzó a vivir la vida.

Ese día de regreso a mi casa fue tener un momento de alegría como hacía tiempo que no tenía. Estaba con mi madre y con mi hermana, pensaba que era el final de las separaciones, de dejarme de sentir solo. Pero la vida me enseñó que no sería así, porque el regresar a la casa con mi madre significó perder a mi padre, a quien no vería por muchos años, porque él lo había decidido así.

En estos años de una familia con madre y hermana menor, siempre estaba y sentía la ausencia de mi padre. En cada acto escolar, cada evento en la escuela, cada fiesta de fin de año, en los encuentros de familia, siempre faltaba alguien. Esa ausencia de años, se fue transformando en rencor y en una situación que me hacía no querer estar en esos lugares donde podría estar mi padre. Para mí, se terminaron los veranos en casa de mis abuelos, porque era un lugar donde no me sentía parte de esa familia, donde faltaba mi padre.

Pasaron los años, terminé de transitar por la primaria y por la secundaria y llegó el tiempo de tener que elegir qué hacer después de graduado. En este tiempo, entendí que la ausencia de mi padre en casa hizo que yo fuera el responsable, mi madre trabajaba en jornada completa y quien cocinaba, limpiaba y era responsable de que la casa funcionara era el

hermano mayor. Mi hermana siempre era la menor, la más chica, la que se sostenía en lo que yo decidiera o realizara, pero sentía que si no hacía algo, esa casa no andaría. Mi madre en su trabajo y preocupada porque el dinero llegara a fin de mes a casa; la veíamos sólo de noche, muy tarde, cuando llegaba cansada de su trabajo, pero entendíamos que estaba agotada, que no debíamos pedir nada, simplemente seguir haciendo las cosas solos.

La escuela secundaria que cursé también fue al azar, nunca pensé qué orientación quería seguir. Solo me importaba no estar en casa, salir de allí y estar fuera de ella. Esa escuela apareció de la mano de una amiga, una vecina que un año antes había ingresado al primer año. Yo veía que ella salía a la mañana con su guardapolvo blanco, regresaba al medio día y una hora después volvía a salir con su guardapolvo marrón. Yo dije esa es la escuela a la cual quiero ir, estar mucho tiempo fuera de casa.

El cursar la escuela secundaria fue un pasar por la escuela, pero donde seguía teniendo las responsabilidades de la casa. Lo que me acuerdo es que cuando estaba en tercer año, hubo un problema en el curso y llegó la vicedirectora y nos dijo: “es una vergüenza que los futuros docentes tengan estas conductas, ¿así piensan ser docentes?” Ese día me enteré que estaba en una escuela de artes, pero era una escuela donde después de cinco años, de cursar en doble turno, mañana y tarde, nos recibíamos como Bachilleres y como Maestros de Artes Visuales para ejercer en el nivel primario. De esta forma llegué a enterarme que sería docente, porque hasta ese momento yo asistía a un secundario por la mañana y por la tarde a talleres de artes donde me divertía mucho. Así llegue a la docencia, los años siguientes me hicieron ver que ese sería mi mundo y mi profesión.

Repensar el rol docente desde el reconocimiento de una identidad marrón

En este momento, participando del curso de posgrado, vuelven a mí términos como territorio, fronterización, diversidad cultural, identidad y preguntas como qué significa ser marrón y vivir en una provincia donde el 80% somos marrones, pero quienes gobiernan parecen bajados de los barcos europeos, blancos, rubios y de ojos claros. Esta situación me permite reconocer que, como provincia de frontera, de encontrarnos en el límite del país, hemos sido tradicionalmente considerados y tratados como un espacio subalterno, cuya diferencia, nuestro color de piel, de ojos, de cabellos y nuestros rasgos amerindios del altiplano, nos ubican al margen, respecto a un centro tomado como modelo.

En estos márgenes olvidados y hasta negados por el centro, se encuentra la respuesta para generar la fronterización, la convivencia y el reconocimiento del mestizaje y la revalorización de ser marrón. El concepto de margen, según Capella (2010), ha llevado al discurso de dependencia, a la idea de transición y a la eventual formación de la identidad desde el margen. Otro de los aspectos que señala el autor es que el discurso sobre las implicaciones de la marginalidad subyacente en las diferencias condujo a la negación de los discursos particulares y complejos, impidiendo cualquier reconocimiento de discursos alternativos, mucho más si son las voces de los que no somos blancos.

Volver desde los recuerdos a esa escuela primaria donde descubrí qué significaba portar el guardapolvo marrón, me permite decir hoy que se hace visible el mandato escolar y político: la búsqueda de la identidad nacional, el respeto a los símbolos patrios (una bandera, un himno), el sentimiento de argentinidad, la herencia de los gobiernos militares en los rituales escolares (formar fila) y el estudio de la historia de Argentina, en la que los próceres y héroes son blancos-europeos (currículo único). Estos elementos contribuyen a la consolidación de un modelo pedagógico y de escuela como instrumentos para la búsqueda de la unidad nacional y del ser argentino, desde una visión del centro, de Buenos Aires. Este modelo educativo, de escuela, de aula y de enseñanza sostenía y aún sostiene en las profundidades de su cultura escolar, una identidad nacional de imagen europea, en desmedro

de la cultura local, de lo propio, de lo originario, de la diversidad cultural y étnica que podría reflejar la diversidad cultural en este territorio nacional.

Llevamos más de un siglo sosteniendo un Sistema Educativo argentino único, inspirado en el pensamiento de que todos los ciudadanos debíamos ser socializados de la misma manera, sin importar nuestros orígenes e identidades. La escuela y su accionar educador son presentados como un terreno neutro, universal, único, que respeta y escolariza a todos los habitantes del país. Este modelo, centrado en el territorio y en una escuela única y para todos, sostiene un proyecto de país homogéneo y de raíces blancas. Para adecuarnos al sistema, los estudiantes descendientes de los pueblos originarios debemos abandonar nuestras identidades, negar de nuestros orígenes, héroes y figuras míticas.

Hacer y pensar desde la autoetnografía puede operar como una lente que nos permite a los docentes interpretar la naturaleza relatada de nuestras vidas en el ámbito escolar, en el marco de un lugar, una época, una cultura y las creencias personales que emergen en las prácticas. Los relatos de las experiencias no pretenden mostrar una foto de la realidad, son interpretaciones subjetivas, personales, que tienen la finalidad de buscar y construir un saber social y pedagógico. En la autoetnografía he encontrado la forma de expresar lo que siento, deseo y necesito exponer en este momento, para poder descubrir quién soy y explicar mi actuar, decir y pensar.

Narrar mi vida en familia, una infancia de ausencias, una escuela dividida en turnos, darme cuenta de que el color de los guardapolvos, blanco o marrón, nos ubica a los estudiantes y docentes en diferentes trayectos escolares, me permite exponer con toda crudeza el saber social y pedagógico que portamos los sujetos y que emerge cuando es necesario y posible trabajar, porque se crea el espacio para realizar este análisis. Lo relevante del relato es que puedo mirar, analizar y reflexionar sobre lo que se vive en las escuelas, no solo focalizado en lo pedagógico, sino a partir de lo que nos acontece a los sujetos y las implicancias sociales del acto de enseñar.

Por ello, creo que las experiencias que visibilizamos desde la autoetnografía posibilitan la construcción de un proceso de análisis, de reflexión y de construcción de una nueva relación entre lo personal, lo político, lo social y lo educativo. Este es el sentido profundo que como formador tengo que favorecer y transmitir a los estudiantes, para que puedan ampliar la visión de lo escolar y construir una sociedad basada en el respeto, la igualdad, la justicia, la ética y la responsabilidad social.

Recordando mi pasar por la escuela primaria, mis experiencias como docente y estadias de posformación en el extranjero, me hacen pensar que la escuela y los docentes mucho tenemos que ver con esta situación de invisibilización de nuestra identidad marrón local. Porque este sentimiento de negar quien soy, de dónde vengo, mi color de piel y mi vivencia con el delantal marrón lo aprendí en algún lugar o bien alguien me enseñó a ocultar o invisibilizar mi identidad. La pregunta que me realizo es ¿Por qué sentirme avergonzado del color de piel marrón? Quizás porque uno sabe o aprende el lugar que ocupará en las escuelas, el turno tarde, y porque a futuro estaría predeterminado a ocupar puestos laborales menos remunerados o que ser parte de ciertos espacios en la sociedad es una cuestión de apellidos y de color de piel.

Pensar lo educativo en clave de autoetnografía me posibilitó, a partir de la experiencia, comenzar a pensar y reflexionar sobre aquello que me atraviesa como sujeto perteneciente a un grupo cultural invisibilizado y la posibilidad de tomar conciencia y comprender los acontecimientos que vivo día a día. Contreras y Pérez de Lara (2010) sostienen que toda investigación que no se desliga de la experiencia busca algo muy especial, no solo construir un saber, sino también busca evidenciar lo vivido e iluminar el camino para develar las causas, consecuencias, posibilidades y sentidos.

Escribir sobre mi experiencia con relación a un marco social y cultural posibilita mirar, analizar y reflexionar sobre mis prácticas, donde el objetivo no es solo contar relatos sobre lo vivido, sino que desde el relato emerge un modo de dar forma a lo que vivimos para prestarle atención a las cuestiones que, a través del contar y del sentir, se nos desvelan como aquellas que requieren detenimiento, desarrollo, exploración, reflexión e investigación. La mirada autoetnográfica me permitió avanzar en procesos de análisis, reflexión y comprensión de lo social, lo cultural, lo humano y lo escolar que afectan de un modo existencial mi vida y la profesión docente.

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La Aleccionadora Experiencia de la Sobrecarga

Francisco Saenz (francisco.saenz@uns.edu.ar)

Resumen

En este trabajo de corte autoetnográfico se ofrece un relato y el análisis de mi experiencia como estudiante universitario argentino en el año 2020, atravesado por la situación de aislamiento, durante la cual me propuse llevar adelante una gran cantidad de responsabilidades académicas. Esta experiencia tuvo un enorme impacto sobre mi subjetividad, que en el trabajo se analiza desde la noción de identidad. Para profundizar en este aspecto, en el texto se retoman dos situaciones consideradas epifánicas, en tanto se configuraron como momentos bisagra por su carácter revelador. Los hechos relatados invitan a reflexionar acerca de los límites de la autoexigencia, en particular en el ámbito académico, pero también de manera extensible a los múltiples ámbitos de la vida.

Palabras clave

autoetnografía, identidad, sobrecarga

Abstract

This autoethnographic work offers an account and the analysis of my experience as an Argentine university student during the year 2020, crossed by the situation of isolation, during which I proposed to carry out a large number of academic responsibilities. This experience had an enormous impact on my subjectivity, which in the work is analyzed from the notion of identity. In order to go deeper into this aspect, the text takes up two situations considered epiphanic, since they were configured as hinge moments due to their revealing character. The events recounted invite us to reflect on the limits of self-demand, particularly in the academic field, but also extensible to the multiple spheres of life.

Keywords

autoethnography, identity, overload

Introducción

El 2020, de más está decir, fue un año especialmente atípico. Sin dudas, nunca imaginé hasta dónde se podrían extender las implicancias de una pandemia.

Para fines de 2019 estaba en trámites de solicitar mi título de profesor en Física, y mediaba el cursado de la Licenciatura en Ciencias de la Educación. En mi universidad, cada carrera tiene un plan de estudios preferencial, que indica a modo orientativo qué materias cursar en cada año y cuatrimestre. Como el profesorado comparte materias de todos los años de Ciencias de la Educación (y, por lo tanto, no debía volver a cursarlas), pensar en seguir el plan preferencial de la licenciatura nunca fue una opción. En el marco de la pronta necesidad de independizarme, me propuse aprovechar esta situación y mi experticia estudiantil para poder finalizar la carrera en un año menos de lo que indica el plan. Para ello elaboré un ambicioso, pero desde mi punto de vista viable plan de cursado para el resto de mi carrera universitaria.

Inicié ese año de manera muy similar a los anteriores. Con sincero entusiasmo por iniciar el ciclo lectivo, deseoso de enfrentarme a las nuevas materias que me depararía el tercer año de Ciencias de la Educación, y expectante por trabajar en los nuevos cargos que había obtenido como auxiliar docente en el Departamento de Física.

Las noticias acerca de una virulenta enfermedad llegaron y todo parecía lejano. No lejano en el sentido de aquello que falta por llegar, sino relacionado a lo inalcanzable, distópico. Será que todas las semanas nos encontramos con noticias que avizoran escenarios fatalistas, sobre guerras nucleares o meteoritos gigantes que, afortunadamente, la realidad siempre descarta. Pero este no fue el caso.

De un día para otro, el dictado de los cursos de verano presenciales en los que trabajaba fue suspendido. Los exámenes se pospusieron y, después de idas, vueltas y sobrados rumores, se dictaminó el cursado virtual en la Universidad Nacional del Sur. Sin demora, vino a mi mente que tenía enfrente una oportunidad de reacomodar mi avance en el plan de estudios. Sin embargo, esto no sería fácil. Tenía que cursar seis materias solo el primer cuatrimestre y cinco más el segundo, cuando el plan de la carrera nunca dispone más de tres o cuatro. Me dije a mi mismo que no perdía nada con intentarlo y avancé de esa manera.

Ya habiendo pasado algunas semanas del inicio de clases, y dada la cantidad de materias que cursaba, su alta carga de lecturas, trabajos prácticos e instancias de evaluación, no demoré en encontrarme con el primer “atracón” de entregas. No estando dispuesto a ceder en mi objetivo, dispuse el tiempo y la energía necesarios para cumplir cada una de estos requerimientos, resignando, en pocas palabras, todo lo demás.

Un día en particular me percaté de esta situación, mi vida estudiantil –siempre cargada de tiempo libre y actividades extraacadémicas– se había vuelto un continuo estudiar. Mi habitación se había transformado en mi oficina, mi sala de lectura, mi aula donde estudio y también donde trabajo, e incluso también –para poder ahorrar tiempo– mi comedor. En aquel momento de caer en la cuenta de esta realidad, cada cuestionamiento se enfrentaba a una pregunta: Si todos mis pasatiempos, mis espacios de socialización, mis deportes están limitados por la pandemia, ¿qué me estoy perdiendo? Esta pregunta me invitó entonces a continuar tal como lo estaba haciendo. Pensaba que de todas formas no estaría haciendo “nada provechoso” de otra manera.

Cerca de un mes después llegó otro día que constituyó para mí una epifanía. Nuevamente, las entregas, los trabajos prácticos, los exámenes se habían concentrado en un viernes. Y exigiendo al máximo mi capacidad humana de trabajo, llegué a realizar todo en tiempo y forma. El problema llegaría el sábado siguiente.

A las 8 de la mañana sonó la alarma que, por primera vez en mi vida, había dispuesto voluntariamente para despertarme para estudiar de lunes a lunes. A pesar del frío, como todos los días, me desperté, me di una ducha rápida y me senté en el escritorio de mi habitación. Prendí la computadora, abrí mi *checklist* y no encontré ningún elemento sin tildar. No podía ser. Ingresé a la página web de cada materia para verificar eso. Solo había mencionadas entregas lejanas, para las cuales ni siquiera habían dispuesto todavía las consignas. No. No podía ser. Busqué nuevamente, y me encontré –aún para mi sorpresa– con la confirmación de esta situación.

De repente, enfrente de mí tenía lo que hacía semanas no conocía. Tiempo. Pensé que tenía que aprovecharlo. Seguramente ordenar las fotocopias sería provechoso. Pero en veinte minutos ya había terminado esa tarea. Organicé los archivos en mi computadora, pero eso tampoco llevó más de media hora. Yo creo que la misma situación me estaba diciendo: “Dale, ya te podés levantar de esa silla, andá a hacer algo que te guste”, y al mismo tiempo creo que yo era consciente de eso. Sin embargo, permanecí ahí. Como abstraído de aquella situación, que desde

afuera podría parecer un oasis en el desierto, me quedé en mi computadora. Abría y cerraba archivos, entraba a una y otra página web de las distintas materias. Y sentía que eso era lo que me correspondía. “Porque tengo muchas cosas que hacer”.

Me permití un escape a la cocina, con la excusa de preparar algún plato elaborado que resulte un premio por aquel logro. Pero una necesidad por volver a “chequear” que esté todo hecho me llevó nuevamente a cocinar mi comida habitual, que nuevamente llevé en un plato a mi escritorio. Pensaba: “No sea cosa que pierda tiempo comiendo...”, incluso aunque aquel día el tiempo me sobraba.

Al terminar de comer me decidí a hacer algo para relajarme. Seguramente podría salir de ese círculo, aunque sea por un rato, si hacía algo que me gustara. Y fue quizás mi mayor sorpresa el darme cuenta de que no tenía la más mínima idea de qué quería hacer. Mi vida universitaria, antes cargada de pasatiempos y acompañada de estudio, se había vuelto una pintura monocromática, en donde el único color del cuadro era pintar y trabajar. Y no solo eso, sino que de repente, la pintura parecía no querer admitir más colores. Me surgieron preguntas inauditas. ¿Qué me gusta hacer? ¿Sigo disfrutando de tocar la guitarra? ¿Me gustan las películas? ¿Con quién disfruto conversar? La respuesta me abrumó. O, mejor dicho, la no respuesta. Realmente, no lo sabía. Me había olvidado de quién soy.

Breve reflexión introspectiva sobre la identidad

¿Qué es aquello que somos si no nuestra identidad? Entonces he aquí un concepto que quizás me pueda ayudar a aproximarme a esta experiencia. Recuerdo haber aprendido sobre este concepto tanto en la secundaria como en la universidad. En este caso, no me refiero a la identidad social, que definen Tajfel y Turner (1979) como la concepción de pertenencia a ciertos grupos o sectores sociales; sino particularmente a la identidad personal. Según Erikson (1968), esta sería el conjunto de rasgos propios de un individuo, que derivan en una conciencia del individuo sobre la propia identidad. De esta manera, yo me conozco, me defino, me construyo, y estas nociones me guían en la cotidianidad para tomar decisiones por mí. Esto nos permite discurrir el día a día de manera más económica, dejando a esta identidad la respuesta a la mayoría de las decisiones que podemos o debemos tomar a diario.

Entonces parece aproximarse una respuesta posible a mis preguntas. En un contexto cargado no por días ni semanas, sino meses, en los que las exigencias académicas y laborales requerían del total de mi tiempo diario y en el que no podía elegir mi cena por otro criterio que no sea “lo que se cocine más rápido”, ¿qué lugar queda para decidir? Y si no decido nada y tampoco me puedo tomar el tiempo de pensar introspectivamente o, mucho menos, de conversar extensamente sobre temas no relacionados a mis responsabilidades, ¿qué lugar queda para mi identidad? Nunca me había percatado de que hay una marcada diferencia entre acciones decididas y obligaciones. Toda mi vida había estudiado por placer, había hecho de la hora de cursada, la hora de estudio, la hora de repaso, un momento más entre muchas otras “horas de...”, llevando cada una de estas tareas con mucha responsabilidad, pero a la vez con libertad y flexibilidad, pudiendo siempre elegir cuándo, cómo, con quién llevarlas. Lejos de ello, ahora mi rutina estaba compuesta de obligaciones, sobre las que no podía decidir más que cuál de ellas hacer primero.

Otro de los elementos que habían cambiado en mi vida –un poco por la sobrecarga, un poco por el contexto sanitario– fue la cuestión de lo social. Porque en cuestión de días, mi rutina había pasado de situarme cara a cara con alrededor de cien personas por día (entre colegas, compañerxs y estudiantes) a transcurrir en la soledad de mi escritorio, desarrollando consultas

por Zoom con –cuanto mucho– 5 o 6 estudiantes. Creo que mi incomodidad con esta situación, siendo alguien tremendamente extrovertido, no debería sorprenderme. Aquí me remito nuevamente a Erikson (1968), cuando nos ofrece algunas líneas que caracterizan la noción de identidad. Una de estas indica que la identidad es una construcción que se produce en la interacción con otros. Al respecto, me pregunto ahora en qué medida estas clases por videoconferencia, compartidas con otros usuarios ocultos tras un “Nick” y una foto de perfil representaban un auténtico proceso de interacción. Sí, intercambiaba mensajes..., mis conocimientos se ponían en juego frente a los del resto, ya sean mis alumnxs, docentes o compañerxs. Pero no mis ideas, mis valores, mis sentires. No podría decir que, en la mayor parte del tiempo, quien hablaba era yo, sino mis saberes acerca de lo que otros dijeron y descubrieron. Mi subjetividad, en este proceso, pocas veces se veía en juego. Entonces, entiendo yo, no estaba interactuando.

Erikson (1968) también afirma que la identidad es un fenómeno con un significativo componente emocional. Y un poco en línea con la reflexión anterior, me doy cuenta de que en aquél abarrotado trajín no había lugar para las emociones. Será que había que guardarlas, porque si les daba lugar, sabía que no iban a ser buenas. También creo que sentir, procesar las emociones, descubrirlas, requiere fundamentalmente de tiempo y energía, justamente los dos elementos que más escaseaban en mi rutina.

Sin decidir, sin interactuar y sin sentir, la identidad no tiene espacio de ser.

El cuerpo dice basta

A pesar de lo agotador que me resultaba, debo decir que por meses atravesé este proceso de manera “asintomática”. Yo sabía, en el fondo, que estaba resultando en consecuencias importantes para mí. Pero, a decir verdad, no tenía idea cuáles. Tampoco lo quería saber, por temor a que conocer esto me invite a considerar el descargarme de responsabilidades. Si no tenía idea del perjuicio que me estaba generando esto, podía temporalmente sacarlo de la ecuación de precio-beneficio, y elaborar ficticia y artificialmente una situación aparente en la que estaba haciendo lo más conveniente para mí. Aún no conocía –o al menos subestimaba– la vinculación cuerpo-mente y lo inteligente de nuestra naturaleza humana.

Me desperté una mañana más. En este punto, ya no quería volver a escuchar esa alarma en mi vida. El tierno sonido de una composición musical, producida cuidadosamente con instrumentos agradables y notas sutiles se había transformado de alguna manera en el *soundtrack* del inicio de otro día agobiante más. Puse el agua para el mate –medio por excelencia para lograr estar más despierto luego de no haber dormido lo suficiente– y me senté en mi escritorio a leer. Era invierno, por lo que no había salido completamente el sol y, aun estando al frente de la ventana, debía encender mi lámpara de escritorio para contar con la luz suficiente.

Había pasado quizás una hora cuando noté cierta incomodidad en la zona posterior de mi cuello. Cambiaba las hojas de lugar, subía, bajaba mi silla, encendía más luces, producía todos los cambios posibles pero el dolor persistía. Rendido, decidí continuar leyendo. Aunque el dolor se sostuvo, logré terminar las lecturas que tenía previstas para esa mañana. Almorcé rápidamente y seguí estudiando. Al levantarme, me di cuenta de que mi cabeza se encontraba sensible. El caminar me producía un muy molesto dolor, que se apaciguaba un poco al sentarme. Seguí leyendo y ahora el dolor de cabeza y cuello iba en aumento. Me dirigí con dificultad a la farmacia a comprar “algo para la cabeza”, a lo que me ofrecieron ibuprofeno.

Apenas después de volver tomé el comprimido que había comprado y me uní a la clase que tenía prevista. Como estoy acostumbrado, participé –como pude– de cada pregunta de la

profesora en la que consideraba tener algo interesante para aportar. Tengo que admitir que siempre me ha preocupado estar atento a las clases, llegar con las lecturas al día y aportar en la participación, no para quedar bien sino para inducirme a seguir prestando atención. Recuerdo que me preguntaron si me sentía bien. Evidentemente, mis ojeras, mi mirada cansada, mi tono de voz delataban mi estado. Espero no haber dicho ninguna incoherencia en ese momento, porque a decir verdad no podría afirmar que me encontraba plenamente consciente de la realidad.

Luego de la clase, y a pesar de haberme medicado, el dolor no se apaciguó sino todo lo contrario. Había llegado la hora de la cena, oportunidad para tomarme una pausa, pero para mi sorpresa no tenía hambre, sino que las náuseas se habían apoderado de mí. Intenté preparar alguna comida que me pueda abrir el apetito, pero cualquier olor o sabor producía lo opuesto al efecto deseado. En este punto, al dolor cervical, de cabeza, las náuseas, se había sumado mucho frío y sensación de debilidad. Volví a mi habitación. No tenía nada más que hacer que recostarme.

En la cama, acobijado con todo el abrigo que encontré, no hallaba forma de estar cómodo. La diversidad de malestares producía que en cualquier posición me encontrara con un problema. Mis ojos intentaban cerrarse y cada vez que los cerraba, sentía una fuerza que me hacía aún más difícil abrirlos. Pero el malestar, el dolor, era tal que no podía dormir. Incluso, al cerrar los ojos, sentía que todo giraba a mi alrededor. Una repentina náusea me hizo correr al baño. El caminar, el vomitar y lo desagradable de la situación no hacían más que empeorar mis dolores, al punto de quebrarme al llanto.

En ese momento me percaté de que estaba en la cúspide del malestar posible. No había prácticamente manera de estar peor, al menos sin derivar en una hospitalización. Luego del vómito, las náuseas se interrumpieron y, entre lágrimas, pude dormir, esperando estar un poco mejor al día siguiente. En un destello de lucidez, apagué para el día siguiente la alarma que tenía religiosamente programada.

Desperté y –a decir verdad– no sabía ni qué hora era. La puerta y la persiana cerradas me impedían utilizar la luz del sol como indicador de la hora. Al encender la pantalla de mi celular, me encontré con que ya transcurría el mediodía. Mi tiempo de sueño había más que duplicado lo habitual. Para mi sorpresa, el dolor, las náuseas, el frío habían desaparecido completamente. Lejos del deplorable estado que había experimentado, y por primera vez en meses, me sentía bien. Me levanté con vigor y enérgico. También, afortunadamente, muy hambriento.

Más allá de lo físico, mi mente estaba funcionando de manera diferente. Mi energía estaba disponible pero un estado de relajación me invitaba a dosificarla. Preparé uno de mis desayunos favoritos: café con leche y tostadas con manteca de maní y mermelada, y una vez listo, me senté en una reposera en mi patio a disfrutarlo. No era como si fuera fin de semana ni como si estuviera de vacaciones, era como si de repente me hubiera transportado a otra realidad, lejana a las obligaciones y las prisas. Me acobijaba una profunda sensación de paz y armonía, que difícilmente podría explicar sin transportarme a un plano más espiritual que mental, terreno difícil para un ateo empedernido como yo.

Este estado se prolongó durante el día, el cual pasé redescubriendo mi vida. Por primera vez no prendí mi computadora ni revisé mis apuntes. Lejos de ello, y un poco desorientado por la ruptura de mi rutina, decidí salir a caminar. Me reencontré con las formas de las nubes, con la calidez del sol en mi rostro, con el tiempo.

¿Fue este día el fin de aquella secuencia estudiantil y laboral? Lejos de ello. Solo un día después ya me percataba de los problemas que generó mi “pausa” de día y medio para la intrincada planificación del tiempo que tenía prevista. Pronto me encontraba nuevamente en la

misma rutina. Un poco más descansado, sí, pero en el mismo camino de autodestrucción. Una cachetada de síntomas me había obligado a tomar un descanso, pero la realidad –y mi imposibilidad para dejar aquello en lo que asumo una responsabilidad– me llevaron pronto a continuar de la misma manera que antes. Acá en Argentina uno diría que “ya estaba en el baile y tenía que bailar”. Bajando la cabeza nuevamente frente a las responsabilidades académicas, continué otorgando mi tiempo y energía a las exigencias universitarias. Si hubo algo que cambió, simplemente fue que ahora era un poco más consciente del daño que me estaba produciendo y de la vida que dejaba de lado. Pero, ¿dejar una materia? Eso estaba muy lejos de encontrarse como una opción aceptable para mí.

Una retrospectiva desde el hoy

Ya habiendo pasado más de año y medio desde el inicio de esta situación, puedo decir que sin duda no soy el mismo. A pesar de la experiencia que narré en los anteriores apartados, transcurrida durante el primer cuatrimestre del 2020, en el segundo cuatrimestre volví a anotarme a más materias de las que indica el plan de estudios, tal como había planeado al inicio de la pandemia. No me encontraba dispuesto a negociarlo conmigo mismo, ya que aquel plan me permitiría recibirme en el menor plazo posible. No me interesa ahondar demasiado en este período porque a decir verdad fue muy similar al anterior. Los episodios de dolor cervical, de cabeza y náuseas que me producían vómitos por la noche y bienestar al día siguiente, se intercalaron dos o tres veces con la exigente rutina. Lejos de resultarme un motivo para detener este proceso, estos episodios se configuraron como un elemento más que hacía posible el sistema de sometimiento ante el que me doblegaba.

Luego de finalizar la cursada y rendir un examen final, en mi primera semana realmente libre estaba nuevamente desorientado. Sentía que quería hacer todo, pero que a la vez no tenía nada para hacer. Me di cuenta entonces que no sería fácil volver a mí. Pero se me avecinaban dos meses enteros de vacaciones, y un cuatrimestre relativamente relajado, en los que tenía nada más y nada menos que la tarea de volver a mí.

Hoy cambié mi alarma, pero también cambié mi relación con ella. Me permito posponerla, una, dos y seis veces. Me permito dormir en las mañanas de los sábados, y hasta pasar haciendo “fiaca” los domingos por la mañana. Hoy mi guitarra ya no tiene polvo, y está casi siempre afinada. Mis botines de fútbol están afuera del placard, como los pocos pares de calzado de uso más habitual. En mis chats de WhatsApp aparecen primero mis mejores amistades. Hoy sé cómo me siento y qué quiero hacer hoy.

En el medio, debí pasar semanas errante, como esperando a que una materia llegue a decirme cómo ocupar mi tiempo y energía. Hice memoria sobre recuerdos de situaciones que antes disfruté, e intenté resituarme en ellas. En algunos casos lo disfruté, en muchos otros no pude reencontrarme con el placer que recordaba. ¿Se había apagado algo en mí? No lo sé, pero mucho había cambiado. Poco a poco fui y sigo armando este nuevo yo, me sigo reenfrontando a experiencias viejas y nuevas, y verificando en dónde me siento cómodo, qué quiero y qué no quiero, qué es parte de mí y qué no lo es. A pesar de ello, siguen llegando pensamientos y sentimientos intrusivos que me instan a ceder mi tiempo a mis responsabilidades y que me niegan el vivir para mí. Es un proceso duro y sobre todo largo, que tiene momentos angustiantes y frustrantes, pero también dosis de alivio y esperanza.

Esta experiencia, más que ofrecerme aprendizajes, me aleccionó. Así como el padre de la vieja escuela que daba un cascarrón al niño que cruzó la calle sin mirar (y en el fondo estaba

preocupado porque la vida de su hijo no vuelva a correr ese peligro), este proceso me dio una lección por las malas, una lección a la que me negaba a acceder de otra manera.

No soy el mismo alumno ni docente

La experiencia que relaté resultó, sin dudas, un emergente en mi vida. Me enfrenté a una situación de la cual no tenía noción. Solo luego de que hubieron pasado meses de haberse terminado, problematicé mucho de lo que hice y dije en anteriores situaciones. Es que a veces parece que la experiencia es la única manera de aprender las cosas o, por lo menos, de alcanzar un determinado nivel de comprensión sobre estas. En este sentido, es valioso retomar la noción de experiencia que aporta Contreras (2011), en tanto considera que se relaciona, más que con lo que hacemos, con aquello que esta genera en nuestra subjetividad y las reflexiones que deriva. Este aporte resulta fundamental, ya que invita a poner en cuestión qué hacemos con lo que nos sucede, otorgando de esta manera agencia al sujeto.

Aprendí, y sigo aprendiendo, a no poner nada por encima de mí. A desconfiar de aquellos discursos meritocráticos de incentivo al trabajo duro e incansable (como si aquello de no cansarse pudiera existir). Aprendí a dejar de pretender vivir como un *workaholic* para vivir como yo sé vivir. ¿Cómo es vivir “como yo”? A decir verdad, aún no lo sé con precisión, pero sospecho que justamente esto de no saberlo es su característica central.

Desde mi posición de estudiante, no dejo de recordar las felicitaciones de docentes que recibí por mi trabajo el año pasado. De pensar que, sin saberlo, me estaban felicitando por llevar el estilo de vida que llevaba, que era el que hacía posible tener siempre buenos resultados. Me pregunto entonces a cuántos alumnos sobresalientes –y no tanto– habré felicitado y estimulado a “seguir así”, sin saber el trasfondo que esto implicaba. ¿Cómo podemos pretender dar consejos sobre el estudio mientras desconocemos totalmente el estado mental y social de nuestros estudiantes? Sin dudas, hoy pienso dos veces cada reto y cada felicitación, y me propongo intentar conocer el trasfondo de la vida de cada estudiante en el mayor nivel posible, a sabiendas de que un resultado excelente, un buen promedio o un título universitario no se deben obtener a costa de cualquier precio.

Pretendemos educar en contenidos, pero también en valores personales y sociales. Quienes somos militantes educativos de las ideas freireanas sobre la pedagogía para la liberación debemos recordar que la educación debe ser una práctica de libertad (Freire, 1982) y para ello requerimos, justamente, del poder de decisión. Como educadores, debemos ceder el tiempo, el espacio y la energía para que la libertad sea posible. Y como estudiantes debemos tomar ese tiempo y hacerlo propio, utilizarlo para decidir, para ejercer esa libertad. Y en el caso de que no se nos conceda, resistir.

Debo decir que la mayor parte de las reflexiones aquí plasmadas fueron producto del proceso de esta propia escritura, que resultó un medio tremendamente potente de arrancar de la negación y la represión todos estos hechos que fueron y son parte de mí, de procesarlos, de revisitarlos y de hacer de ellos una experiencia, en el sentido antes mencionado de la palabra.

Tengo la esperanza de que este texto también sea una herramienta de reflexión y problematización, que pueda aportar a comprender la realidad estudiantil, de la docencia y de la vida en general. Y si no resultase de esta manera, de todas formas, el valor terapéutico de su escritura –identificado por Ellis, Adam y Bochner (2019) como característico del estilo autoetnográfico– ya hizo que este proceso haya valido la pena.

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Returning Home/Re-examining the “Outness” Discourse: Deleuzo-Guattarian Becomings in an Online Collaborative Writing Group

Darren Cummings (dranyork@yorku.ca)

Abstract

This paper explores a new materialist philosophical orientation to autoethnographic narratives I composed within a collaborative writing and discussion group with four other rural queer-identified teachers. I examine how my own assemblage of rural space, the public school, Pride month, and the collective writing group, brought me to new explorations of previously written autoethnographic narratives on being “out” in schools. Group members’ discussions about the deterritorializing power of being “out” to their students forced me to revisit how I do not discuss my sexuality with students; something that I had addressed in my Masters autoethnography and imagined I had resolved.

Keywords

New Materialism; Assemblage; LGBTQ+ educators

This paper explores a new materialist and queer orientation to autoethnographic narratives I composed within a collaborative writing and discussion group with four other rural queer-identified teachers for my doctoral dissertation. New materialism examines how relational networks, or assemblages, made up of humans, discourses, and the material world lead to social production (Davies & Gannon, 2013; Fox & Alldred, 2015b; Iverson & Renold, 2013; Jackson, 2013; Mazzei, 2013). When an event, from the seemingly mundane to the substantial, occurs within an assemblage, the affect felt in the moment can produce a ‘line of flight,’ towards a new “becoming” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). It is through these affective flows in assemblage that power is produced. Therefore, in new materialist research, one should examine data for power and power imbalances that occurred at the time the event happened, and the becomings that occurred as a result of this event (Alldred & Fox, 2015). In this study, I do so by using Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of territorialization, reterritorialization and deterritorialization. Thus, I examine how queer individuals are *territorialized* through cisheteronormative assemblages, but also the ways we work towards *deterritorialization* as we fight back against harmful social scripts, and the many ways that normative society attempts to continually *reterritorialize* us.

To apply these notions to education, one can easily remember the cisheteronormative classroom assemblage we were all schooled in, where queerness was unspoken and invisible. This assemblage was composed of discourses that solidified cisgender and heterosexual norms through the official curriculum; the hidden curriculum of the hallways; the gendered materiality of the school space with separate washrooms, physical education classes, and even health classes— where “girls” went to one room, “boys” went to another, “girls played particular games,” “boys played other ones”; where boys and boys, and girls and girls (which were also the only two acceptable genders) certainly had no business having crushes on each other, attending school dances together, and certainly better not have sex or fall in love, to name but a few examples. We were taught to be cisgender and straight, territorialized on a normative grid that

we should not move beyond, policed by fear, reprimands and exclusion. Sadly, for many queer kids in schools today, this assemblage still remains.

With that said, a history of queer activism has pushed for the deterritorialization of our collective queer selves, where we can engage in lines of flight away from cisheteronormativity and towards embracing and celebrating queer lives. Queer educators may deterritorialize their classroom space by including queer curricular content, placing queer images on their walls, and having open discussion about queerness with their students. However, with any deterritorialization of norms there is always the risk of reterritorialization, as this transgression is threatening to those who cannot imagine constructs and possibilities outside of the norm. Thus, a queer teacher who attempts to deterritorialize their classroom space can face admonishments by administrators, complaints from parents, reprimands by districts, and in some cases, risk their job security (Connell, 2012; Jennings, 2015). These fears/realities can effectively silence queer educators, reterritorializing them; demanding they acquiesce to the desired norms. This Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy is fitting for queer autoethnographers who might utilize these constructs to analyze their life stories, noting the ways that they have been territorialized and the ways that they embark upon lines of flight towards freedom. Moreover, new materialist research not only investigates the lines of flight that have occurred through past assemblages, but also through the research encounter itself. In our collaborative group, the affect felt through the sharing and discussion of our past encounters also led group members to new understandings of the self and others, to new becomings. Thus, within the collaborative group, factors such as: participants' emotions, the affect attached to the way they read their narrative, the language and description used, along with the power of the memory itself, creates an affective force that can lead to a becoming for other group members (Davies & Gannon, 2013).

Additionally, the stories and subsequent discussion may also bring someone to a revisitation and a rethinking of previously told narratives. Revision, according to Ellis & Bochner (2016) is important in autoethnography because through reflecting and redrafting, there is a sense that our storied selves are never permanent, and rather than fixing a self in print, the author can examine how the self has changed overtime, and how the stories of the self can be interrogated and thought of differently.

It is through these lenses I examine how my own assemblage of leaving the university setting to return to my rural home due to Covid 19, substituting in the schools after a four-year absence, the collective writing group, and Pride month, led me to revisit my thoughts around being 'out' in the classroom. My initial re-evaluation began when I listened to my participants discuss the deterritorializing power of being "out" to their students, forcing me to revisit how I typically do not discuss my sexuality with students; something that I had addressed in my Masters autoethnography and imagined I had resolved. Thus, I revisited old narratives and wrote new ones as I continued to grapple with the question of the deterritorializing power of "outness."

A vignette from 2016:

I do not openly discuss my sexuality or gender with my students. How does one go about this? If I had a partner, I always thought that I would put his picture on my desk. Where is my voice? I am very troubled by this because I do not feel authentic, even though I will scream out that I am not in the closet. Parents and staff know, community members know, and I know that kids know. Other staff members have told me that they do not talk about their sexuality either. Is this the notion of the public versus private, the professional versus the personal, or the known versus the secret? When it was a secret before, I was in the closet, but I'm not in the closet now.

What impact is this having on students who could have an “out” role model? What about the repercussions of having open dialogue with my students? I have experienced homophobia by parents before— an all too real fear. Is it then my responsibility to “come out” again and again to every class that I teach, every year? Am I presenting queerness as undesirable to those students who think I am in the closet? (Cummings, 2016, p. 100)

These questions, modified from my thesis and written 5 years ago, all speak to some of the scholarly discourse on “outness” which have informed my reasoning for not coming out to students. Connell (2012) reminds us that coming out is not a linear or stable development. As Deleuze & Guattari suggest, identities are continually *becoming* throughout one’s lifetime. Coming out is not something that is completed once and then finished; people often return to the closet depending on the situation (Connell, 2012). In my experience, one has to come out over and over again throughout one’s life; it is not an “achievement” that happens once and is over with, as one has to assess when and where it is safe to do so and where it is not. Halberstam (2005) also says that not expressing outness can be a ‘deliberate misrecognition’: a purposeful attempt to disrupt the norms, rather than solidify an identity. Youdell (2010) states this might be preferable, as once an identity is proclaimed, specifically once a teacher proclaims a sexual identity, it may suggest to students that this identity marker cannot and will not be changed (p. 97). To suggest that being queer is only about an internal feeling, or a knowing, erases the varied and many experiences of people who do not consider queer as part of an identity, for example, those who come upon queerness later in life and had no conceptualization of *being* queer in the past. Additionally, sometimes a person is missing sufficient language to name oneself. In my own experience, I have only recently become queer. This is because for much of my life I was named as “gay” and took that identifier on, until I discovered a better one to embrace.

This is where I was 5 years ago. I liked the idea of being “deliberately misrecognized.” More recently, for my doctoral work, I came across an article by Lucas Crawford, a rural trans community member. Crawford (2008) utilizes Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of imperceptibility to refer to a rural imperceptibility, where an individual might register as “different,” or as “queer,” and yet, they may not necessarily be “out” or visible. He notes that this imperceptibility is different than binary notions of in/out of the closet. The notion of imperceptibility comes from Deleuze & Guattari. It is what is created when the self has been fully dismantled, a “body without organs” (BwO) (p. 151), a body that cannot be named, a body that is not subjectified, a body that cannot be labelled wrong or right, but only “populated by intensities” (p. 153). For Deleuze & Guattari, imperceptibility is the ultimate goal of deterritorialization. Thus, viewing rural queer imperceptibility as a form of deterritorialization, the “imperceptible” becomes not about being in the closet or about “coming out narratives,” but is about a queer becoming in the country which still works to deterritorialize the space: the community, the school and the self.

What might this imperceptibility look like and how does it differ from exclamations of outness? I’ll now briefly introduce the 4 other participants in my focus group to demonstrate how we each take up outness in schools.¹ Rachel and Jenna discuss initial worry early in their careers when deciding to come out but then felt it was best to be out to their students. Adele talks about being outed by a staff member to students and how her partner now volunteers at the school and is well-known to the kids. Bera identifies as genderqueer and uses they/them pronouns. They note they are often coded as “male” by others, but that this does not reflect their gender identity.

¹ All participant names are pseudonyms that were chosen by the participants.

They regularly wear skirts and scarves to school and use the honorific Mx. They have been given a script by their district that says what they are allowed to say about their identity, essentially, “This is the presentation and honorific that works for me,” without being able to expand further. Then there is me, who is also male-perceived but has long hair, wears scarves and makeup to school, and is decidedly queer but does not proclaim it to students. Rachel, Adele and Jenna all talk about the positive deterritorializing work they have done through being out and supporting queer students. However, I would argue that Bera and myself are more ‘imperceptible,’ not nameable, but that we queer the school space through our gender presentation, and the ways in which we bring queer content/discussion into the school and classroom, which also effectively deterritorializes the cisheteronormative space.

However, it is the amazing work that my “out” group members share that makes me start to question my stance on being out. This discussion brought me to disclose to them that I am not out with my students. In my journal I wrote that when I told the group this, I sounded shaky, and I was nervous — something I didn’t expect:

This business about not being out to students is very unsettling for me. I don’t think this should be something I should have to defend, and I think I can support my reasoning with scholarly literature for not proclaiming an identity...but I also wonder if it’s just plain fear. Maybe I would come out now. I hate feeling shame around not coming out. I hate when queer people feel shame in general. I did feel it tonight, not from my group members, but from myself. It felt heavy and that I was too vulnerable. I think I’ll turn this into a vignette.

And so, for our next session, I wrote the following:

I continue to reflect upon all of the work I have done within the district and my own classroom to advocate for queer and all minoritized youth: I ran or participated in the Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) whenever I was in a school that had one; pride flags and gender-affirming posters were in my classrooms; I interrogated gender roles and norms in my History and English classes; and students knew not to use derogatory terms in my room. Yet, I didn’t come out to them, and no student ever asked, although some did come out to me. Honestly, I felt like I never had to come out, and part of me still feels that way. Some moments I may feel like I want to exclaim my queerness. Other moments I want to walk in and let my presentation speak for itself. I feel there is power in this. I don’t think of this as “hiding.” I don’t feel the need to exclaim an identity, some scholars suggest I shouldn’t anyway, but I will always defend and advocate for queer people. Is this enough? Do the ghosts of the closet from the 80’s and 90’s keep me from being as visible as I might be? Has not being “out” in the classroom shielded me from backlash from parents, and has this led to my sense of belonging in rural schools? Lastly, should I feel shame about this? Because I do. Haven’t we internalized enough shame? There is always work for the queer to do, to free oneself (to deterritorialize) from a tightly wound web of shame.

I also shared a second vignette where I would begin to question my stance on this subject. This was informed by what I was now seeing in the schools I was substituting in:

I’ve been out of the school for a few years now but due to the Covid pandemic I returned to my hometown and decided that I should put my name on the substitute list. There have been some changes since 2016. I couldn’t help but smile when I saw pride posters and the pride and

trans flag hanging in the school common areas. I know they do not show a complete picture, that they can be symbols of diversity that are just that, symbolic but not actual representations of queer acceptance. However, in one class, a group of students were sitting near the front wearing board GSA clothing and I thought, "How wonderful!" As I walked by, one of the students said to me, "I'm wondering what your pronouns are? I can't really tell by looking at you!" I said to the student, "It's he/him, and thank you so much for asking me!" I didn't ask what their pronouns were because I wasn't sure if I should, or what might be the repercussions if I did. But I felt joy in that moment that the student felt they could ask me, and I also felt joy that I was in a sense, unreadable, undiscernible, but still very queer and the kids knew it. I don't know, maybe in 2023, if I return to the classroom, maybe I'd want to be more visible for kids like these ones. Maybe I'd still feel that just my presence in the building has a queering effect. To be continued.

In my first vignette, I am both defending and questioning my stance on imperceptibility. I do think there is something powerful about letting both my queer activism and queer presentation within the classroom stand without feeling the need to proclaim to students that I am queer. However, I also think it is important to question my reasoning for doing so, and thus, I do ask if whether it is residual shame, or the fear of parents, that keeps me from being "out." I reflect upon how this brings me shame, and if it brings me shame, and I feel that I am an activist teacher who is not in the closet, then what does this kind of thinking do to queer teachers who *are* in the closet and feel that they cannot be out at all?

For the second vignette, I am once again teetering between the idea of being "out" for the students — Should I really be "out" for anyone other than myself? — but again, the joy I feel by being imperceptible. It is clear in this vignette that being imperceptible does not mean that I am not recognized, my queerness is still seen by the student who asks me what my pronouns are. It also must be noted how the student feels safe to ask me about my pronouns, and that, perhaps, this particular classroom, or school assemblage, is more conducive to having these open conversations than ones that I had been teaching in 5 years ago, evidenced by more queer content in the hallways and the board-distributed GSA clothing.

Our fifth to seventh sessions together all happened to coincide in June, which is Pride month. For our fifth session we write about the ways in which we feel celebrated or validated within our schools. Two participants share how their boards are mandating a Pride week at their schools and how validating this is for them as queer educators. In our next session, three of us, including myself, stand up to show each other the Pride shirts we just happened to be wearing, and I share the following vignette:

There have been many changes in society since I was a child and teenager in this rural community. As I walk into this new high school that is situated on the grounds where the former decrepit and fading one sat, I do not recognize it. The only tell-tale signs that existed is some of the landscaping: the playing field and the grassy area on the side of the building where the kids sit, where my friends and I sat some 25 years ago. Back then there was complete silence about queerness, about who I was. There was no Pride in the hallways, there were no lessons about queerness in the classrooms, there really was nothing that said to the children that it was ok to be queer, let alone, to let young people know that it was wonderful for them to be queer. That they were loved and lovable because of their queerness. But it's also not correct for me to say that there was only silence, because among the silent classrooms hung the din of student voices exclaiming how wrong I was for simply existing, with their words and their looks and their actions. And the only thing to offset these voices, because mainstream media wasn't discussing

queer lives, at least in a positive way, was the cohort of misfits that I called friends, who shored me up, one of the many groups of friends throughout the years to do such a thing.

So, I cannot help but reflect upon how things have changed. I honestly never thought I would see the day where Pride events are celebrated in our rural schools, where rainbow flags are raised, and rainbow bags are given out. Yesterday, I was pleasantly surprised when the GSA advisor came up to me and said that the human rights coordinator of the board (who is my friend) sent a GSA Pride shirt to the school for me to wear. She told me that the GSA would be holding Pride activities on Friday and the advisors were wearing their shirts. I told her that if I substitute, I will wear mine also.

So, I see progress. At the same time, I heard scoffing and saw eyes rolling from students when discussions of Pride arose, and I know that we mustn't create a picture of the experiences of queer students as all unicorns and rainbows. Because I know what those eye rolls mean, and what is likely said when the teachers aren't around. It's a new building, but it comes with old echoes. I want queer kids to feel safe in their environments and to believe that they are good. I want them to know there are possibilities for them to create queer futures in the rural or wherever they want to go. I hope I'm working Friday so I can wear my pride shirt.

Unfortunately, I was not working on Friday. I was then asked to work the next Tuesday and I debated wearing the Pride shirt. I thought about it for some time, and felt I just was not sure if I wanted to, unsure if I knew enough about the school climate to center myself out. So, I went the next day and did not wear it. However, a number of students in the first class I taught had Pride fans that someone had picked up at the store, and I thought to myself, "Well, I should have worn my shirt!" I was asked to go in the next day, and I decided to wear it. I was nervous because I really had not expressed this overt queerness before in a school. The first thing the Administration said to me when I went in was, "Nice shirt!" and then when I taught the students with the pride fans, they all commented how much they liked my shirt, as well. Another student talked with me about how she planned the "Pride Day" the Friday before. I received no negative feedback from anyone. I came home feeling that the students who it might have benefited to see me in the shirt saw me. I just wonder if I would have worn it if it were not for the assemblage of the writing group, Pride month, and the combination of students who also had pride paraphernalia? I was also waiting for someone to ask me if I was queer, but again no one did, and I didn't volunteer it. I still didn't feel like I had to.

The discussion with the students suggests that wearing the shirt produced a positive affect in the school environment, and perhaps, along with the students' Pride materials, contributed to a deterritorializing of the school space.

Where does this leave me? I'm now back at the University where I do not have to think about being out in the public school system. As I walk down these city streets, I still love being imperceptible, that people might look at me and wonder, "Who is this person?" I still want to take the pressure off other queer folx who cannot or do not want to be out. I want to remove the shame that continually reterritorializes us. Can this work be done with only exclamations of "outness," or can many imperceptible "bodies without organs" filled with nothing but intensities and possibilities, free of labels, do the same work? Still, to be continued.

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Growing Up and Into Excess: A Historical and Auto-Ethnographic Investigation into the Gendered, Sexualized, and Racialized Nature of Fat Embodiment

Isabel Padalecki

ispadalecki@davidson.edu, isabelpadalecki@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay explores the radical potentials of fat autoethnography. I survey central Fat Studies research and my experiences as a fat, white, lesbian, trans scholar, asking: What is fat stigma? How have Fat Studies scholars and fat activists challenged notions of fat abjection and normative notions of embodiment? How do experiences of resistance, oppression, and personhood at the intersections of fatness and queerness contribute to a radical re-scripting of biopolitical understandings of embodiment? Using auto-ethnography, I participate in Fat Studies' goal of reorienting the production of fat knowledge away from medicalization and towards the imaginations of fat people, manifesting a discursive space in which we can reimagine fat and queer lives as full, complex, and worth living.

Keywords

Fat Studies, queer theory, lesbian history, fat history, personal narrative, childhood

I. “Fat Studies”—What is That?”

This is the first thing my mother said to me after I told her I was writing a literature review of the field of Fat Studies. I don't consider my mom a radical fat liberationist but given her position as a genetic researcher of “obesity,” I expected her to have some idea of what I was speaking about. I responded: “Fat Studies. You know, the study of the politics of body size, fat discrimination...that kind of stuff.” It wasn't the most sophisticated definition, as I had just started to chip away at my long Fat Studies bibliography, but this was all I could offer as I backed out of my apartment parking lot, to rush to a dental appointment.

I'd like to think that maybe I was aware, even then, of how radical, transformative, and groundbreaking Fat Studies is/was/will always be. Maybe I had just convinced myself that my mom wasn't ready to receive that message. Maybe I feared my voice would shake, or that I wouldn't know the exact words to relay the importance of this field. Maybe I was scared to admit that, using the analytical lens Fat Studies was providing me, I was starting to interrogate my childhood participation in the generational trauma of starving so as to avoid death by “obesity.”

I guess I could have told her all of this, but she probably wouldn't have heard me. She has spent far too many years producing the literature in genomics that has been using the authority of scientific studies and journal articles to tether “obesity” to death since the 1990s. I remember having many distant yet significant encounters with this research in my heavily-carpeted childhood home, especially after my mom picked me up from elementary school on Fridays. While I would do my math homework at the wooden kitchen table, swinging my legs that didn't quite touch the ground, I would listen distractedly as my mom's conference calls echoed throughout the house. The word “comorbidity,” always followed closely by “obesity,”

always caught my attention. I had no idea what this word meant, but when I heard it, I always paused. I would put my pencil down, my brow would crease off-center (it still does), and for a moment, I would take a break from homework and visualize death. Sitting at that creaky kitchen table, I imagined my pre-teen body in a grotesque state of decay. I feared, vividly, my premature oblivion. As I grew up and into my fatness, these images of annihilation became increasingly routine. It became easier to pick up the pencil and return to my work. I still can't explain comorbidity to you, reader, but I got the message: fat=death, and it's your job to survive.

Today, after spending nearly a year researching Fat Studies, I would answer my mom's question ("Fat Studies"--what is that?") by saying that this field provides a counter-literature to the "obesity epidemic" she participates in through her research on the genetic factors contributing to "obesity." I would tell her that fat bodies have always existed, but that fat hatred has not. I would further implore her to see that this fat hatred is just one aspect of a broad system of biopolitical bodily categorizations intended to separate the civilized and worthy from the "others." I would teach her what Fat Studies scholars have taught me: that fatphobia and ableism and cisheterosexism and anti-Blackness were all co-constructed alongside the settler-colonial United States, and that the contemporary "obesity" epidemic is just the most modern and sophisticated reiteration of classic American fat hatred.¹

To help her untangle her own investment in the "obesity" epidemic, I would ask that my mom consider this so-called epidemic, which she feels so motivated and empowered to help resolve, in the context of the profit-hungry medical-industrial-complex and the multi-billion dollar diet and weight loss industries.² I would assure her that I know she so deeply believes the work she is doing will provide people with longer, happier, and healthier lives by identifying the genetic causes of "obesity," but that I now know this tragically earnest belief in the capacity of science to cure what we call "obesity" to be one of many systemic and diffuse mechanisms through which broad imperatives of fat hatred operate. I would try, desperately, to help her see that she is participating in the fat oppression and stigma she and I both faced as we grew up and into our excess. Given that these statements reframe her scientific work, I would not expect her to believe me outright, so I would also take the time to communicate several evidence-based points about the historical development of our fatphobic reality.

First, many Fat Studies scholars have examined the historical meanings of fat, and investigated the extent to which it is always, already implicated in all historical forms of body regulation, normalization, and marginalization. Sabrina Strings specifically discusses how fatness was used as a signifier of Blackness during the era of chattel slavery. During this era, white supremacist elites used fat hatred to reify the biological racism they used to justify the enslavement of Black people. They mobilized fatness as a tool to distinguish white people from supposedly-fatter Black people, thereby construing fatness as evidence of Black inferiority. By claiming that fatness and Blackness coexisted in uncivilized, inferior, and dehumanized bodies, white colonizers used warped scientific logics of embodiment to claim ownership of human beings. Fatphobia is always, already anti-Black.³

Second, emergent medical and diet industries and the media worked to reify this fat hatred during the 1920s. They used medical publications and advertisements to portray fat bodies as uncivilized, immoral, gluttonous, and unable to handle the abundance of modern society. The diet industry in particular rapidly gained power, influence, and wealth during the early twentieth century. Additionally, newly-elevated fatphobic media representations also allowed the United States to continue -- and strengthen -- its persistent goal of enacting and justifying the embodied and biological hierarchization of human beings. The villainization of fatness in advertisements

and articles made fat hatred into a common object of discrimination and disgust, by positioning the fat body as the enemy of an emergent modern society. Together, the state, the medical industry, and the diet industry concretized a death-imperative for fat subjects and worked to reproduce and profit from the idea that some bodies are inherently aberrant and unruly. In so doing, these authorities buttressed their power to regulate, categorize, and pathologize our bodies according to various social binaries that separate ideal, normative lives from the death-worlds of their abject counterparts. Fatphobia is always, already, a necropolitical project through which political and economic authorities have sought to “[control] mortality” and to “define life” in relation to “manifestations of power” and ideas of embodied normativity.⁴

Third, around the turn of the twenty-first century, the government, mass media, and diet industries collaborated to re-center fat hatred within public discourse so as to generate a profitable increase of weight-related medical anxiety and fat shame. A growing number of scientific researchers created the fear-inducing language of the “obesity” epidemic, which deemed fat people diseased and lazy threats to the health of the nation. In *The Obesity Myth*, Paul Campos provides an overview of the sensationalized scientific literature and media publications that emerged to construct “obesity” as a national public health crisis during this era.⁵ Campos reviews several scientific papers published between the years of 1999 and 2005, all of which emphasized links between fatness and poor health and bolstered the construction of “obesity” as a national crisis meriting urgent response. These studies, primarily published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, received extensive media coverage and contributed to a culture that associated fat with poor health, fear, and death, despite that they were based on scientifically irresponsible data analysis.⁶

Meanwhile, a small minority began questioning whether this increased critique of fatness as an unhealthy and undesirable state could be more accurately termed a “moral panic,” rather than a true “public health crisis,” as Campos et al. framed it in 2006.⁷ Receiving infinitely more publicity, proponents of the “obesity epidemic” used the objective authority associated with medicalized notions of treatment to reinvigorate fat hatred and sensationalize the links between fatness and death. In doing so, they created a moral panic that at once imbued fatness with an unwillingness to contribute to healthy American futures and boosted diet-industry profits beyond what could have previously been imagined. Not content at re-emphasizing fat abjection, these authorities have become even greedier, and continue gradually and arbitrarily to expand the group of those subject to the label of “fat” and targeted by advertisements for diet pills and weight-loss surgery. In fact, according to Anna Kirkland, a 1998 lowering of the weight threshold one had to reach to be deemed “obese” “created millions of new fat people” overnight “simply by definitional fiat.”⁸ Anti-fatness is clearly far more political than it is scientific.⁹

Fat Studies scholars have exposed the fallacy of these scientific narratives that portray fat people as unwilling to choose normative, thin, and supposedly-healthy embodiment. They have shown that though the profit-hungry pundits behind these narratives appear as kind and intelligent helpers of the “obese,” these medicalized concerns construe their ultimate goal: to make money off of the eradication of fat people. Fat Studies scholars have proven that my mom’s deep and genuine belief that she was saving me when she put me on Weight Watchers in elementary school represents just one of many roles we play within this constructed, affective economy of fat hatred. I would tell her that within the context of the “obesity” epidemic, her motherly concerns had become fodder for industrial manipulation, mobilized in service of pursuing health through monetary participation in fat annihilation. Fat Studies provides a counter-literature against the pathologization and regulation of fat people justified and enacted

through these affective economies of anxiety and concern. This counter-literature affirms that despite the moral panic we have all been led to invest in, health is possible, and probable, at every size. *Fat Studies* demonstrates that it is fat discrimination that creates health risks that wouldn't otherwise exist, not fatness itself.¹⁰ *Fat Studies* rejects the "obesity" epidemic.

The first time I read Marilyn Wann's foreword to the 2009 *Fat Studies Reader*, I felt an especially strong urge to warn my mom that we cannot trust the fearful warning cries of "obesity epidemic" that had motivated her to study the science of obesity and prescribe me restrictive diets throughout my childhood. I wanted to tell her that she and her fellow medical authorities, who she so desperately believed were working to find fat-genes and solve the problem of intergenerational "obesity," have both failed to address and actively reinforced societal fat discrimination. These "obesity" experts, then, create the very conditions of fat suffering they aspire to reduce. Today, I would ask my mom to question her continued belief in the urgent need to address this "epidemic." I would ask her to look around, and to see that the pathologization of fatness has not actually made fat people healthier or skinnier; it has, instead, made fat people into subjects of heightened state and interpersonal surveillance, regulation, and deadly weight-loss technologies. Today, I desperately want my mom to realize that the miserable and extreme diets and surgeries prescribed each day to cure "obesity" have never truly worked. All they have done is disappear fat people as if their lives never mattered at all.¹¹

Today, I would ask that my mom try to understand that the sympathetic notions of curing the poor fat subject which she has internalized ultimately obscure a deadly desire to eviscerate fatness once its biological origin is revealed. Though it would take a massive burst of courage, I would tell her *Fat Studies* scholars have shown me this dark truth underlying the work she has come to know as benevolent. I would tell her that there is no real difference between locating and marking for "treatment" genes associated with fatness and a eugenic drive to imagine (and attempt to create) a world without fat people. I want to tell her what Marilyn Wann told me: that "with no giant pile of dead fat bodies, death threats about fatness sound like wishful thinking."¹²

When I read these words, I pictured myself as one of many dead, fat bodies, piled atop one another as if none of us were ever people at all. I pictured politicians in crisp black suits and doctors in their stark white lab coats laughing as they watched us decompose. I wondered if they'd miss the money they had made off of our misery, or if even that wasn't enough to give our lives value in their fatphobic death cult. This distressing image, however, quickly dissolved into a kind of unsettling recognition. I had seen this before. On this instance of remembering, I experienced a potent sense of nostalgia--one in which this bloody scene took on the exact shade of the red floral carpet that adorned the stairs in the house where I learned to fear my fat body.

Today, I would tell my mom that the proliferating web of proposed cures for the supposedly deadly state of "obesity" is really, then, a tool of biopolitical power. I would teach her what Michel Foucault taught me about biopower: that the state and its corporate partners control us at the level of the body and in a way that is decentralized and produces us as subjects. They "[exert] a positive influence on" life itself and endeavor to "administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations."¹³ I would tell her that this biopower allows the fatphobic, neoliberal state "to foster life or disallow it to the point of death," and make the body a site of regulation.¹⁴

Today, I would tell my mom that the medicalized associations of fatness with unhealthy abnormality and the subsequent prescription of deadly medical interventions are clear manifestations of biopower. I would emphasize that the only acceptable, good, or cooperative fat people within this biopolitical system of exchanges are those who accept these self-administered

forms of self-annihilation in the name of idealized “life.” I would urge her that the label of “good” fat person, one both she and I have desired, is really just a social pat-on-the-back for those who internalize fatphobic imperatives until they are no longer fat subjects at all.¹⁵ The good fatty, then, doesn’t even exist, because the good fatty must starve and undergo bariatric surgery and eliminate their fatness even if they have to eviscerate their body entirely to do so. As Stacey Bias told us in 2014, “there is no better fatty than a dead one.”¹⁶ Today I would tell my mom that Fat Studies scholarship converges on a rejection of this necrotizing logic, arguing, in the words of Marilyn Wann, that there is no way to “hate” fat people “for [their] own good.”¹⁷

I think a lot about how often I have been coerced into hating myself for my own good, especially throughout the many years during which my parents put me on the Weight Watchers diet. I cycled on and off “the program” between the ages of eleven to fourteen, but even today I can still feel the skin of that little leather journal where I counted my 1,100 calories per day. To this day I feel a sick, involuntary pleasure when I think about those hunger pains. They were my unwilling price paid towards the affirmation that comes with being recognized as a good, disappearing fat person. They seemed almost worth it when my mom would smile and congratulate me for my efforts at our weekly weigh-ins. I think about my small hands shaking as I wrote out the “point” value next to my 100-calorie bag of baked Lays, desperately hungry for more, and I’m reminded of a quotation from Cat Pause and Sonya Renee Taylor in 2021:

The fat body becomes a project of individual failure that hampers the ultimate aspirations [...] productivity and profit [...] under neoliberalism, notions of health are inseparable from morality and virtue, rendering the fat body an amoral body and [...] encouraging citizens to self-police the body as a means of performing “good citizenship.”¹⁸

When I first read this quote, discomfort twisted in my chest. Having just begun the process of addressing my childhood encounters with enforced starvation, I had started to make peace with the external violence enacted upon me as a recipient of the generational trauma of fat hatred. After reading this quotation, however, I felt a shift in the tenuous grasp I’d crafted to make sense of my personal history. Reading about the neoliberal world we inhabit, I learned the hard truth dictated by Hannele Harunjen: “in a culture where neoliberal governmentality reigns, there is no need to coerce or discipline people, because people discipline themselves” without the imposition of an external punishing agent.¹⁹ I was forced, very abruptly, to recognize that I have and continue to do fat hatred to myself. With each recurrence of restrictive eating and each look of disdain I hold for private moments in the mirror, I rehearse the drama of fat self-hatred. I allow myself to ask the painful questions that cannot be answered: What if I had kept counting calories? Would I have become thin? Should I have become thin? What if mom was right, and I’m killing myself each day I dare to exist in all of my excess flesh?

It feels nearly unthinkable to admit that nobody had to physically force me to choose apple slices over fries with my happy meals all of those years, despite the intense yearning I felt for the delicious joy of fried goodness. Though I am certainly not responsible for vast and societal histories of fat hatred, I have been complicit in my own oppression. I have signed on the dotted line for my own evisceration. I did so even at eleven years old, when I decided to choose the hunger of good citizenship over the isolated death world of “obesity.” I try not to be overly critical with my younger self, and to recognize that this version of me took the pain as the only viable path out of the inherent inadequacy I had learned to associate with my fatness. I accepted the terms of exchange, convinced that if I starved and became thin, I would receive love, affection, and attention from my peers. Maybe someone would want to play with me at recess or

even spread rumors that someone had a crush on me--something I did not think possible in a body I'd learned to regard as undesirable. Maybe I would no longer have to be the quiet fat girl who didn't dare take up more space than her excess flesh already demanded.

Under the coercive influence of fatphobia, I made my choice, and I've continued to make it periodically throughout my life every time I have decided to be "healthy" again. I'm hoping it won't happen again, but it's hard to trust a self I have come to know through discourses that position fatness as a pathological, temporary, and incomplete way of existing. Despite this, I will go forward trying to be gentle with myself. At eleven years old, I did not yet know about Fat Studies, or that I could access a fat identity that said "fuck you" to the moralization of health. I'm thankful to have since learned about this alternative, but sometimes I fear I still straddle the boundary that demarcates that other world, where "obesity" reigns.

Today I would tell my mom that Fat Studies has taught me that, although we have been coerced to desire our own evisceration, fat people have always, and will always, exist and thrive. I would ask her: Why is it radical to say that human weight diversity is simply a fact, and that fat people can and have been happy and healthy and fat? I would remind her that the extent to which fat hatred has permeated the collective US worldview does not indicate that such fat hatred is justified or based on the truth that fat is an inherently inferior or unpleasant mode of living. Rather, it indicates how insidiously we have all been led, from the doctor's office to the weight-loss clinic, to internalize politicized fat hatred and a desire for thin future worlds.

Today I would underscore the most basic aim of Fat Studies scholarship: to discover who is oppressed, and how, by a stigmatizing and fatphobic medicalized gaze, as well as who benefits from this stigmatization. I would tell my mom that Fat Studies asks us to question why and how medical authorities — the researchers, physicians, and corporations invested in ending "obesity" — have obtained the authority to create knowledge about fat people. I would tell her that this skewed preference for a thin-centric standpoint creates a hierarchy that places fat people in a disempowered "other" position; we can't even speak for ourselves!²⁰ Unlike the science of "obesity," Fat Studies recognizes us as self-empowered and autonomous fat people who can speak on our own behalf, and works to relocate the production of knowledge about fatness from the politically-charged medical establishment to the lives of fat people. Turning away from fantasies that our bodies contain objective biological markers through which we can be neatly categorized and known and controlled, Fat Studies asks us as fat people to articulate the complex, embodied ways in which we experience the worlds we inhabit. Fat Studies asks us, not doctors or media personalities, how we as fat people can transform the world in celebration of fatness, rather than in aversion to it.²¹

Today, I would confirm what I imagine my mom might already suspect - that Fat Studies is directly hostile to the fatphobic, medicalized world around us. I would tell my mom that Fat Studies seeks not only to describe fat oppression, but also, in the words of Marilyn Wann, to "move that obstacle from our shared path."²² I would tell her that it has produced a politicized and revolutionary range of texts forged by and for fat people and invested in eradicating the fat hatred, stigma, and oppression that we face in our everyday lives. I would tell her that Fat Studies is interested in changing the world, not fat people, and that this is non-negotiable.²³

This might be a bit much for our first discussion on Fat Studies, but I would also like to tell my mom that Fat Studies scholars ask us not only to stop hating fat people, but also to rethink the entire logic by which we define, quantify, and categorize bodies in relation to a singular norm. I would tell her what Cat Pause, Jackie Wyes, and Samantha Murray, told me: that "non-normative bodies challenge--that is to say, queer--the disciplinary power of normative

categories.”²⁴ Fat Studies rejects wholeheartedly all notions of embodied selfhood that force us to know ourselves only in relation to categorical binaries that position one as either fully human or an abject, non-human, excessive other. In elevating the voices and experiences of fat people, Fat Studies upsets the idea that bodies that are thin, cisgender, white, abled, and therefore recognized as normative, are the only bodies that matter.²⁵ Fat Studies scholars like Dylan Vade and Sondra Solovay ask us to consider:

Every person is different. We move differently, work differently, dress differently, express gender differently. What if difference were the given? And what if bodies were a given? We all have bodies.²⁶

Today, I would ask my mom to imagine a world in which bodies that refuse to be made legible within binaries between the normative and the abject could be recognized as resistantly and inevitably present, and as bodies that will always matter. I would ask her to consider what it might mean to recognize the fat, abject life as valuable and worth living, even outside of normative and legible notions of embodiment. Maybe she would ruminate with me and Judith Butler on the destabilizing power of fluid fat embodiment and imagine the abundance of fat flesh as physically blurring the biological lines typically understood to demarcate binary-sexed bodies. Together, we could ask: How do complex and autonomous experiences of fat embodiment “force a radical re-articulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as ‘life,’ lives worth living, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?”²⁷ I hope that together we could recognize that fat lives, including my own, are important and worth living.

Today, I would make sure to assure my mom that even given these shared theories and perspectives, Fat Studies comes from a diverse range of scholarly fields, activists, scholars, and people who are fat and have something to say about it. I would tell her that fatness has an activist history older than either of us. I would tell her that even before she was born in 1970, there were radicals in the United States who were willing to put their bodies on the line to call attention to and unravel the threads of fat oppression that have long pervaded fat American life.²⁸ I would detail for her the many voices I have encountered in my Fat Studies research, including those of anthropologists, historians, biomedical researchers, poets, lawyers, activists, and many fat people ready to “throw their weight around” towards a revolutionary field of inquiry.

“Throwing their weight around.”²⁹ I’ve thought about this phrase almost daily since I first encountered it in the GLBT Historical Society Archives in San Francisco in July of 2021. While in San Francisco, I explored the “Judy Freespirit Papers” collection and learned about many fat activists of the past, including Judy Freespirit. Freespirit was a prolific fat feminist given her role as one of the founders of the Los Angeles-based feminist fat liberation collective, The Fat Underground, which thrived in the 1970s and 1980s. I carried this phrase with me every day I visited that archive, eager to learn more about the fat histories I had never known to look for.

Sometimes, I wonder if writing autoethnography counts as throwing my weight around. I tell myself, however, in these moments of doubt, that there is no singular metric for doing the work of fat liberation. I remind myself that every second of this work is vulnerable, and that it is terrifying to render oneself in such detail in a document whose final destinations I cannot fully predict. It is not easy to reveal myself to you, reader, but committing to Fat Studies means articulating a world by and for fat people and telling even the most painful aspects of our complex fat stories.

Last week, I drove to the dentist again and laughed when I thought about how long it would take me to say all of this. That really would be an awful lot to get through on the way to the dentist. Given my time restraints, I might have to shorten my message. Above all, I know that

today, I would tell my mom that fundamentally Fat Studies asks us to consider the multiplicity of what it means to be fat beyond what the “obesity” expert has to say. I’d tell her that there is room for her in the discursive world where fat doesn’t have to be a death sentence and starvation isn’t our only salvation. I would tell her that I want her to come with me. I want you to come with me, too, reader. I’ll keep throwing my weight around as long as you’re willing to listen.

II. How did Fat Studies come into existence?

As I began my research on Fat Studies, I frequently found myself wondering exactly how a field that challenges the authority of medicine and threatens a stigma broadly considered acceptable ever came into existence. I wondered: what conditions predated this field that had touched me so profoundly? How did such a radical field of inquiry take root within the system of colleges and universities responsible for producing medicalized research on “obesity”?

As I read Fat Studies texts, I learned that the history of Fat Studies cannot be evaluated only from within the walls of the academy. As I began to learn about histories of fat identity in the United States, I encountered an entire world of fat activism that I had never heard of before. I found vast histories of fat theory, thought, solidarity, and liberationist efforts that I had never, in my entire time as an undergraduate student, even remotely imagined. This activist history, as it was portrayed in Fat Studies texts, seemed to be mostly concentrated in urban areas in the United States during the late twentieth century: the era of social revolutions that scholars have written about extensively and yet is rarely constructed as an era of fat revolution.³⁰

I vividly remember my first encounter with fat activism in the summer of 2021, when I read Charlotte Cooper’s 2016 *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*. On a Tuesday afternoon, I sat down in the silence of the basement of E.H. Little Library, hoping I could skim at least two chapters before I had to make the mile-long trek home. Once I began reading, however, I could not stop. I devoured the detailed pictures Cooper painted of a vast array of historical efforts for fat liberation that predated my birth by decades, and I experienced a frenzied state between excitement and anxiety. How have I gone so long as a fat lesbian without even realizing that such volumes of fat activism had existed? Where has it gone?

Several weeks later, I found myself booking last-minute plane tickets to San Francisco to view the archived personal papers and effects of Judy Freespirit, a founding member of the fat liberation movement and the Fat Underground.³¹ I winced at the last-minute flight costs but did not hesitate; something within me felt drawn to these archives. I wondered if, when I stepped onto the California soil, I’d feel a sense of history or a sudden wholeness knowing that I was moving increasingly closer to a proud fat lineage I had always longed for without the language to articulate such a desire. Though Judy Freespirit died in 2010, it felt like I was heading towards my first encounter with a distant relative -- someone to whom I was connected despite the uncrossable barrier of time between us. I imagined, somehow, that she wanted me to witness the work she did to claim that fat people, and especially fat lesbians, deserved to be free.

A majority of Fat Studies scholarship acknowledges openly that many foundational theorizations of fatness and fat oppression would not exist were it not for the radical fat activists who utilized their lived experiences of fat embodiment and oppression to craft theories outside of the academy.³² These activists authored texts that valued accessibility above all else and attempted to convince a diverse range of fat people that they were not, in fact, unworthy of love, care, and pride. Fat activists, including members of the Fat Underground, boldly disrupted dozens of Weight Watchers instructional meetings and conferences on the science of “obesity;” they used direct action to craft and enact theories of fat liberation. Their willingness to challenge

the misogynistic and medicalized oppression of fat women in particular created the foundations of fat resistance and agency upon which Fat Studies was built.³³

As I read these documents in the basement reading room of the GLBT Historical Society Museum and Archives, I often had to pause to unstick my legs from the old leather chairs at the shared table. On my last day in the archives, the weather was mild, but the reading room was especially warm, and filled with other fat, queer researchers. We didn't often speak, as we all shared a common understanding of the urgency that comes with trying to stuff as much analysis into the archive's open reading hours as humanly possible. Nevertheless, we shared the warm air and the spark of interest we chased as we sifted through decades of queer history.

I occasionally felt the eyes of my fellow researchers glancing over my shoulder as I sat on that leather chair, which I eventually shuffled towards a corner of the room to watch VHS tapes of the original members of the Fat Underground. I took frantic notes, trying to remember every detail of how these women developed and acted upon their beliefs as an emergent activist coalition of fat, queer, and radically-oriented fat liberationists. One of the original members of the organization spoke specifically of the work they did to disrupt diet culture as it progressed and indoctrinated those around them in real-time. She spoke of how she and her fat activist friends would attend Weight Watchers instructional meetings and pretend to join the program, only to disrupt these gatherings by asking the meeting leader pointed questions about the diet industry and its complete lack of success in creating a thinner world.

At this point, I could not help but cease my rapid typing. The memories flooded my mind as I recalled encounters with the spaces of fat hatred these women disrupted. I gave myself a moment to close my eyes as they spoke. I visualized the direct action as they described it to me, and watched within as my memories of being subjected to cultures of diets and starvation mingled with a counterfactual imaginary world in which I could, somehow, encounter these activists in my personal history. I pictured them barging into the small, crowded space of the Weight Watchers meeting space I visited each Wednesday night as a young child. I pictured them slipping into the meeting area undetected while like cattle the rest of us were led to be weighed one by one, either congratulated or consoled based on the minuscule changes in our body weight. I saw a younger version of Isabel taking her seat in the back of the meeting room and claiming a plastic chair that creaked under the weight of her excess. I felt sick as I remembered my childlike eagerness to participate in the weekly hour-long discussion of how hard we were all working to adopt starvation as a means to rid the earth of our kind.

On this instance of remembering, I wondered if members of the Fat Underground would have dared boldly to take up space in my Weight Watchers meeting, had the organization still existed in 2011. I wondered what it might have felt like at that age, to encounter fat people with no interest in becoming thin. I watched, through the lens of my speculative musing, as they raised their hands to ask a question, taunting the "success-story" thin meeting leader. I listened closely as they cited study after study that proved that we were all wasting our money on a billion-dollar diet industry that had no interest in nor capacity to cure us, only a desire to make us so self-loathing we would pay them for an empty promise of forced, miserable, and starving conformity. I urged my 11-year-old past self to pay attention as they mocked this ritual of hunger and questioned the so-called expert put in place to guide us to thin futures that would never exist.

In the space of the archival reading room, I felt a sense of connection to and solidarity with the women on that decades-old VHS tape, even though our union was only imaginary. I took a small, bittersweet comfort in knowing that at least in some alternate iteration of this fucked-up reality, I could imagine myself unmarred by the oppressive wounds of growing up fat.

I could imagine my younger self gleefully rising within the Weight Watchers meeting space, throwing my weight tracking booklet in the trash and storming out alongside my imaginary historical friends. I could imagine, for one sweet moment, that this was the last day I ever chose the visceral pain of hunger to pursue thin acceptance.

When I opened my eyes, I felt a sudden and intense desire to cry, all because of how desperately I yearned for this counter-historical musing to be real. I wanted so badly to jump into the VHS tape, join them, and experience a sense of fat solidarity that I now realized I had never even come close to in my life. I wished, with a sense of fierce protectiveness over my younger self, that I had learned about fat liberation before I learned, with frightening precision, to eviscerate my own flesh. Regardless of this pain, I hold onto this moment of archival connection in the present and return to it often; I remember it fondly whenever I feel my thighs stick to my leather couch in the North Carolina summer heat. I hold onto this moment because, regardless of the loneliness I felt upon returning to reality, within this imaginary, impossible, and joyful moment I shared with fat liberationists of the past, I was able to imagine myself to be free.

In recognizing fat liberationist activists as theoretical contributors and knowledge producers outside of the academy, Fat Studies as a field creates an academic environment inclusive of knowledge produced both within and outside of academic institutions. The fact that both tenured professors and a wide range of folks from outside of the academy--including plus-size models like Leah Vernon, activists like Judy Freespirit, and journalists like Virgie Tovar--are valuable contributors to Fat Studies demonstrates that this field spans the entirety of society in search of knowledge regarding fat embodiment.³⁴ By claiming a history that is built upon and inherently indebted to the work of activists outside of the academy, Fat Studies scholars engage in knowledge production at the intersection of activism and academic research. Fat Studies, then, threatens existing hierarchies that place knowledge produced in the university above and apart from all else; their work exists within the academy and in tension with it.

III. What exactly is the history of fat activism? Does fat have a history?

After my trip to San Francisco, my interest in fat history only grew. I had never before allowed myself to imagine fat ancestors and histories that I could claim. Nonetheless, I also realized that learning about and constructing fat histories is a complex and difficult task. Despite the fact that so many foundational Fat Studies scholars credit fat activists as the earliest theorists of fat liberation, fat activism has barely been historicized.³⁵ It is difficult to find research about fat activism and its history because these histories cannot be examined through organized repositories and lack the decades of publications that inform other historical inquiries.

In part due to the extent to which fat people remain oppressed well into the twenty-first century, histories of fat resistance aren't offered to us as easily traceable and coherent histories and lineages. Outside of the world of Fat Studies, fat people are not still rarely recognized as a historically oppressed and politicized group; because of this, it is hard to imagine the collective historical existence of fatness as an identity category.³⁶ With no historical identity to grab onto, young fat people like myself go most of our lives without even knowing that groups like the Fat Underground existed. I didn't even know there was such a thing as fat history, let alone rich histories of fat activism, until I flew across the country and held it in my hands.

During my intense fifteen hours of archival review, I became increasingly aware that so many theories I had encountered within recent scholarly texts were even more indebted to fat activist histories than I had previously realized. As I read manifestos, position papers, fliers, and personal diary entries created by fat liberationists of the late twentieth century, I felt like I was

experiencing these theories for the first time all over again. I began to realize that the theories of embodiment, power, and politics I had uncovered in contemporary scholarly Fat Studies sources were continuations of conversations that started long ago. These conversations emerged not from the syllabus but from the airplane seat, the doctor's scale, and the heart-pounding feeling of seeing oneself labeled "morbidly obese." My archival experiences clarified that Fat Studies began with fat activism, and therefore began with and for fat people: it has always been a discourse articulated according to our relationship with the external world and with ourselves.

On my first day in the archives, I encountered a pink pamphlet of poetry, entitled *A Slim Volume of Fat Poems*. The pamphlet, published by Judy Freespirit in 1996, was dedicated to the Fat Underground. I enjoyed each poem and moved with Judy as she took me between many ways of thinking about fatness, from the silly to the sexual to the sorrowful. One poem, however, reached a source of unrecognized pain buried deep within me, at what seemed to be the core of myself. Every time I feel the familiar sadness of fat hatred tugging on me, I remember this poem viscerally, and I am struck by the profound extent to which it captures an internal truth I can barely stand to face. One stanza sticks out, and I repeat it over and over when it feels like there might be no escape from the darkness of social death. It reminds me that necropolitical theories of fatness are brutally real, drawn out through the daily experience of living in the abject realm of the fat Other. Speaking of her good friend and comrade, Lynn Mabel-Lois, Judy states:

Lynn said, *I'd like to die thin*
Even knowing all that I know,
Even knowing how dieting kills me,
I'd like to die thin.
*There isn't much to live for anyways.*³⁷

Scholarly theories of fatness as a state of social death were written plainly on the page before me; with neither peer review nor academic title, these words nevertheless spoke with the powerful authority of a fat person living in a society that positions fatness as a signifier of a life in which "there isn't much to live for." Theories that fat oppression positions us as abject, non-human, and death-bound beings who can only hope to eventually "die thin" did not have to be explained to me through theoretical framings. Rather, through sharing this vulnerable moment with Lynn and Judy, I recognized these theories as familiar truths. I realized that I had understood the necropolitical workings of anti-fatness since the first time my pediatrician warned me that I could be classified as "morbidly obese."

This poem, speaking with the authority of lived experience, demonstrates clearly and urgently the stakes of Fat Studies: this is life or death. Lynn's words, "I'd like to die thin," haunt me; I feel as though I carry it with me in every moment that I exist in my fat flesh. I do not think of this haunting as scary, though; the weight that I carry from witnessing such intimate encounters with these dark and difficult truths reminds me that even when speaking of thoughts of death, or recounting traumatic encounters with fat hatred, there is power and vitality in fat vulnerability. When I feel Lynn speaking to me of dying thin, I do not see her as not reifying the pathologized death worlds associated with fat life. Instead, she is reminding me that fat lives are complex, multiple, and shifting in each moment. The heavy weight of this poem reminds me of the theoretical power of fat vulnerability. It reminds me, in moments when I wonder if this auto-ethnographic research is just self-indulgent, or pointless, or depressing, of what Tidgwell et al. stated in 2018: that "fat lives," including my own, are "the most suitable place to begin."³⁸

My archival experience taught me with stunning clarity that the personal has always been political in the field of Fat Studies and is entwined in the very historical foundations of the field

itself. I learned that there is no way to research fundamental questions of embodiment, of selfhood, and of being, that would not implicate the shifting lens of self-identity.³⁹ I discovered that fat liberation and histories cannot exist without the personal: they cannot exist without conceptualizing fat embodiment from within the bodies and minds of fat people. I realized that personal narrative methods are not just enjoyable, but essential aspects of Fat Studies research.

Seeing this plain evidence of how deeply personal experiences of fat embodiment influenced the earliest theorizations of fat liberation and fat oppression convinced me of the absolute importance of elevating the self in Fat Studies research. As Corson and Schwitzman advise, my evaluation of Fat Studies texts in both the archives and the academy takes encounters with scholarly texts as intersubjective encounters with other human beings. Scholarly and archival Fat Studies texts, then, provide a point at which we encounter both the bare content of the source as well as its author.⁴⁰ As Fat Studies scholars and activists have argued, there is no way to cast aside this self to investigate fatness, no matter how much more comfortable it may be to detach and lean into the fiction of objectivity. The “self” is always and already present, and provides a source of knowledge and power that cannot and should not be obscured.

Often, I think back to the unexpected kinship I experienced as I engaged in this encounter with fat history. Somehow, I did not feel like a voyeur witnessing that which was meant to stay private; rather, I felt like a child uncovering a hidden, familial cast of elders who had been obscured by a world that understood the power and danger of fat solidarity, pleasure, love, and community.⁴¹ As I took the train from the archives to my hotel each day, I wondered if there was a chance that somehow I could penetrate the veil of time, and that somehow Judy Freespirit knew that I, a young, fat lesbian, would witness her life and understand that I was not alone. I’ll never forget holding fat history in my hands in that tiny reading room full of fat, trans, and queer people. This encounter reminded me of what Amy Farrell told me: fatness is always, already queer, trans, and dangerous in its capacity to “challenge” the idea [...] of the “civilized” body.”⁴²

Many Fat Studies scholars have recognized that fat histories and queer histories are interlaced and cannot be separated coherently into two piles of events and theories.⁴³ The fat activists I got to know through my archival research--those who theorized about fatness far before such a conversation entered the academy--refused to apologize for their fatness, their queerness, and the space they took up. Instead, in the words of Charlotte Cooper, they celebrated, theorized, and “established an analysis of fat oppression based on gender and radical lesbian identity [and] sought to question power.”⁴⁴ They laid the groundwork of defending the very personhood of those in fat, aberrant bodies, and without them, I would probably be writing about something else right now with a sinking feeling inside of me that something was missing.

On the plane ride home from California, I luckily sat in a window seat in an empty row. I watched across the airplane’s massive wing as the clouds gathered in billowy, undecipherable shapes. Though I was heading back to a night of post-vacation laundry, I felt only gratitude.

IV. If fat liberation began in the 1970s, then why aren’t we even a little bit free in 2021?

I remember asking myself this question often as I flipped through archival documents and felt years of struggles for liberation slip through my fingers. I wondered how the world where this had all occurred was the same in which, when I had dinner at my friend’s house in elementary school, I learned how to assess accurately the calorie count on my plate with an astoundingly low margin of error (watch out - there twenty calories in a tablespoon of ketchup!).

Sometimes when I’m feeling especially bitter about this world that condemns my very existence, I wish away histories of resistance. It’s too painful to think that if these women

couldn't liberate us, how could I or anyone else? Even after all of this time and research, sometimes it seems like self-love and fat acceptance, even within myself, might be impossible. Starvation and thin aspiration still beckon. Sometimes I feel like I'm a fraud because of their appeal. Can I call myself a fat liberationist, given these tensions I struggle to expose?

In Fat Studies literature, histories of fat activism are generally regarded with uncritical praise. Scholars like Marilyn Wann, alongside activists of the present, endorse fat activism as an important historical and contemporary site in which fatness was reimagined as a desirable mode of embodiment. In particular, fat historians paint fat activist histories as complex, and yet, for the most part, celebratory.⁴⁵ They ask us to look upon fat activists like Judy Freespirit and other members of movements for fat liberation throughout American history as foremothers--the first to theorize fat oppression and liberation in ways that served the needs of fat people.

Charlotte Cooper portrays these histories of fat activism as diverse, radical, and barely historicized. She describes the supposed founders of fat activism from the 1970s and 1980s as queer women who "set the standards for politically aware activism" and created counternarratives to those that would portray fat people as diseased and immoral.⁴⁶ Amy Farrell and Kathleen LeBesco share this orientation, as they discuss fat activist histories as liberatory spaces in which fat feminists reconceptualized fat embodiment as proud and rebellious.⁴⁷

Given the relative lack of literature regarding histories of fat agency and activism, it is not surprising that much of this scholarship aims primarily to describe, celebrate, and acknowledge these histories of fat pride and liberation. I still get a bit uneasy, sometimes, when I think about what it would mean to critically evaluate historical fat activist tactics and ideologies. I often ask: how can we even begin to critique fat activism when we've barely even gotten a chance to revel in it? How can we begin to point out discontinuities and tensions within histories of fat power when fat power is something that isn't even thinkable until you get that one-in-a-million chance to hold it in your hands and see its presence in the archive?

This largely celebratory historicization of fat activism is not universal. Samantha Murray, for example, has presented a critical account of historical fat pride perspectives--a viewpoint I did not even consider to be possible before reading her work.⁴⁸ Murray presents four major criticisms of the kind of fat pride politics that organizations like the Fat Underground constructed in the earliest days of American fat liberation activism:

1. The kind of fat pride that we encounter in American histories of fat activism locates social change at the level of the individual fat person, who is supposed easily to shed all remaining connections to pervasive narratives of fat hatred in exchange for fat pride.
2. Fat pride assumes a singular definition of fat identity that draws clear lines between who is "in" and who is "out," thereby leaving no space for complex relationships to fatness.
3. The idea that a person could simply change their mind about fatness reproduces the idea that there is a knowable internal self merely housed by our bodies. Murray reminds us that we are our bodies; we are not just housed by them.
4. Replacing a normative slender aesthetic with a new fat aesthetic does not deconstruct systems of visual categorization that construct bodies as revealing internal truths.

It wasn't until several months after my trip to San Francisco that I read Murray's work. I was not originally planning to heavily feature this text in my research; however, as I spent the hours between twelve and three in the morning skimming the text eagerly from the foot of my bed, I knew I had arrived at this scholarship needing the theories and vulnerabilities it contained. It seemed as though Samantha Murray and I got to know each other through this exchange, and she somehow understood a part of my fat subjectivity I had not yet fully recognized.

As I read Murray's monograph, I caught a glimpse of the small, quiet moments where she allowed her own life to slip into the academic theories she spun; where she narrated her own experiences as a fat woman living in a fatphobic world. I recognized, through her vulnerability, the extent to which the specter of self-love in a thin and starved body beckons to many fat adults who grew up as fat children. She allowed herself to say that despite every self-help text written to instruct us on how to shake the limits that teach us to despise our fat flesh, we have to reckon with the fact that we have all come to understand and know ourselves through discourses of personhood that position us as incomplete, pathological, and inadequate in our fatness. She reminds us of this by speaking from her own experience as a fat woman yearning for a sense of belonging amidst the rampant fatphobia of the contemporary world, stating:

Even as I loathe the discourses that position my fat flesh as pathological, and wish to change them, they constitute my very being, and my desire to belong.⁴⁹

I've spent so many nights unlearning, writing, and reflecting until my fingers ache from typing. I've read the *Fat Liberation Manifesto*, authored by founding members of the Fat Underground, at least a dozen times, and even held it in my hands. Yet today, if my mom's scientific research created a perfect anti-fat pill, I might just take it, and obliterate my flesh to feel accepted.

Murray made me feel less alone in this "failure" to be unambiguously and constantly proud of my fatness. She told me that if it was as simple as permanently changing one's mind and flipping the fat switch from hate to love, we would all have done it by now. Identity, normalization, and pathologization would have no bearing on us. If it were that simple, I wouldn't be haunted by the image of dying thin, which inspires both horror and desire. She told me I wasn't a bad activist because I hated fat hatred but also, sometimes, still hated my fat self. That these were the kind of complexities that fat activists who began the conversation of fat liberation didn't get a chance to articulate in their fight for the most basic human recognition.

Murray also reminded me that these fat liberationists in the stories I read in the archives weren't gods sent to free me. They were people who dared to argue for fat humanity in a world of fat abjection. So why should we expect perfection? Why should we gloss over their work with simple, celebratory remembrance? I agree with Murray that we owe them our critiques and complexities. We owe them the continuation of their work, as we expand our concept of fat identity, rather than regarding fat liberation as a forever incomplete project of the past.

Murray's critiques, however, are not universal. Charlotte Cooper has pushed back against her arguments and stated that Murray's points homogenize a diverse history of fat activism. Cooper does agree with Murray's arguments that fat identity is inherently complex, contingent, and ambiguous in ways not easily accommodated in many radical fat liberation spaces throughout American history. She does, however, contest Murray's claim that fat liberationist politics center an impossible, individual project of reorienting oneself towards fat pride:

Murray rejects the idea that self-accepting fat embodiment, by people who are within the system of exchanges she cites, could be anything but a charade.⁵⁰

Cooper further complicates our understanding of fat activist histories and pushes against Murray's insistence that changing one's mind about fatness from within an abjected fat body is impossible. She resists the idea that it is unthinkable to navigate beyond logics that position the body as a site of normalization, and asks us to consider alternative forms of fat identity beyond binaries that teach us to locate ourselves between a norm and its correlative aberration.

Cooper, then, positions us to aspire to radical self-love, despite the fact that we have learned to see ourselves as fat, abject, and not-fully-human.⁵¹ She offers a historical perspective on fat activism that is celebratory, not because she is surprised to find fat resistance in the

historical record, but because such recorded instances of fat love demonstrate the historical existence of that which is supposedly impossible. In Cooper's view, histories of fat liberation that push this notion of reimagining fatness in terms of joyful embodiment do not represent a charade. Rather, these histories show us that it has been, and is, possible to believe in fat pride.

I often think about the intimacy I felt while reading Judy Freespirit's personal journals in the archives. In an entry from May 12, 1981, Judy told me about her lover, Elana:

Elana [...] really loves how fat I am [...] before my body was accepted, tolerated, gotten used to - but never really loved. I feel full and satisfied and whole and centered.⁵²

I've had a hard time situating myself between Murray and Cooper. On one hand, I feel an affinity with Murray's struggles to access the unequivocal fat pride. Further, I understand Murray's work as containing a vital truth: that the project of theorizing fat liberation is never complete. She asserts that to undo fat hatred, we have to undo entire systems that have taught us to view our bodies as biological sites of categorization. In so doing she comforts me, and tells me that I cannot expect myself to single-handedly eschew this whole system of knowledge and power.

On the other hand, I keep going back to Judy and Elena, truly loving each other, within and because of their fatness, rather than in spite of it. I think about Judy sitting down to write this private confession. Why would she, in her private ruminations, fabricate fat love where it didn't exist? I can't help but believe her and yearn for what she shared with Elena. I want to believe that someday fat love and acceptance could find me, even though I have come to know myself through the lens of fat hatred, and in spite of the fact that my fatness is ambiguous and complex.

Some days it still feels as if I could only know myself in relation to authorities of normalization that make my body into an aberration. It feels like there's no easy way I can fully love myself. But some days it feels like fat love and pride are possible. It feels like fat love, shared between people like Judy and Elana, disproves all of my fears. It feels like Cooper might be right in saying that if we can yearn for it, imagine it, or locate it in fat histories, we can touch the kind of liberation fat activists like Judy and Elana created in their daily practices of fat love.

V. How am I supposed to conclude an autoethnographic literature review?

I have to admit something to you, reader: I am not sure how to conclude this work. I am also still afraid to show it to my family and friends. Despite this, I maintain firmly that there is immeasurable power in embracing fat vulnerability and speaking as fat people who are not on some linear trajectory towards some finalized or legibly-humanized versions of ourselves. There is power in all fat narratives, and especially those that recognize the nonlinear experience of seeking self-acceptance in a world where we come to know ourselves through fat hatred.

These narratives, including my own, do not accept fat hatred as inevitable, nor do they neutralize the pain of oppression. Rather, they ask what Cameron Awkward-Rich asks us: what happens when we take this pain not as an obstacle to a fulfilling life or liberatory sense of fatness, but as a mundane fact, as something we can live with and beside? What happens when we tell fat stories that accept the complexity and confusion of fat life? What happens when we write autoethnographic literature reviews that are impossible to finish and never whole?⁵³

I recently spoke with a friend of mine, Alyssa, about this conundrum. In response, she recited a poem to me over Chamomile tea:

I wouldn't mind being a rose [...]

Fear has not yet occurred to them, nor ambition [...]

Neither do they ask how long they must be roses, and then what.
Or any other foolish question.⁵⁴

We spoke about this poem for a long time, and experienced a spark of companionship with these words despite knowing little of their origin. It was the same spark I felt as I looked at photos of Judy Freespirit in her red velvet dress, and posing in the golden-hour sun on a warm night in 1981. She had much pain and oppression both behind and ahead of her in this photo, which I knew from the hundreds of personal diary entries of hers I have read. And yet, looking at her smiling in the sun, asking about the pain that would precede or follow such a moment seemed as foolish as asking the roses if, in their patch of sunshine, they ever yearned for wholeness.

At some point that night, Alyssa asked me a question I have turned over in my mind as I've struggled with this conclusion: "What's the point in being whole, anyway?" Reader, I need you to know that our wholeness, our ability to fit into the box of finalized, optimized, and normative humanity, is not what makes us important. Asking whether or not we are whole enough, human enough, or liberated enough, or whether our fat stories have some sort of final or complete meaning, are all foolish questions. These questions tether our value to our legibility and affirm the logic that associates fatness with incomplete personhood. Reader, I need you to know that the supposed finality and fullness of normative, thin embodiment is not what makes us beings and bodies that matter, despite what regulatory notions of embodiment want us to believe.

Reader, we have been told that fatness is only acceptable as a temporary state, a place from which we must improve and optimize our lives. We have also been told that a linear and individual path towards a final destination of unambiguous fat pride is the ultimate imperative of liberation. And yet, the self is ever-shifting, undergoing constant and complex negotiations between the internal and the external. Reader, I want you to know that fat vulnerability does not need to be legible or coherent; rather, by embracing the raw power of fat storytelling, we can truly reimagine fat and queer lives as abundant, complex, and worth living despite their illegibility within normative frameworks of what constitutes lives worth living. By centering our fat selves, though shifting and complicated, we can question the very notion of the embodied subject and the idea that we must always progress towards this finalized, optimized, and thin self.

And to you, my fat reader, in particular: know that however you relate to fatness, you have valuable stories to tell as you are now. You do not have to wait for thinness to be whole, and you do not have to wait for some sense of wholeness, total liberation, or freedom from pain to produce knowledge from the center of yourself. Together, we can be like the roses and stop asking what comes next, "after" fatness, and for how long we must be in this supposedly temporary state of "fat," or otherwise in pain as a result of our traumatic experiences with fat oppression. Instead, we can spend our time dreaming up autonomous fat personhood, untethered from normative personhood. We can start from where we are now, not from where we might be if we either become thin or completely erase all painful marks of our encounters with fat hatred.

I don't have a coherent call to action for you, reader. I'm sorry if you were hoping for a feasible plan to end all fat hatred. Nevertheless, I want you to know that reading about Fat Studies scholarship and activism has transformed my life. These texts will not heal my wounds. And yet, engaging with Fat Studies texts and histories has convinced me that there is a viable, autonomous fat future for me. I do not intend to construe this as a future without pain. It is a future that exists, in all of its unknown, human complexity.

Reader, I have finally figured out my struggle to write this conclusion. I've realized that it's not actually a conclusion, after all. Instead, this is my goodbye-for-now to you, a see-you-later rather than a definitive severing of me and you. Thank you for accompanying me to the archives and sitting beside me as I stumbled through academic theories for the first time. I do not yet know you, but I was thinking of you the whole time, imagining who exactly might read my words, and wondering if they might impact you as the words of many others have impacted me. And to my fat reader, in particular: I hope my words have convinced you of the fundamental power of the personal and that you can leave this page knowing that fat lives, in all of their complexity, are, in fact, worth living.

Notes

1. Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Bristol, England: HammerOn Press, 2016); Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011); Laura Fraser, "The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 11-15; Caleb Luna, "On Being Fat, Brown, Femme, Ugly, and Unloveable," BGD: Amplifying the Voices of Queer and Trans People of Color, July 21, 2014; Krystal Smalls, "Fat, Black, and Ugly: The Semiotic Production of Prodigious Femininities," *Transforming Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (2021): 12-28; Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019). Though there remain many literature gaps regarding the history of fatness, these scholars are examples of those who have examined the historical meanings of fat, and how it is always, already implicated in all historical forms of body regulation, normalization, and marginalization.
2. IBISWorld, "Weight Loss Services in the US: Market Size 2002-2027," July 13, 2021, <https://www.ibisworld.com/industry-statistics/market-size/weight-loss-services-united-states/>.
3. Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*.
4. Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 103.
5. Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health* (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2004).
6. Campos, *The Obesity Myth*, 174.
7. Paul Campos, Abigail Saguy, Paul Ernsberger, Eric Oliver, and Glenn Gaeser, "The Epidemiology of Overweight and Obesity: Public Health Crisis or Moral Panic?" *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35, no.1 (2006): 55-60.
8. Anna Kirkland, "The Environmental Account of Obesity: A Case for Feminist Skepticism," *Signs* 36, no. 2 (2011): 463-86.
9. Farrell, *Fat Shame*; April Herndon, "Disparate but Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 121-37; Cat Pause, Jackie Wyes, and Samantha Murray, *Queering Fat Embodiment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014); Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009); Smalls, "Fat, Black, and Ugly"; Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*.
10. Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth*; Linda Bacon, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* (Dallas, TX: Benbella Books, 2008); Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*. These are some of the most well-known and foundational texts that disprove existing links between fatness and poor health outcomes.
11. Lawyer Paul Campos is well-known for reviewing scientific studies that attempt to uphold diets and efficiently disproving them: "Despite a century-long search for a "cure" for "overweight," we still have no idea how to make fat people thin." Campos, *The Obesity Myth*, xxii.
12. Marilyn Wann, "Foreword: Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), xxvii-1.
13. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction* (New York, NY: Random House, 1978), 137.
14. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 138.
15. Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death: Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 754-80; Kimberly Dark, "Things I Learned From Fat People on the Plane," *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 8, no. 3 (2019): 299-319; Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Samantha Kwan,

- “Navigating Public Spaces: Gender, Race, and Body Privilege in Everyday Life,” *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 2 (2010): 144–66; Luna, “On Being Fat”; Zoe Meleo-Erwin, “Disrupting Normal: Toward the ‘Ordinary and Familiar’ in Fat Politics,” *Feminism and Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2012): 288-402; Smalls, “Fat, Black, and Ugly”; Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018); Wann, “An Invitation to Revolution”; Francis Ray White, “Fat, Queer, Dead: ‘Obesity’ and the Death Drive,” *Somatechnics* 2, no. 1 (2012): 1-17; Francis Ray White, “Fat/Trans: Queering the Activist Body,” *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 3, no. 2 (2013): 86-100. These are just a few of many scholars who have examined the subject of death, dying, and/or necropolitics in relation to fatness.
16. Stacy Bias, “The Good Fatty Examined,” Stacey Bias: Heart-Led Creative, June 4, 2014, <http://stacybias.net/2014/06/12-good-fatty-archetypes/>.
 17. Wann, “An Invitation to Revolution,” xiv.
 18. Cat Pause and Sonya Renee Taylor, “Fattening Up Scholarship,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies*, eds. Cat Pause and Sonya Renee Taylor (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2021), 44.
 19. Hannele Harunjen, “Fatness and Consequences of Neoliberalism,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies*, eds. Cat Pause and Sonya Renee Taylor (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2021), 74.
 20. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, “Introduction,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 11.
 21. Cooper, *Fat Activism*; Luna, “On Being Fat”; Cat Pause, “Live to tell: Coming Out as Fat,” *Somatechnics*, 2 (2012): 42–56; Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*; White, “Fat, Queer, Dead.”
 22. Wann, “An Invitation to Revolution,” xviii.
 23. Cooper, *Fat Activism*; Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Luna, “On Being Fat”; Pause and Taylor, *International Handbook of Fat Studies*; Pause, Wyes, and Murray, *Queering Fat Embodiment*; Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*; Smalls, “Fat, Black, and Ugly”; Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*; White, “Fat, Queer, Dead.”
 24. Pause, Wyes, and Murray, *Queering Fat Embodiment*, 13.
 25. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Herndon, “Disparate But Disabled”; Luna, “On Being Fat”; Mia Mingus, “Feeling the Weight: Some Beginning Notes on Disability, Access, and Love,” *Leaving Evidence: A Blog by Mia Mingus*, May 8, 2012; Pause, Wyes, and Murray, *Queering Fat Embodiment*; Smalls, “Fat, Black, and Ugly”; Taylor, *Body is Not An Apology*; Leah Vernon, *Unashamed: Musings of a Fat, Black Muslim* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019).
 26. Dylan Vade and Sondra Solovay, “No Apology: Shared Struggles in Fat and Transgender Law” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 174.
 27. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 16.
 28. Judy Freespirit Papers, Collection 2008-48, GLBT Historical Society Museum and Archives, San Francisco, California.
 29. Fat activism newspapers and magazines, Papers, Carton 2: Subject Files, Folder 2/11: Fat Activism Newspapers, Magazines, Judy Freespirit Papers, GLBT Historical Society Museum and Archives, San Francisco, California.
 30. Charlotte Cooper, “A Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline,” *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 7, no. 2 (2018): 61-74.
 31. Fat Underground pamphlets, fliers, position papers, and personal reflections of Judy Freespirit and other members of the Fat Underground, Papers, Carton 2: Subject Files, Folder 2/10: Fat Activism, Judy Freespirit Papers, GLBT Historical Society Museum and Archives, San Francisco, California.
 32. Cooper, *Fat Activism*; Cooper, “Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline”; Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Pause, Wyes, and Murray, *Queering Fat Embodiment*; Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*; Abigail Saguy, “Why Fat is a Feminist Issue,” *Sex Roles* (2012): 600-607; Zora Simic, “Fat as a Feminist Issue: A History,” in *Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism*, eds. Helen Hester and Caroline Walters (New York: New York, Routledge, 2015), 15-37; Virgie Tovar, *You Have the Right to Remain Fat* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2018). These scholars have all argued the importance of fat activism in paving the way for Fat Studies.
 33. Laura Bock and Carol Squires, “Fat Lip Reader’s Theater: A Recollection in Two Voices,” *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 8, no. 3 (2019): 219-239; Cooper, *Fat Activism*;

- Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Greta Rensenbrink, "Fat's No Four Letter Word: Fat Feminism and Identity Politics in the 1970s and 1980s," in *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, eds. Elena Levy-Navarro (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 213-244. These scholars have noted the fundamental work of the Fat Underground and those associated with and working in collaboration with this group.
34. Judy Freespirit Papers; Tovar, *The Right to Remain Fat*; Vernon, *Unashamed*.
 35. Charlotte Cooper, "Fat Lib: How Fat Activism Expands the Obesity Debate," in *Debating Obesity*, eds. Emma Rich, Lee F. Monaghan, and Lucy Aphramor (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 164-191; Cooper, *Fat Activism*; Cooper, "Queer and Trans Fat Activism Timeline"; Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Rensenbrink, "Fat's No Four Letter Word"; Simic, "Fat as a Feminist Issue." In the past decade, efforts to historicize fat activism have increased. These scholars have undertaken this task.
 36. Herndon, "Disparate But Disabled"; Laura Pratt, "The (Fat) Body and the Archive: Toward the Creation of a Fat Community Archive," *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 7, no. 2 (2018): 227-239.
 37. Judy Freespirit, "On Dying Fat," 1977, Papers, Box 1: Judy Freespirit Papers, Folder 9: Poetry and Prose, 1977-1982, Judy Freespirit Papers, Collection 1956, UCLA Library Special Collections Young Research Library, Los Angeles, California.
 38. Tracy Tidgwell, May Friedman, Jen Rinaldi, Crystal Kotow, and Emily R.M. Lind, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Fatness and Temporality," *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 7, no. 2 (2018): 116.
 39. Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method: Developing Qualitative Inquiry* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008); Stacey Holman Jones and Anne M. Harris, *Queering Autoethnography* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019). These sources provide background information about the development of personal narrative and autoethnography as radical and scholarly methodologies.
 40. Jordan Corson and Tara Schwitzman, "We, Monsters: An Autoethnographic Literature Review of Experiences in Doctoral Education Programs (Kind Of)," in *Decentering the Researcher in Intimate Scholarship: Critical Posthuman Methodological Perspectives in Education*, eds. Kathryn Strom, Tammy Mills, and Alan Ovens (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2018), 45-58.
 41. Judy Freespirit Papers, Collection 2008-48, GLBT Historical Society Museum and Archives, San Francisco, California.
 42. Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 171.
 43. Pause, Wyes, and Murray, *Queering Fat Embodiment*.
 44. Cooper, *Fat Activism*, 121.
 45. Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Amy Erdman Farrell, "Origin Stories: Thickening Fat and the Problem of Historiography," in *Thickening Fat: Fat Bodies, Intersectionality, and Social Justice*, eds. May Friedman, Carla Rice, and Jen Rinaldi (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 183-193; Anna Kirkland, *Fat Rights: Dilemmas of Difference and Personhood* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2008); Kathleen Robinson, "The Fat Acceptance Movement Contesting Fatness as Illness, 1969-1998," PhD Diss. (The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2014); Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*.
 46. Cooper, "Fat Lib."
 47. Farrell, "Origin Stories"; Kathleen LeBesco, "Queering Fat Bodies/Politics," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. J. E. Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 74-90.
 48. Samantha Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
 49. Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body*, 9.
 50. Cooper, "Fat Lib," 186.
 51. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.
 52. Personal journal of Judy Freespirit, 1981, Papers, Carton 1: Publications and Personal Journals, Judy Freespirit Papers, GLBT Historical Society Museum and Archives, San Francisco, California.
 53. Cameron Awkward-Rich, "Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading Like a Depressed Transsexual," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 4 (2017): 819-41.
 54. Mary Oliver, "Roses, Late Summer," in *House of Light: Poems by Mary Oliver* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990).

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Somos Asesoras, ¿y eso qué es?

Un Relato Autoetnográfico Colaborativo

Elda Monetti (emonettibarce@gmail.com)
Graciela B. Plachot (gplachot@gmail.com)

Resumen

Nos desempeñamos como asesoras pedagógicas en dos universidades latinoamericanas. Las asesorías pedagógicas son espacios institucionales creados con la finalidad de acompañar a los actores educativos en las prácticas de enseñanza y aprendizaje en la universidad. En este relato autoetnográfico colaborativo damos cuenta de nuestras historias como tales en una universidad pública en Argentina y otra en Uruguay. Entre epifanías y anotaciones nos preguntamos qué significa ser asesoras pedagógicas en nuestras universidades. Buscamos dar visibilidad a la tarea que realizamos y reflexionar sobre las problemáticas que nos atraviesan en una conversación entre iguales.

Palabras clave

autoetnografía colaborativa, asesora pedagógica, universidad pública

Abstract

We are pedagogical advisors in two Latin American universities. Pedagogical consultancies are institutional spaces created with the purpose of accompanying institutional actors in teaching and learning practices at the university.

In this collaborative autoethnographic story, we give an account of our stories as such, in a public university, one in Argentina and other, in Uruguay. Between epiphanies and annotations, we problematize what it means to be a pedagogical advisor in our universities. We aim to give visibility to the work we carry out and meditate to the problems that we face through a dialogue between equals.

Keywords

collaborative autoethnography, pedagogical advisor, public university

Del Ayer y del Hoy

Nosotras, Elda y Graciela, hemos investigado juntas desde hace más de siete años sobre temáticas relacionadas con la Educación Superior. Nos preguntamos por las prácticas educativas significativas para el ingreso y la inclusión del estudiante (Monetti, 2016), por la democratización del conocimiento (Monetti y Ruiz Barbot, 2021), la articulación de las funciones de docencia, investigación y extensión, y ahora por las asesorías pedagógicas en las universidades públicas que habitamos. Hoy buscamos compartirles, en conversación, esta autoetnografía colaborativa a partir de preguntas que, como bucles, adquieren sentidos, nombran sujetos, cuentan historias. Les contamos de nuestras primeras interacciones comunicacionales, de cuando nos miramos, escuchamos y animamos a imaginar otros espacios juntas. Les compartimos también nuestras preguntas que buscan dar respuesta a la construcción de la

asesoría educativa y les invitamos a conocer en nuestro relato una experiencia de compañía cercana.

Del Cómo y del Cuándo

Elda

A fines del año 2013 conformamos una red interuniversitaria integrada por equipos de investigadoras/es de tres universidades argentinas y una uruguaya cuya finalidad fue identificar y dar visibilidad a experiencias de enseñanza significativas en los diversos niveles educativos, con especial énfasis en el universitario. Un año después en una mañana de mediados de abril, estoy esperando en una de las oficinas del Departamento de Humanidades de la Universidad Nacional del Sur¹ que lleguen las/los docentes que viajan desde Buenos Aires y Montevideo para participar de la primera reunión de la red interuniversitaria que acabamos de armar. Varios grupos bajan del ascensor, en el primero de ellos llegan Mabela, Sandra y Graciela de Uruguay, luego lo harán los otros dos grupos argentinos.

Empieza la reunión en la sala de conferencias, nos presentamos, damos rostro a las autoras de los mails que venimos intercambiando en los últimos meses. Así es como comienza mi relación con Graciela. Escuchándole decir que es psicóloga, que trabaja como profesora en la Facultad de Psicología de la Universidad de la República (Uruguay) y se dedica también a acompañar a los y las estudiantes ingresantes en uno de sus roles de asesora pedagógica. Graciela nos cuenta que la matrícula de ingreso a la Licenciatura en Psicología, además de ser muy heterogénea, porque la población estudiantil proviene de casi todas las orientaciones de la educación secundaria, es la más alta en el área Salud (más de 3000 ingresantes por año). En este escenario, su tarea como asesora pedagógica da cuenta de la posibilidad de acompañar como hospedador (Carbajal, 2021; Derrida, 1997) y estar para el otro. Graciela cuenta que esas claves de numerosidad muchas veces se transforman en masividad. Los esfuerzos institucionales del equipo de asesorías y los individuales de cada docente de ingreso se vuelven esenciales en las experiencias de legitimación, participación y relación con los saberes y con la institución en cada inicio por parte de los estudiantes (Mancovsky, 2017). Su preocupación gira en torno a sostener sus trayectorias y promover la persistencia estudiantil (Tinto, 2021), a lo cual añade que está agradecida de participar en esta red interuniversitaria y que lo que más le gusta es la horizontalidad de la propuesta. Es decir, me explica, que siente, de alguna forma, que las interacciones previas entre los miembros de la red por correo y las primeras escenas de intercambio desarmen huellas de jerarquías..., seguramente se instalarán otras, pero se respira reconocimiento y valoración. En este sentido, las personas se miran y se toman el tiempo para escuchar. Estas palabras aún resuenan en mí.

Hoy, siete años después, hemos compartido muchos espacios: sostenemos la continuidad de la red que fue cambiando de nombre, pero manteniendo esa idea de horizontalidad y de aprendizaje para con sus miembros; visitamos nuestras universidades para dar cursos de posgrado y conversamos infinidad de veces virtualmente. Quizás la última actividad compartida que nos llevó a pensar en este relato autoetnográfico colaborativo sea su participación en un curso de autoetnografía que coordiné con Silvia Bénard en mi universidad y al cual invité a Graciela, casi pensando que no le interesaría.

La invitación a narrar llegó después de finalizar el curso. Tenía muchas ganas de escribir qué le sucede a una asesora pedagógica de una universidad argentina. A ella también le interesó

¹ Esta universidad está ubicada en la ciudad de Bahía Blanca, Argentina.

la temática y aquí estamos las dos en nuestra primera reunión virtual para preguntarnos qué significa ser asesora pedagógica en nuestras universidades. Dos mujeres en tarea una vez más...

Graciela

Es noviembre de hace siete años y estaba aprontando la valija para llegar a Bahía Blanca en Argentina. ¡Cuánto me divierte y disfruto salir de la Facultad²! Este viaje de la red me parece un regalo. La vorágine de lo cotidiano irremediablemente se interrumpe. El organizar el trabajo en mi casa, asistir a dar clases en la facultad, atender a estudiantes, son tareas que me gustan pero que el viajar me permite poner en pausa. Salir siempre me da distancia y tiempo para pensar. Esta sensación de poder dejar las rutinas, necesariamente impuesta por el viajar, se siente de alguna forma como una pausa necesaria. Siempre llego agotada al aeropuerto y allí respiro. En realidad, los aeropuertos están muy presentes en mi vida y siempre llego agotada, por lo que dejo atrás, y respiro, por lo que me espera.

Me entusiasma mucho trabajar con otras disciplinas. En mi facultad generalmente trabajamos psicólogos/as. También compañeros y compañeras formadas en Ciencias Sociales, pero a mí me convocan las voces de las Ciencias de la Educación y es de éstas que ¡la red enuncia muchas y muy potentes!

La sala es grande y somos muchos para discutir qué son las “experiencias educativas significativas” (la temática en torno a la cual gira el trabajo de la red). Los equipos de las universidades son muy diversos: hombres y mujeres, psicólogas, sociólogas y educadoras. ¡Qué bueno! Allí conocí a Elda. Increíble, alguien que habla más rápido que yo. Me siento cómoda y segura de nuestro trabajo, dispuesta a aprender de las prácticas de cada grupo. Los discursos naturalizados en el territorio de las Ciencias de la Educación se me hacen maravillosos. Dicen y nombran autores que intento registrar. Creo que la interdisciplinariedad me hace ser una psicóloga de fronteras abiertas. Me siento muy convocada por sus discursos y con ganas de aprender.

Elda sonrío y conversa. Me doy cuenta de lo poco que sonreímos en lo cotidiano de nuestro trabajo. Ese primer día sentí su disposición a sumarse a aventuras académicas. De a poco me fui animando a proponerlas. En un terreno muy cálido, de confianza y valoración he podido crecer en su compañía. Siempre me siento totalmente agradecida. Ella también me invita y yo sé que, si puedo sostenerlo, va a ser una experiencia de trabajo ardua, rigurosa y gratificante. Su última invitación: a un curso de autoetnografía y de allí a esta autoetnografía colaborativa sobre nuestras formas de ser y hacer en las asesorías educativas de la universidad.

Y así comienza nuestro transitar por esta tarea de asesoramiento que nos apasiona. Nos damos esta posibilidad juntas. La de sentir, pensar y escribir. Nos regalamos una pausa en el hacer del acompañamiento, donde la urgencia del otro se dismantela para hoy vivir la pausa para nosotras. Un tiempo para producir, para escucharnos y descubrir...

Del Hoy de la Conversación Autoetnográfica y del Para Qué de las Asesorías

Elda

Estoy en mi casa preparando la comida, como siempre lo hago, apurada por terminar y seguir trabajando. En ese momento entra mi hija quien me había estado observando desde la otra habitación. ¿Qué es eso de ser asesora pedagógica?, me pregunta Ángeles, mi hija. Difícil y fácil de describir, pienso. Se asemeja a las piruetas de los acróbatas en el circo: sostienen el equilibrio

² Me refiero a la Facultad de Psicología de la Universidad de la República ubicada en Montevideo, Uruguay.

y conforman coreografías. Es lo que hago a diario. Escucho las preocupaciones de docentes y estudiantes universitarios acerca de lo que les sucede cuando enseñan y aprenden.

–¿Es solo escuchar? –insiste Ángeles.

–No, más que eso, es escuchar y acompañar. Ardoino (2000) diría que es caminar junto a otro. Eso hacemos, intentamos ayudar a comprender (Nicastro y Andreozzi, 2003) a preguntarse y preguntarnos acerca de lo educativo en la universidad.

Graciela

Montevideo anuncia el cierre de la primavera y los primeros calores que nos acercan a las vacaciones de verano. Se sienten los últimos días de noviembre con el calor y el anochecer más tarde. Estoy bajando por la calle Tristán Narvaja rumbo a la facultad. Esta cuadra para nosotros es parte de nuestras vidas. Por aquí comemos rapidito en los mediodías y a esta hora, sobre las 18:00, los bares nos reciben en las veredas, la gente comparte algo, siempre se para..., rumbo a donde se vaya. Los árboles cubren las veredas con su pelusa..., nunca podemos estacionar y la gente sube a la calle 18 de julio o baja para su paralela Paysandú. Son los que se van del turno vespertino y los que llegan al nocturno. Voy con tiempo a la apertura del horario de consulta de la noche en la Unidad de Apoyo a la Enseñanza³. Hace ya más de 2 años que me ocupo del turno de la noche. Estos estudiantes me convocan. Seguramente tomada por parte de mi propia trayectoria estudiantil y la posibilidad de ser estudiante solo en las noches. Quedan dos jueves más de estos y ya casi llegamos a fin de año, al final del ciclo académico. Me digo a mí misma: Queda poco Graciela..., enfrenta un jueves más.

El cambio de plan de estudios parece el fin del mundo, aunque en realidad es el principio de otro. Todos los servicios fuimos invitados-mandatados a rediseñar el currículum de la carrera de Psicología. Tras interminables debates co-participativos, nos embarcamos en la reformulación de lo formal y esperamos lo inaugurante del currículum real y del oculto (Díaz Barriga, 2006). Aquí estamos ahora con el nuevo plan de estudios. Situación, esta, que hace emerger una nueva escena para la asesoría. Atravesó los muros del equipo especializado, desplomó fronteras y se reinventó con el proceso de cambio de plan. Los lenguajes de lo curricular y lo formativo se “colaron” en las cátedras, en la cantina, en el patio. Parece inevitable ahora la presencia de lo que Tardif (2004) llama el saber curricular de los docentes y lo que Nicastro y Andreozzi (2003) refieren a lo institucional.

La facultad está repleta de estudiantes y ya hay más de medio pasillo de espera, son jóvenes y no tan jóvenes sentados en el piso, haciendo fila en la puerta de la asesoría. Buscan respuestas y esperan poder entender algo en esta confusión y vertiginosidad del cambio que genera pasarse de un diseño curricular a otro en su formación. Llego treinta minutos antes, pero ellos ya están allí, hace rato. Su presencia y su postura comunica en lo no verbal la disposición al encuentro. Cuerpos en reposo, sentados en el piso, detienen la escena institucional para que otro se tome el tiempo de conversar con ellos. Se trata de parar, acercarse y mirarse de otras formas a las que la institución generalmente está acostumbrada. Las dimensiones de la comunicación no verbal (Poyatos, 2003) interrumpen en esta interacción la extranjería del anonimato y habilitan el sentarse, el escucharse, el disponerse a la interacción verbal y no verbal del encuentro. El 93% de lo que nos comunicamos es no verbal (Ferrero & Martín, 2012; Mehrabian, 1971) y ellos con su espera ya me cuentan, están ahí para que yo de alguna forma pueda estar para ellos. Rápidamente identifico a los que están con niños/as que intentan “portarse bien” en la multitudinaria fila.

³ La Unidad de Apoyo a la Enseñanza fue la estructura asignada institucionalmente para las asesorías educativas hasta el año 2013.

Nuestra facultad tiene un alto porcentaje de estudiantes que son madres y padres. El turno de la noche les deja un lugar a la posibilidad de estudiar a la par que desarrollan su proyecto familiar. Comienzo por pasar un talonario para que se repartan unos cien números. Produce un efecto instantáneo y rápidamente ineficiente de garantía de que van a ser atendidos. Es un clásico que, a los diez minutos, desesperados me golpean la puerta, aún faltan quince para abrir, ya no hay números y hay muchos estudiantes más. Siempre respondo: No se preocupen, de alguna forma nos vamos a arreglar. No tengo claro cómo, pero contenerlos y estar a su disposición (Mazza, 2020) es vital para desdramatizar la escena de la confusión y la pérdida del lugar. Una vez más el talonario de los cien números nos dice que no alcanzan los lugares, los tiempos y los recursos para poder sostener al otro en su formación.

Estudiantes muy diversos se preguntan por cómo seguir en el nuevo plan, dónde van a quedar. Siento que algo del cómo seguir y del ser reconocidos y contemplados está en su pregunta y la asesoría es el lugar y una experiencia de cercanía para esa legitimación. Instala desde el inicio la confianza en la comunicación, da un tiempo, detiene y acerca los cuerpos, mira, pregunta y escucha.

Preparo las mesas de entrevista grupal, respiro en profundidad y abro la puerta. Me esperan los/las estudiantes más diversos/as en preguntas y posibilidades que seguro no voy a poder solucionar totalmente. Me siento cansada pero también dispuesta.

Me conmueven particularmente los estudiantes que “aparecieron” con esto del cambio de plan. Son los que sienten que este diseño les va a permitir retomar sus estudios. Volver a estudiar psicología, eso que en otros tiempos de sus vidas les estaba vedado, ya que las demandas del plan de estudio se vivían como imposibles. La semestralización versus los cursos anuales, la posibilidad de rendir libre muchas asignaturas, configuran transformaciones que en sus consultas sienten como la oportunidad que este cambio puede dar a un deseo atrapado y postergado. Abro la puerta y una vez más, siguiendo a Tinto (1989, 2021), espero contribuir a que no sea giratoria, es decir que de verdad puedan quedar de este lado, del adentro de la formación, es decir, que les ayude a permanecer en la facultad y recibirse de psicólogos.

Siempre me mantengo atenta a las expresiones de la inclusión estratificada (Ezcurra, 2018) y excluyente (Gentili, 2009). Lo estratificado genera rutas alternativas que afectan la calidad de la formación de quienes las transitan, evidenciando ser itinerarios con menos horas y mayor flexibilidad que convocan estudiantes con predictores de riesgo, por sus cargas horarias laborales, por tener a cargo sujetos en situación de dependencia. ¿Rutas diferentes para los diferentes? Diversificar es la clave en tensión de la calidad y disposición docente e institucional que estas trayectorias comprometan. Lo excluyente habla de una inclusión inacabada en las acciones que la resguarden, políticamente inconclusa y que de alguna forma deja entrar y deja ir.

Tengo que prepararme, respirar, tener los materiales y empezar a trabajar. ¿Se tratará la asesoría de marcar un espacio físico-institucional donde poder esperar a otro? y allí ¿identificar rápido las circunstancias del otro? Hall (1966) se sorprendería de las distancias proxémicas que la asesoría instala en un lugar que interpela todas las interacciones de la comunicación verbal y no verbal (CNV) para lo universitario. Entre las dimensiones de esta última, la proxemia instala una relación única para la experiencia universitaria. La cercanía de lo numeroso no es garantía de relación. Estar en un aula con 200 estudiantes no implica establecer una relación. Los cuerpos pueden aproximarse, pero eso no siempre conlleva que la mirada se ponga en juego y la escucha circule. La asesoría desmantela la proxemia de la numerosidad, estamos cerca, nos miramos, nos escuchamos y el tiempo se detiene a comprender la singularidad de la existencia más allá de la presencia, es un tiempo para conversar (Skliar, 2007; 2018).

Elda

La asesoría y los lugares, Graciela, son un recorrido complejo.

Llegar a ocupar el rol de asesora lo siento casi como un logro personal. Comencé a trabajar como asesora en el mismo momento en que se crea este espacio institucional.

Recuerdo estar en la oficina que ocupamos en la universidad y comentarle a la profesora con quien trabajaba y de quien era ayudante que me habían ofrecido un cargo provisorio de asesora pedagógica. No lo recibió tan alegremente como hubiera esperado.

Lo mismo sucedió en la reunión en que se discutió la posibilidad de que los cargos de las asesoras se instalaran en el Área de Educación de mi departamento. Hubo resistencias, rumores. Al final se aceptó, aunque no todos estuvieron de acuerdo. Para mí implicó la posibilidad de poder instalar lo educativo en un lugar de la universidad donde me parecía que estaba ausente, en manos de gente que no había estudiado ni reflexionado sobre lo educativo; sin embargo, no todos mis colegas pensaban lo mismo.

La oficina que me asignaron es el cuartito de la fotocopidora ubicado en el último piso del edificio del Rectorado. El pequeño escritorio está encerrado entre la fotocopidora, que dobla el tamaño del escritorio, y la ventana. Luego de la pequeña cocina hay dos oficinas más amplias en las que trabajan varias personas. Me invitan a compartir el mate y el café de la cocina. También hay una heladera. Tengo un lugar en el que puedo consumir té o café a mi gusto y sin tener que pagarlo de mi bolsillo. También tengo hojas y una computadora con conexión a internet y mail. Me siento en el cielo. De allí pasamos a ser tres asesoras pedagógicas, ya en un espacio más grande y con compañeras de trabajo con las que compartíamos el desayuno de la mañana todos los martes. Fueron los años de esplendor de la asesoría.

Hoy, somos solamente dos asesoras. El cartel que decía “Asesoría pedagógica” ya no tiene una puerta en donde colgarse. No hay puerta a la que tocar, ni oficina a la que volver después de la pandemia. Comenzamos a habitar la virtualidad antes de que llegara la pandemia. Vienen a mi mente las afirmaciones acerca del sentido y significado que los miembros de una organización le asignan al espacio (Fernández, 1994) o que “el espacio condiciona, determina la percepción de la presencia del otro” (Schvarstein, 1995, p. 247), en este caso, del asesoramiento educativo (Nicastro y Andreozzi, 2003) ¿Qué significa para una universidad que no se pueda encontrar una oficina, un lugar para la asesoría? ¿Nos necesitarán? ¿Seremos molestas para las autoridades o no cumpliremos la función que se espera de nosotras? ¿Qué tan adentro, que tan afuera nos dejó la pandemia? Estas preguntas me hacen dudar de lo que significa en nuestro caso la falta de ese espacio. Creo que nuestra tarea está puesta en duda o es que lo que hacemos no es lo esperado.

Del Mañana de Preguntas Inconclusas al Acompañamiento en Cercanía

–¿Qué te parece, Elda, si para cerrar este intercambio compartimos las preguntas provisorias que el relato autoetnográfico colaborativo fue dando a nuestra inquietud de comprender las asesorías educativas? –propone Graciela.

–Sí, preguntas que nos llevan a pensarnos como asesoras –acuerda Elda–. Muchas veces las desgranamos en nuestro trabajo y revolotean como las palomas en un camino desierto, sobreviviendo y viviendo en un mundo por momentos hostil o acogedor, así como las instituciones que habitamos, espacios por momentos hostiles o acogedores para nuestro hacer.

Muchas veces nos sentimos parte, producimos, innovamos e inventamos. Otras nos vemos excluidos y no logramos reconocernos ni sentirnos valorados. En muchas oportunidades el instituido nos aprisiona. Y muchas otras, de la mano de la asesoría se tejen instituyentes que dan espacio a los sujetos y mejoran las prácticas.

Devienen de la tarea, en los sujetos y en nuestras relaciones con los saberes... para producir nuevos haceres.

Sobre la Tarea

Graciela: Cuando estamos frente a los/las estudiantes o a nuestros colegas acompañando en los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje me pregunto si se trata de hacer diferencias y atender a las diferencias. En ello va la posibilidad de rescatar y comprender a cada estudiante en la singularidad de su existencia y mediar en su relación pedagógica con los saberes, y en su relación social con la institución y sus pares. Así, construir en lo inflexible e instituido una oportunidad de adecuación, un tiempo y una forma para enseñar y aprender situada (Díaz Barriga, 2006).

Elda: Al participar de las reuniones o en los intercambios con colegas y docentes, ¿buscamos ordenar, con flexibilidad, sin rechazar las ideas que no compartimos? ¿Sostenemos los límites de lo que es posible realizar y buscamos oportunidades e intersticios para debatir?

Graciela: ¿Moverse en el tiempo: ¿estás acá, vas para allá? ¡Qué bien se siente avanzar! ¿Ponerse a disposición al imaginar lo posible y, a modo de profecía, situar al estudiante en un porvenir formativo y profesional? Muchas veces me escucho preguntando su situación curricular y enunciando luego una ruta de avance. Comienza la construcción con el otro de su proyecto de trabajo. Es la posibilidad que tiene el estudiante de imaginar sus futuros logros académicos, con nuestra mediación como asesoras. Brindamos el andamiaje para llegar a una visión de futuro muchas veces denegada por la institución y las múltiples circunstancias de la subjetividad. Nombrar al estudiante en su avance y en su egreso, en momentos donde algo de su trayecto se ha interrumpido. Exámenes perdidos, cupos en las asignaturas, lecturas no comprendidas. Preguntar sobre hacia dónde se va, redescubrir el placer de la formación y con ello parte de lo que convoca a la disciplina. Se trata de situar y recuperar la profesión y el ejercicio que espera, entre tantas lecturas y avatares subjetivos que la formación conlleva. Esto, Elda, me ha resultado repetidamente en la asesoría como estrategia para subjetivar al estudiante en un tiempo anterior y posterior al que lo trae a la consulta. Allí contacta con un deseo inicial y reconfigura en lo aprendido un futuro profesional. Se motiva, con y ante el otro, la asesora, en una conversación que algo le anuncia de lo provisorio del conflicto, de lo posible del avance y de los tiempos profesionales que le esperan.

Graciela: ¿Revisar continuamente lo que vamos definiendo institucionalmente? ¿Sostener la frustración de representar a la institución, oficiar de mediadora en múltiples conflictos en torno a lo educativo? ¿Se trata de ser bisagra entre lo institucional y lo subjetivo? ¿Construir la institución al mismo tiempo que reconocemos sus debilidades, sus fortalezas, sus necesidades? Somos parte y portavoz de la norma institucional, de las condiciones de un diseño y participamos en la búsqueda continua de la mejora del mismo y su flexibilización. Esta posición puede resultar muchas veces ambivalente y pendular. Desde allí, acompañar sin dejar de transformar y repensar críticamente cada resolución y acción, sin temor a lo provisorio y el error. Sin cansarse de dar la lucha hacia la mejora y el reconocimiento de las subjetividades.

Elda: ¿En nuestra tarea preguntamos acerca de las situaciones y dificultades por las que atraviesan docentes y estudiantes para conversar a partir de sus narrativas o lo hacemos desde las nuestras?

Sobre los Sujetos de la Tarea

Graciela: ¿Romper el anonimato y la soledad? ¿Instalar lógicas colaborativas en los sujetos educativos? De alguna forma la asesoría muestra que cada uno es único y a la vez otros están y han estado en situaciones similares. Eso alivia la vivencia de soledad y deja una huella de colectivo y de posibilidad. Lo vemos cuando decimos al estudiante que ya la institución ha transitado esta situación que hoy se presenta y se inscribe en su cuerpo y su trayecto, que se han superado y que se pueden reinventar nuevas estrategias, que juntos con otros, desde el cogobierno y desde la asesoría forman parte de una gestión académica institucional en movimiento.

Elda: Cuando armamos nuestras propuestas de intervención, ¿nos proponemos empoderar a los sujetos involucrados, hacerlos más fuertes para afrontar la institución y sus avatares? ¿Propiciamos espacios para que trabajen con otros?

Sobre las Asesoras, sus Relaciones con los Saberes

Graciela: ¿Es posible poner las experiencias propias a circular? ¿Cuáles son nuestros saberes de oficio, de tropiezos y de logros? ¿Cómo hacer para que se pongan a rodar para el otro? Sin duda aquí se trata de lograr esa distancia óptima, donde el estudiante sienta que es escuchado en su experiencia única e irrepetible, pero de alguna forma la conversación le da la oportunidad de escuchar otros logros, así como tropiezos y mejoras.

Elda: Desde nuestra historia personal y profesional nos sentimos docentes universitarios que amamos la educación y buscamos mejorar los aprendizajes de los estudiantes. Desde esta mirada, ¿les damos lugar a los saberes de los otros? ¿Reconocemos los saberes sobre lo pedagógico que portan? ¿Podemos acompañarles estando atentas a lo que significa acompañar más que enseñar?

Graciela: Saberes que habiliten a trabajar con los pliegues, mandatos y creencias..., prácticas que hacen visible parte de lo invisible.

Hasta aquí, querida Elda, nuestras epifanías y reflexiones. Continuemos con aquello que sigue resonando en cada una con lo hasta aquí construido. Esperemos que, como todo relato autoetnográfico (Ellis, 2004), el nuestro provoque a otros/as asesores/as a reflexionar sobre la tarea que diariamente realizan.

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¡De Haberlo Sabido Antes! **Narrativa Autoetnográfica Sobre El Sentido Existencial**

María Angélica González Martínez (magm.colibri@gmail.com)

Resumen

Narrativa autoetnográfica en la que ofrezco al lector mi experiencia con relación a mi encuentro con el tema del sentido de la existencia, desde la perspectiva del Dr. Viktor E. Frankl. Este escrito inicia con la historia de cómo mi mamá, a raíz de la muerte de mi papá, fue perdiendo las ganas de vivir, cayendo en un estado depresivo que culminó con la somatización de un cáncer y luego con la muerte. Mi experiencia me ha llevado a indagar sobre las posibles causas que propician el vacío existencial y las vías para salir de este y retomar el camino hacia el sentido de la existencia.

Palabras clave

autoetnografía, sentido existencial, vacío existencial, logoterapia, análisis existencial, neurosis noógena

Abstract

Autoethnographic narrative in which I offer the reader my experience in relation to my encounter with the theme of the meaning of existence, from the perspective of Dr. Viktor E. Frankl. This writing begins with the story of how my mother, following the death of my father, was losing the will to live, falling into a depressive state that culminated in the somatization of cancer and then death. My experience has led me to investigate the possible causes that propitiate the existential void and the ways to get out of it and resume the path towards the meaning of existence.

Keywords

autoethnographic, meaning of existence, existential emptiness, logotherapy, existential analysis, noogenic neurosis

Mi Encuentro con la Logoterapia y el Análisis Existencial

¿Cómo poder imaginar que una persona tan entrañable para ti, que ha estado presente durante toda tu vida, con todo su ser, contigo, para ti y para los demás, en un momento dado, ante una contingencia estremecedora de la vida, poco a poco, se vaya distanciando mental y emocionalmente, aunque físicamente siga estando presente? Quizás el principal problema es que este proceso va sucediendo de forma paulatina, a cuenta gotas, no te das cuenta, el día viene y va, con sus prisas y sus trajines; y, cuando notas la diferencia de los cambios en la persona que amas, la distancia es tan grande y la situación tan grave y confusa que te quedas paralizada, la confusión se apodera de ti y no atinas ni siquiera a dimensionar el problema, mucho menos a pensar que pueda existir una solución.

Cuando la vida te ha dado una madre con una gran fortaleza, das por hecho que ella ha sido dotada con un blindaje tan especial que ningún viento será capaz de derrocarla. La has visto enfrentar tantos retos, tantas batallas y de tan variados calibres, que simplemente, en automático,

solo esperas que le suceda lo que les sucedía a esos juguetes que teníamos de niños, llamados “bobos”, los cuales eran unos inflables de plástico que en su base tenían algo así como arena, de tal manera que el juego consistía en agarrarlo a guantadas, con el impacto de los golpes se caía y casi de inmediato se reincorporaba, es decir, regresaba a su posición original. El nuestro, mío y de mis hermanos, tenía la figura de un payaso. Ahora que lo pienso, me pregunto si este era un juguete educativo que pretendía inculcarte, desde pequeño, el que, ante los golpes de la vida, vale caerse, pero inmediatamente tendrías que levantarte, recomponerte y volver a dar la pelea, sin ninguna reflexión que mediara el proceso.

Pensándolo mejor, creo que esta interpretación con relación al juguete es fruto de mi imaginación debido a la educación que recibí desde niña. Recuerdo que mis papás, a mis hermanos y a mí, constantemente, nos repetían frases que iban echando raíces en lo más profundo de nuestro ser: “en la vida debemos ser muy, muy fuertes”, “para atrás, ni para agarrar vuelo”, “no llores, la gente débil no llega muy lejos”, “mejor no te caigas, porque, de todas maneras, te vas a tener que volver a levantar, y será doble el trabajo” y otras frases que contenían mensajes similares. Estos mensajes eran, a su vez, el eco de la voz de mi abuela materna. Sin duda alguna, mi mamá y mi abuela eran mujeres que pareciera que habían venido a esta vida a cumplir con la consigna de ganar todas las batallas y no dejarse vencer por nada, ni por nadie, en el cumplimiento de sus propósitos que giraban en torno a formar familias unidas y funcionales. Y, además, debían de criar a sus hijos con ese mismo ímpetu, con esa misma fortaleza. ¡Dos robles bien plantados!

También pervive en mi memoria, como un ejemplo contundente de la fortaleza tan grande que tenía mi mamá, cuando ella sufrió un accidente, fue en mayo del año 1975. Yo tenía quince años, en plena adolescencia, con ganas de comerme el mundo, descubriendo la vida y conquistándola a mi manera. Ese día asistimos a un festival deportivo que a fines del ciclo escolar se celebraba en el colegio al que iban mis hermanos. Mi mamá se sentó en las graderías preparadas para tal ocasión, mis hermanos estaban en las canchas, con sus profesores y compañeros, yo andaba con mis amigas, de un lado para otro. De repente, se escuchó un ruido, estridente, desconocido, no podías identificar de dónde provenía, luego, un crujir de la madera y el fierro juntos, finalmente gritos, muchos gritos, gritos de angustia y de dolor. Creo que todos los presentes nos quedamos paralizados por el horror, sin entender lo que sucedía..., finalmente nos dimos cuenta de que una gran sección de las graderías había colapsado, antes se bamboleó, de un lado para el otro, hasta que finalmente cayó con un fuerte estruendo. Todo en cuestión de segundos. La pierna izquierda de mi mamá había quedado atrapada bajo los fierros retorcidos, las maderas y el peso de las personas. No solo ella sufrió los estragos del accidente, fueron muchas las víctimas, aunque no hubo pérdida de vidas humanas.

Viví la desesperación de no saber bien a bien lo que estaba ocurriendo, me abrumaba la sensación que causa el miedo que paraliza el cuerpo y la mente. La gente gritaba, estábamos todos muy asustados, en los primeros momentos, nadie sabía qué hacer, ni los alcances del colapso de las graderías. Yo volteaba para un lado y para otro, lo que quería era localizarla, saber en dónde estaba mi mamá. Mi mirada estaba como borrosa, veía sin ver. Mis oídos también estaban aturdidos. Yo la había visto de lejos, hacia un rato, pero en ese momento, no me era posible encontrarla. La angustia de buscar a mi mamá, entre tanta gente, me provocaba mucho agobio, taquicardia, las piernas no me obedecían, el miedo y la tristeza impedía que reaccionara para hacer algo efectivo. El tiempo parecía que se había detenido. En realidad, me embargaba un fuerte presentimiento de que algo malo le había sucedido, porque yo, en ese instante, no tenía una evidencia concreta del accidente de mi mamá. Mi papá, por algún motivo, no había podido

asistir al evento, por lo tanto, asumí la responsabilidad del problema. Mucha gente empezó a ayudar a los heridos. Después vino el sonido de las ambulancias, finalmente, el recorrido rumbo al hospital.

Escribo este incidente para poder dar a entender, que verdaderamente, mi mamá tenía temple de acero. Lo que siguió fue un año terriblemente doloroso y agotador. En concreto, el tendón de su pie izquierdo se había trozado casi por completo y la piel se había perdido, la carne estaba expuesta, esto sería algo muy difícil de sanar. El médico dijo que hubiera sido mejor que tuviera varias fracturas de hueso, porque el tendón no se reconstruye fácilmente y el proceso de sanación iba a ser un calvario. ¡Y sí que lo fue! La sometieron a varias operaciones, de las cuales surgieron infecciones, intentos de injertos, con una técnica y con otra, y nada, el tendón no se reconstituía y los injertos de piel no encarnaban sobre la herida. El médico que la atendía hizo un esfuerzo más para lograr la sanación, su propósito era que el injerto se lograra gracias a que el área dañada tuviera un contacto directo de la parte de piel viva que se pretendía injertar. Por lo tanto, él ideó una posición en la que ella sufría una terrible incomodidad por lo forzada que esta resultaba, ella permaneció totalmente inmovilizada en la cama durante más de un mes. En este lapso nunca la oímos quejarse, siempre nos mostró una actitud positiva y una sonrisa en su semblante, aunque en el fondo estaba presente un rictus de dolor.

Yo pienso que este evento me hizo seguir aprendiendo la lección de aguantar y no mostrar mis sentimientos, que ser fuertes en la vida consistía en callar y soportar. Verla a diario, en esa posición, sin quejarse, sin derramar ni una sola lágrima, al menos delante de nosotros y sin tener la certeza que se fuera a lograr el objetivo de sanación, fue una de las pruebas más duras que la vida me ha presentado. Durante mucho tiempo pensé que esta era una valiosa lección, pero ahora que escribo este relato y reflexiono profundamente sobre este acontecimiento, pienso que mi mamá, sin proponérselo, me enseñó que ocultar mis sentimientos, aquellos que denotaban debilidad, era valioso, cuando en realidad no lo es. El ser humano debe aceptar su vulnerabilidad y aprender a recibir el apoyo de otros seres humanos. Si no expresas tu dolor o tu sufrimiento ante las personas más cercanas a ti, ¿cómo podrán tenderte la mano de la manera adecuada?

A mis quince años, aprendí a inyectar a mi mamá que requería de dos inyecciones diarias, porque, por el lugar en donde vivíamos, resultaba difícil que alguien más lo hiciera. Con un buen sentido del humor, mi mamá me dijo, “Trae una naranja porque te voy a enseñar a inyectar” y después de unos pocos pinchazos en la naranja, me dijo: “Ahora sí pónmela a mí”. A lo cual, yo repliqué, “¡Noooo! Qué miedo, tú me has dicho que las agujas con el antibiótico se tapan”. “Pues si se tapa, lo vuelves a intentar hasta que puedas, así que entre más rápido aprendas mejor”, agregó. Desde entonces y hasta la fecha, cuando lo necesito, yo misma me inyecto. Esta fue una gran lección que abonó mi proceso de maduración, perder el miedo e intentar hacer algo nuevo. También se me pidió llevar en el coche a mis cuatro hermanos a sus respectivos colegios. Esta labor conllevaba el encargo de que todos estuviéramos listos puntualmente para que yo pudiera hacer el recorrido y llegar después a mi escuela a tiempo. A la salida, de igual manera, los recogía para llegar a comer a la casa. Mi mamá me pidió, de igual forma, que me coordinara con la empleada doméstica para que me encargara lo que hacía falta para la casa, el mandado no podía faltar y todo debería estar bien, pues mi papá era muy exigente con la comida, tenía que conseguir, a como diera lugar, tortillas blancas y otra serie de cosas que mi papá no perdonaba que faltaran. Sin importar el estado de salud de mi mamá, la exigencia era la misma. También fue necesario que yo, como hija mayor, aceptara la exigencia de tomar el lugar de mi mamá, tratando de poner orden y paz con mis hermanos, que como era natural peleaban y discutían toda

la tarde. Ahora pienso que el estado de salud de mi mamá influía en el estado de ánimo de todos, sobre todo en el de mi papá que estaba casi siempre angustiado, ansioso e irritable.

También se dieron anécdotas, que ahora nos parecen jocosas, pero que en su momento causaron grandes disgustos. Recuerdo que un día, mi papá, muy enojado, nos dijo que todos teníamos que ayudar y cooperar en las tareas de la casa en la que todo estaba de cabeza. Mi hermana, que en ese entonces tenía como once años, tuvo la genial ocurrencia de echar a la lavadora los trajes de casimir de lana de mi papá con detergente para lavadora de trastes. Como era de esperar todos quedaron arruinados, sin remedio alguno. En ese momento tuve que hacer acopio de mis dotes diplomáticos, que en realidad no tenía, para que mi papá se calmara y no mortificara aún más a mi mamá. Le prometí que todo iba a estar bien, que yo me haría cargo. La promesa fue muy aventurada porque en realidad yo no sabía cómo administrar una casa, pero con mucho esmero fui aprendiendo, mi propia consigna era que mi mamá tuviera la mayor paz posible en medio de tantas batallas.

Ni qué decir de las luchas que ella tuvo que afrontar. Solo en esta época vi a mi papá llorar, y creo que sus lágrimas eran por el sufrimiento que le causaba ver a mi mamá en ese estado, por la impotencia y la incertidumbre. ¿Cuál fue el desenlace? El injerto no encarnó, no en ese intento. El médico propuso cortar la pierna y si no se aceptaba esa opción, él se retiraría del caso; y, así lo hizo. De ahí siguió un largo peregrinar con otros médicos, en otras ciudades; hasta que finalmente la herida sanó, aunque quedaron grandes cicatrices que dejaron marcadas sus piernas. Durante este tiempo, desde su cama, mi mamá no dejó su responsabilidad con relación a la organización de la casa, como dije antes, yo me convertí en su mano derecha, pero la batuta siempre la llevaba ella. Por las tardes ayudaba a mis hermanos con sus tareas, siempre estuvo, dentro de sus prioridades la educación de sus hijos. Ella hablaba con todos nosotros de cosas importantes de la vida, con cada uno, lo que ella creía más conveniente. El hecho era que los cinco hijos estábamos o en la pubertad o en la adolescencia, y como cabía esperar, la dinámica familia pasaba por una etapa difícil. Mi papá estaba desesperado, sin saber qué hacer, pues la convivencia con nosotros era en realidad casi nula, todo se organizaba a través de mi mamá, ella era el eje alrededor del cual giraba la vida familiar; él se ocupaba más bien de trabajar, de su papel de proveedor.

Pasó el tiempo, casi quince años, era el año de 1989, cuando de forma inesperada mi papá murió de un derrame cerebral masivo a los cincuenta y seis años. Yo, la mayor de la familia, tenía treinta años y mis cuatro hermanos menores me seguían en escalera, nos llevábamos entre uno y dos años entre nosotros. Estaba casada, tenía tres hijas y venía la cuarta en camino. Tres de mis hermanos también ya estaban casados, teniendo a sus niños y pronto se casaría el menor de los cinco.

Mis papás estaban en una edad en la que gozaban de buena salud, eran fuertes en muchos sentidos, tenían proyectos importantes por realizar, podían disfrutar de todo aquello que habían sembrado en la vida y esperaban aún más del porvenir. Ellos tenían un matrimonio que, como diría Serrat, fue madurando “golpe a golpe y verso a verso”; una buena posición social y económica; amigos, pocos, pero entrañables; y, sobre todo, la experiencia para ellos más valiosa era estar disfrutando la llegada de los nietos. La dinámica familiar estaba cambiando, nos tocaba vivir la experiencia de incluir formas diferentes de vida dentro del seno familiar.

Al morir mi papá, en los primeros días, como es de suponer, todos fuimos experimentando nuestro propio duelo, cada quien a su manera. Unos estábamos en la negación, otros en la ira o en la racionalización. Así, en el ir y venir del duelo, habíamos oído decir que normalmente este duraría aproximadamente un año, si es cierto o no, no lo sé, el caso es que

todos aceptamos y dimos por bueno el plazo. Pienso que aceptamos este plazo como un pacto no tangible, entonces, creo que dejamos de preocuparnos por el estado anímico de los demás, porque finalmente en julio de 1990 todos estaríamos bien. No sabíamos que estas son “reglas” instituidas por el sentido común y lo que la gente cree y dice, ahora sé gracias al planteamiento de la tanatología de Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, que el proceso de duelo tiene varias fases y que estas se presentan de manera distinta en cada persona; que el tiempo varía en cada caso; y, además, que no todos los duelos desembocan en la fase final que es la de la “aceptación”.

En los primeros meses, mi mamá estaba muy triste, como era de esperar, pero iba fluyendo, podríamos decir que tres pasos para adelante, y de repente, uno para atrás. Pero, en un punto del camino la fórmula cambió y entonces, fue un paso para adelante y dos para atrás. Yo no me di cuenta de que esto estaba sucediendo. Creo que mis hermanos varones, al menos en apariencia, eran los que más pronto daban muestras de irse adaptando a nuestra nueva realidad. Y digo en apariencia, porque en este México lindo y querido, a los hombres se les enseña a anular y a ocultar sus sentimientos y sus emociones; aunque pensándolo bien, en mi familia esta regla, la aplicó mi mamá para todos. No valía quebrantarse o, al menos, no había que demostrarlo.

No recuerdo exactamente cuándo nos fuimos dando cuenta de que mi mamá se había quedado estancada en su proceso de duelo. He tratado de hacer memoria, y creo que solo asumí, en automático, que todos íbamos fluyendo, cada quien, a su manera, de manera correcta, sin detenerme a reflexionar, en realidad, cómo estaba mi mamá. Ahora me doy cuenta de que mi atención estaba concentrada en mis ocupaciones diarias, en mi matrimonio, mis cuatro hijas y el trabajo. Seguro que también a mis hermanos les pasó lo mismo, cada quien en lo suyo y confiando en que finalmente todos nos recuperaríamos de la pérdida. Lo que quiero decir es que, aunque sí estábamos pendientes de ella, todos la visitábamos y tratábamos de distraerla y consolarla, ninguno de los cinco tuvimos la agudeza de una mirada que verdaderamente hiciera contacto con lo más íntimo de su ser, no nos dimos cuenta de que su duelo no estaba fluyendo adecuadamente.

Cuando el estado anímico de mi mamá se hizo más patente, en sentido negativo, sucedía que cuando le hablabas, aunque parecía que te escuchaba, no era así, ya que cuando le hacías una pregunta, no sabía de lo que se estaba tratando el asunto, cuando la llamabas “mamá”, “mamá”, parecía regresar desde muy, muy lejos, pero su mirada, seguía ausente. Creo que ella se refugió en un mundo paralelo, porque su mundo había perdido el sentido debido a la pérdida de su esposo. Algunos de los síntomas fueron que ella dejó de levantarse a su hora habitual, era como si quisiera seguir dormida para evadirse del sufrimiento; descuidó su arreglo personal, en el que tanto se esmeraba antes; empezó a serle indiferente lo que comía; dejó de interactuar activamente con sus hijos y sus nietos, con sus papás, con sus amigas y sus hermanos.

Llegó el momento en el que, como en un secreto a voces, todos empezamos a murmurar que de seguro ella padecía una profunda depresión. Al hablar con mi mamá de este tema, ella lo negaba, decía que era pasajero, que ya pronto se le iba a pasar..., que estaba bien..., que solo estaba triste. Aunque los síntomas de desapego de la realidad, falta de apetito, deseos de prolongar las horas de sueño, poco empeño en su arreglo personal, decaimiento físico, en fin, se puede decir que no tenía ganas de interactuar con nadie, ni con nada. En lo personal, creí que era una fase natural en su proceso de duelo, ni por un momento sospeché que ya había caído en aguas pantanosas de las que sería muy difícil salir, y menos sin el apoyo profesional adecuado. En este punto, confieso que me aletargué debido a mi ignorancia. No vi venir que, en realidad, su salud física, emocional y mental estaban ya muy comprometidas. Lo que prevalecía en mi mente

era que su comportamiento era “normal” dentro de un proceso de duelo, yo no tenía el ojo avizor para darme cuenta de que ya había cruzado esa línea tan fina entre el duelo y la pérdida del sentido de la existencia.

Ante la insistencia de sus hijos e hijas, un poco más adelante, aceptó un tratamiento psiquiátrico, este tipo de atención médica era algo nuevo en la familia, todos ignorábamos, qué implicaba en realidad un tratamiento de este tipo, qué variantes existían, qué repercusiones o efectos secundarios podían tener los medicamentos, solo confiamos en la fortaleza de mi mamá y en el médico que la iba a tratar. En este sentido, ahora, creo que todos confiamos sin conocer la problemática, nos conformamos con las respuestas del médico, sin indagar más a fondo sobre los efectos de medicamentos tan fuertes para el sistema humano. Sus repuestas ante los interrogantes de, ¿Por qué mi mamá no reacciona? ¿Por qué permanece en ese estado de somnolencia? ¿Por qué mantiene esa actitud de desapego a la vida? ¿Por qué, en general, está sin estar? El médico contestaba que era natural y que estaba tratando de encontrar los medicamentos y las dosis adecuadas. El problema era que estábamos jugando en contra del tiempo.

El psiquiatra nos decía que ella iba bien, que era normal, que la pérdida había sido muy grande e inesperada, que pronto la tendríamos de regreso. La primera receta que le dio constaba de varios medicamentos. El tiempo seguía pasando y su estado anímico lejos de mejorar, empeoraba. Frente a ello, el doctor aumentaba la dosis de las medicinas, era impresionante ver toda esa variedad de formas, colores y tamaños pasar de su mano a su boca. Y luego, otra vez, un estado de aturdimiento, de evasión, de somnolencia, de resignación, un estar, sin estar. Ya casi nada era capaz de captar su atención, de motivarla, de ponerla otra vez en pie de lucha; quizás, solo sus nietos.

Justo cuatro años después de la muerte de mi papá, un día, recuerdo que hacía mucho calor, era verano, había llovido poco, llegué a mi casa, que estaba al lado de la de mi mamá, era mediodía cuando el sol está en lo más alto y sientes que te vas a derretir. Ella también iba llegando a su casa, me llamó, nos encontramos en medio de las dos casas y me dijo, “Mira esta bolita que me salió en el cuello, tócala”. Efectivamente, se palpaba una bola, como del tamaño de una canica, y agregó, “También tengo otra, un poco más abajo, está más chiquita”. Yo sentí cómo, en medio de un día tan caluroso, se me helaba la sangre, que las piernas se me aflojaban, que el estómago me daba vueltas, el corazón me empezó a latir muy fuerte, presentí que esto iba a ser un problema mayor. Como respuesta a todas sus enseñanzas, mi reacción fue inmediata: recomponete, pensé, hay que disimular el agobio y la preocupación. Había que tomar la actitud de “no pasa nada”, lección que continuamente habíamos aprendido mis hermanos y yo, por parte de mi papá.

Acordamos mi mamá y yo decírselo a mi hermana, y luego las tres juntas decidimos que lo primero era acudir de inmediato al médico. Fuimos con el médico de la familia, él había tratado a mis papás desde hacía muchos años y además había llevado una entrañable amistad con mi papá. Él nos indicó que mi mamá necesitaba una revisión detallada por parte de un oncólogo. Entonces, nos reunimos todos, mi mamá, mis hermanos y yo para decidir con qué oncólogo acudiríamos; mi mamá fue quien tomó la decisión, eligió al mismo oncólogo que había tratado algunos años atrás a mi abuelo materno. Él tuvo cáncer, pero, después de cumplir al pie de la letra su tratamiento, salió adelante sin ningún problema; desde que entró en estado de remisión, nunca volvió a presentar células cancerosas en su organismo, murió casi de noventa y nueve años.

El oncólogo estaba en Houston, así que mi hermana y yo la acompañamos a Texas para que la revisara. Después de mandar a hacer una biopsia, el médico nos citó un día primero de

julio, fecha en la que mi mamá cumplía cincuenta y cuatro años, para darnos los resultados, y así, sin más ni más, nos dijo que los tumores estaban en los ganglios linfáticos y eran malignos. Después agregó, dirigiéndose a mi mamá, que no se preocupara que su cáncer era justamente del mismo tipo del que había padecido su papá y que estaba en una de sus primeras etapas, que todo saldría muy bien. De ahí siguió el tratamiento con quimioterapia y luego con radiaciones.

A los cuatro meses, contra todo pronóstico, mi mamá murió.

Vuelvo un poco más atrás en la historia. Cuando mi mamá fue diagnosticada con cáncer, todos estábamos abatidos, solo hacía cuatro años de la muerte de mi papá, y ahora a sus cincuenta y cuatro años, estábamos en peligro de perderla a ella. Dentro de un estado de tensión y sobresalto inicial, en el clima familiar fue prevaleciendo un ambiente de esperanza. No sé si en este punto del camino fueron los mecanismos de defensa los que salieron a hacernos creer que la enfermedad no podría vencer a una mujer otrora tan sana y fuerte.

En estos días, Rocío, una amiga mía muy querida, a quien aprecio mucho por ser una mujer fuerte, juiciosa, de muy dulces sentimientos y además psicóloga, me fue a visitar para infundirme valor y decirme que deseaba con todo su corazón que mi mamá se reestableciera muy pronto. Para regalarle a mi mamá, ella me llevó el libro del Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, titulado “El Hombre en Busca de Sentido”. Yo no había leído ninguna obra de este autor, ni siquiera sabía de su existencia. Mi mente estaba tan abstraída con la noticia del cáncer de mi mamá que la verdad no puse mayor atención en el libro. Simplemente, le di las gracias y guardé el libro para entregárselo más tarde a mi mamá. Por la tarde se lo llevé, le dije que se lo mandaba regalar Rocío, mi amiga, me dio las gracias y lo dejó en su buró. Mi mamá siempre fue una excelente lectora y a todos sus hijos nos inculcó el hábito de la lectura. Pasaron varios días, quizás algunas semanas y yo veía que el libro permanecía intacto en el mismo lugar. Un día le pregunté por qué no lo había empezado a leer y me contestó que no tenía ganas de leer. Se lo pedí prestado, comencé a leerlo y fue en ese momento cuando comenzó mi encuentro con Viktor Frankl, quien, hasta la fecha, ha sido uno de mis grandes maestros y compañeros de vida.

La primera vez que lo leí, me enfrasqué en su contenido siguiendo la historia del preso número 119.104, una historia de las tantas que habían sucedido a raíz del nazismo. Después me di cuenta, que, sin proponérmelo, mi mente volvía recurrentemente a pensar sobre las distintas vivencias de Frankl y sus compañeros en circunstancias tan inhumanas dentro del campo de concentración. Las historias de vida que se narraban verdaderamente dejaban ver al lector el atentado tan brutal en contra de la dignidad del ser humano. En ese momento, no asocié para nada esta narrativa con la historia que estábamos viviendo con mi mamá. Hasta que poco a poco, comprendiendo una cosa, luego la otra, me fui dando cuenta de que lo que este libro contenía, no hacía referencia a una sola persona, en determinada situación y circunstancias, y empecé a intuir que había algo que en esencia nos pertenecía a todos. Entonces caí en la cuenta de que las observaciones, experiencias y enseñanzas del Dr. Frankl trascendían las vallas electrificadas del campo de concentración. Ahora me doy cuenta de que en ese momento tuve una epifanía.

Viktor Frankl vivió los horrores del holocausto en carne propia, él es un testimonio de su propia teoría. Su tesis no se construyó al amparo de la imaginación, sino que quedó cimentada con base a sus vivencias y a la observación disciplinada, metódica y científica de lo que es el ser humano. En los campos de concentración en los que estuvo, él vio dos clases de personas, aquellas que perdieron la esperanza y sucumbieron ante tanto dolor y sufrimiento; y los que, de manera contraria, caminaron de pie, conservando su dignidad, sin perder la esperanza; es decir, lograron conservar el sentido de sus vidas. Ante estas dos maneras de vivir prácticamente las mismas experiencias, Frankl se preguntó qué era lo que los hacía comportarse y reaccionar de

manera tan distinta. ¿Qué movía la voluntad de los unos y los otros? ¿Por qué unos sí pudieron conservar el sentido de sus vidas, a pesar de los horrores que estaban padeciendo? Y dado el caso, ¿cuál fue su principal sostén?

Fui trasladando estos cuestionamientos al caso de mi mamá. ¿Por qué cayó en un estado depresivo del que no pudo salir, siendo que había tenido atención psiquiátrica y seguido las indicaciones de su médico? ¿Por qué otras personas eran capaces de llevar adelante sus duelos y llegar al estado de aceptación? ¿Por qué una mujer con tanta fortaleza sucumbió ante las depresiones y las somatizó en un cáncer? En mi camino por la búsqueda de respuestas aprendí que el Dr. Frankl propuso que existen diferentes tipos de psicosis, que los psiquiatras son los especialistas que deben estar capacitados para determinar su naturaleza y, así, remitir a cada paciente a la terapia adecuada.

La depresión es un tipo de psicosis. Si esta hunde sus raíces en la experiencia de la falta de sentido existencial, se llama <<neurosis noógena>> y debería ser atendida por los logoterapeutas. Ellos no son capaces de devolver el sentido a sus pacientes, pero sí están capacitados para “describir las formas en las que el proceso de percepción de sentido es realizado por <<el hombre o la mujer de la calle>> (...)” (Frankl, 1994, p. 35) Los logoterapeutas hacen ver a sus pacientes que son tres los valores que iluminan el camino hacia el sentido: 1) Hallar el sentido mediante la creatividad en un trabajo o realizarlo en una obra; 2) lograr el encuentro con “otro” ser humano o vivenciar una experiencia en el arte o la contemplación; 3) lograr que una tragedia personal se convierta en un triunfo humano. Estos tres valores fundan la estructura axiológica tripartita de su teoría: valores de creación, valores de vivencia y valores de actitud.

La experiencia de vivir estos tres valores, de preferencia en forma armónica, cuidando un fino balance, es necesaria para la recuperación del sentido de la existencia. Aunque cabe aclarar que los valores de actitud solo se deben experimentar cuando estos se presentan como una prueba de vida, no se deben buscar; esta conducta sería enfermiza, puesto que estaría apuntando hacia una actitud masoquista.

Afirma Frankl que: “Los valores se complementan y con ello se magnifican. Dentro de la gama de los valores de vivencia, el amor es su más perfecto representante. La existencia es auto-trascendencia, es por ello que los valores de vivencia también se fundan en la comunidad. Principalmente en la comunidad que está constituida en la intimidad de un <<yo>> con un <<tú>>”. (...) El amor es, exactamente, la vivencia de otro ser humano en todo lo que su vida tiene de peculiar y singular,” (Frankl, 1994, p. 197) Una persona, que vive su vida aislada, sin tener vínculos humanos que la hagan vibrar, es muy probable que vaya perdiendo la frecuencia que proporciona el con-vivir. Desgraciadamente, mi mamá, sin saberlo, se fue encerrando cada vez más en sí misma, esto la llevó a un círculo vicioso, en el cual se fue desconectando cada día más y más de sus seres queridos. Sobreponernos al dolor y al sufrimiento conlleva la decisión de fomentar relaciones humanas profundas. Por lo que la conocía, pienso que, en el caso de mi mamá, haber optado por trabajar (valores de creación) en una asociación civil o haber asistido como voluntaria a cualquier causa, le hubiera dado la oportunidad de amalgamar el servicio con el amor (valores de vivencia).

Los valores de creación y de vivencia, ambos a la vez, deben buscar su realización en el día a día, con plena conciencia y responsabilidad; sin embargo, los valores de actitud tienen una dinámica diferente. Este grupo de valores consiste precisamente en la actitud que la persona adopta cuando el dolor y/o el sufrimiento aparecen en su vida, como un hecho irremisible. Por muy devastadores que sean estos sentimientos, dice Frankl, la persona no puede renunciar a su vida, no puede dimitir. “Mientras el hombre conserva la conciencia, sigue siendo responsable

frente a los valores de la vida, aunque éstos sean solamente los que llamamos de actitud.” (Frankl, 2010, p. 76) Frankl considera que cuando la persona se mantiene luchando ante las adversidades, tratando de salir adelante, buscando nuevos horizontes de realización, con conciencia de lo que le acontece y aceptando una situación que el destino le impone como irremisible, es cuando el ser humano realmente hace uso de su libertad. La libertad y la responsabilidad, a la luz de la teoría frankliana, forman un vínculo que no debería disolverse.

No cabe duda de que la conciencia de una misión en la vida posee un extraordinario valor psicoterapéutico y psicosocial. No tenemos reparo en afirmar que no hay nada más que ayude al hombre a vencer o, por lo menos, a soportar las dificultades objetivas y las penalidades subjetivas que la conciencia de tener una misión que cumplir. Esta misión cuando se la concibe como algo personal, hace a su portador insustituible, irremplazable, y confiere a su vida el valor de algo único. (Frankl, 1994, p. 90)

El análisis de la existencia en la logoterapia enseña al paciente a concebir la vida como una continua misión; por lo tanto, no es que la persona venga a este mundo solo a concluir una misión única, es una larga cadena formada por muchas misiones.

Si reflexionamos sobre la estructura originaria de nuestro vivir el mundo, habremos de operar sobre el sentido de la vida la revolución copernicana: es la vida misma la que plantea cuestiones al hombre. Éste no tiene por qué interrogarla: es a él, por el contrario, a quién la vida interroga: y él quien tiene que responder a la vida, hacerse responsable. (Frankl, 1994, p. 100-101)

Con relación al concepto del vacío existencial, Frankl afirma que lo padecen aquellas personas que sienten que sus vidas carecen total y definitivamente de un sentido, se ven acosadas por la sensación de tener un desierto dentro de sí.

¡Ay del hombre cuya fe en el sentido de su existencia vacile, al llegar el momento de la fatalidad! Se quedará si esto le sucede, sin reserva moral alguna; el hombre, en estas condiciones, se ve privado de aquellas energías espirituales que sólo es capaz de ofrecer una concepción del mundo que afirme incondicionalmente el sentido de la vida –sin necesidad de que, para ello, el hombre cobre clara conciencia en este sentido ni, mucho menos, que llegue a dar a esta conciencia una clara formulación conceptual y se encontrará así, desarmado para recibir, en las horas difíciles de la vida, los golpes del destino y para compensar <<la fuerza>> de la fatalidad con la suya propia. (Frankl, 2010, p. 52)

A mi mamá, pienso yo, le sucedió lo que el Dr. Frankl postula en el anterior pensamiento. El momento de la fatalidad se presentó de repente, sin previo aviso, mi papá siendo un hombre maduro, pero no viejo, había muerto. Mi mamá ante lo inesperado perdió aquellas energías físicas, emocionales, mentales y espirituales que requería para sobrellevar el duelo. Ella, en su momento, y todos los seres humanos necesitamos tener en lo más profundo de nuestro ser la firme convicción de que *la vida tiene sentido bajo cualquier circunstancia*. Encontré que el Dr. Frankl afirmó que esta convicción no necesita de una clara formulación conceptual, sino de la convicción de permanecer en una lucha continua por lograr una vida plena de sentido.

Al ir analizando el caso de mi mamá, contrastándolo con la teoría de Frankl, fui comprendiendo que, lo más probable, era que a ella se le atendió con una terapia y medicamentos que no fueron los adecuados. Ahora que me he adentrado de lleno en el estudio de la teoría de Frankl, pienso que mi mamá lo que necesitó en ese momento, era un acompañamiento, desde la logoterapia, el análisis existencial y la tanatología de Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, esta última, con el

propósito de haberle ofrecido un acompañamiento en la recuperación del sentido de su vida y en el tránsito adecuado por cada una de las fases del proceso de su duelo.

Asumir, simplemente por sentido común que los duelos duran aproximadamente un año y que toda persona finalmente llega a la fase de aceptación fue un error que yo cometí por ignorancia, no me siento culpable por ello porque yo en ese momento no tenía los conocimientos, ni los medios para comprender lo que en realidad le estaba sucediendo a mi mamá. Pero, hoy en día, y desde hace tiempo asumí la responsabilidad de aprender sobre este tema y compartir mis conocimientos con todas las personas que me lo permitieran con el propósito de contribuir, en la medida de mis posibilidades, que nadie más padezca o muera por no haber recibido la terapia adecuada.

Termino diciendo: ¡De haberlo sabido antes!

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Un Relato Autoetnográfico sobre las Pedagogías Campesinas de mi Padre

Adriana Parra (adrianam.parra86@gmail.com)



Camino a la escuela. Pintura en óleo. Fuente propia.

Resumen

En los años 90, en Colombia, millones de familias fuimos desterradas por las violencias. Tiempo atrás fuimos obligados a entregar la tierra, por lo que cada vez estuvimos más lejos de la montaña y el río. En 1998 las personas armadas reclamaron no sólo tierra y/o animales, sino además un miembro de cada familia para la guerra. Para quienes no aceptamos la entrega de un familiar, la condena fue el destierro. Condenados a vivir en la ciudad (desierto), acudimos a las historias para mantener vivo nuestro mundo rural. Mi padre murió en el exilio, heredándonos su amor por la tierra. Las palabras en este escrito son mis primeros pasos para comprender y acoger tan maravillosa herencia.

Palabras clave

autoetnografía, destierro, mundo rural, pedagogías campesinas

Abstract

In the 1990s, in Colombia, millions of families were exiled by violence. Some time ago we were forced to hand over the land, so we were increasingly farther from the mountains and the river. In 1998, armed people claimed not only land and or animals, but also one member of each family for the war. For those of us who did not accept the delivery of a family member, the sentence was exile. Condemned to live in the city (desert), we turned to stories to keep our rural world alive. My father died in exile, inheriting his love for the land. The words in this writing are my first steps for understanding and embracing such a wonderful heritage.

Keywords

autoethnography, exile, rural world, peasant pedagogies

Tras las huellas de una herencia

Comparto dos diálogos acerca de una de las orillas de la herencia de mi padre, la cual pretendo teorizar como parte de mi tesis doctoral: las pedagogías campesinas.

Diálogo, sueño – despertar sobre el secuestro

–Padre..., el otro día tuve un sueño...

–¿Me quiere contar, mijita?

–Fue al amanecer de un día frío, intentaba abrir mis ojos con mucha dificultad, quería soñar un poco más, adentrarme aún más en aquella montaña..., ascendía a ella caminando entre muchos árboles, habitados todos ellos por pequeñas aves cantoras de diversos colores.

–¿Recuerda lo que sentía, mijita?

–Sentía curiosidad..., los árboles formaban una especie de techo, el cual dejaba entrar el sol, pero de una manera muy tímida. Al instante, un caballo salvaje caminaba a mi lado, sus pasos eran firmes pero muy cuidadosos..., era un poco confuso, en ocasiones a mi lado, en ocasiones galopaba delante de mí, como mostrando caminos.

–¿Recuerda el color del caballo, mijita?

–Era negro padre...

–¿Y cómo eran los caminos que le mostraba?

–Como los caminos de trocha que tantas veces hemos andado.

–Yo caminaba junto al caballo, luego lo contemplaba..., las plantas iban abriendo paso, floreciendo con colores muy intensos, casi como celebrando su caminar. Me surgió una intuición, este caballo que en ocasiones se mostraba como una gigante ave, parecía ser de ahí, de cada espacio que habitaba. Aunque maravillada, me sentía algo extraña y me sorprendía su compañía ¿Qué lo hacía esperarme y mostrarme caminos? ¿A qué lugar quería llevarme...?

–Mijita, ¿usted lo siguió?

–Sí, padre, estaba intrigada y decidida a descubrir su intención.

–No tengo certeza de cuánto tiempo lo seguí, no sentía cansancio, cada espacio de la montaña que visitábamos, contenía vida, nos contenía a nosotros. En un momento, el caballo hecho ave, aquietó su caminar/volar a la sombra de un enorme árbol..., como si esperara que esta vez, fuera yo quien decidiera el rumbo..., parecía un misterio que debía descifrar.

–¿Mantén el color el caballo cuando se convertía en ave?

–Sí, señor, el ave seguía siendo de color negro, aunque tenía unas pintas blancas en la cabeza.

–¿Qué rumbo tomó usted, mijita?

–No alcancé a decidir qué camino tomar...

De repente, una escena, a manera de batalla, irrumpe en mi sueño..., el caballo emprende galope y se aleja apresurado, puedo sentir su intención de no alertar a otros sobre mi presencia..., perdí su rastro, se desvaneció conforme mis pies se iban alejando de la trocha. Una fuerza violenta me alejó abruptamente del camino. Seguido, gritos de angustia. Me desperté asustada. Caminé unos pasos y escuché a hermana decir con voz entrecortada y su cuerpo temblando: “Unos hombres armados se llevaron a padre...” (Comunicación personal con mi padre, agosto de 1998).

Diálogo, visita – entrada a la montaña y al río

–¿A dónde va, padre?

–A la montaña, mijita, hay que darle vuelta al sembrado... ¿Quiere ir?

–Todos los días quiero ir a la montaña, padre..., en silencio o escuchando sus historias.

–[Sonríe] Póngase las botas y empaque una carpa porque más rato nos llueve...

Y más tarde en la montaña...

–Mijita, despacio..., aguarde.

–¿Qué ocurre padre?

–Mire las hormiguitas..., ahí van haciendo camino.

–Esas son de las bravas... ¿Para dónde irán...?

–Por aquí deben tener el hormiguero. Agárrese de aquí para que pase y no las vaya a lastimar.

–Padre, ¿por qué le gustan las hormigas?

–Son trabajadoras y muy organizadas, atentas unas de las otras. Me gusta verlas trabajar...

–Se gasta sus buenos ratos, ¡lo he visto!

– [Sonríe] La tierra es muy sabia... Cuando estoy atento a ella, aprendo de la vida” (Comunicación personal con mi padre, junio de 1998).

Había un ritual al llegar al río. Iniciaba cuando padre plantaba una especie de estaca en la orilla del río, todos estaríamos atentos en caso de que el río la rebasara, pues era señal que se estaba “enojando”, lo cual era riesgoso e indicaba que debíamos salir de él... Padre contemplaba el río por unos minutos y luego se adentraba en él para caminarlo..., la tarea de todos nosotros era observar. Al adentrarse al río, el rostro de mi padre cambiaba con cada paso que daba..., al sentir la arena, las piedras, la corriente... veía cómo el nivel del agua iba subiendo y por momentos lo cubría completamente..., a veces caminaba, otras tantas, tenía que nadar. Era su manera de mostrarnos el río. Una vez conocíamos el río a través del cuerpo de mi padre, sucedía el momento de adentrarnos en él, esta vez, con nuestro propio cuerpo.

–Me da temor la corriente, padre...

–Entre despacio, mijita, y pise firme, un paso cada vez. Tranquila, más abajo está Gabriel... [Mis tíos se ubicaban más abajo en el río, por si la corriente se llevaba a alguno, padre estaba en la parte más honda] (Comunicación personal con mi padre, mayo de 1998).

Las formas de las huellas

Padre, hombre campesino, me enseñó acerca de la posibilidad de construir pequeños lugares seguros, aun en medio de tantas y tan atroces violencias; él construyó un parque de juegos con guadua en el patio de la casa para preservar en mí la capacidad de jugar. Solía llevarnos de paseo al río, muchas familias en el pueblo lo hacían. Sentía mucha ilusión cuando nos daba la noticia de la visita al río, por lo que, antes de dormir, cada uno de mis hermanos dejaba listo aquello que quería llevar. Aunque cada uno elegía algo (una pelota, una hamaca...), por lo general estábamos todos de acuerdo en llevar un neumático, para recorrer el río en sintonía con sus corrientes de agua. Era también una tarea previa la de conseguir lombrices por si había ocasión de pescar. Recuerdo sentir alegría desde el momento en que recibía la noticia, era cuestión de un día, sin embargo, lo disfrutaba tanto que para mí significaba un viaje precioso; el tiempo acá tenía otro valor. Procuraba en cada viaje conservar algo del río, una piedrita de un color o forma que no había visto, un trozo de árbol..., eran pequeños tesoros para mí. Aquel día que salíamos al río, nos levantábamos muy temprano, distribuíamos el equipaje con el peso que cada uno podía soportar y emprendíamos el camino. Lo más frecuente era caminar hasta llegar al río. En ocasiones, en el regreso, algún amigo de padre nos recogía en su carro al encontrarnos en el camino.

Padre decía que los ríos eran una de las maravillas de la naturaleza, por su fuerza y sonoridad; sin embargo, enfatizaba siempre en la importancia de leerlos y caminarlos antes de intentar hacer frente a sus corrientes y nadar en su profundidad. La fuerza de esta maravilla lo fascinaba, pero también lo atemorizaba...

Padre habitó el campo desde una relación de cuidado, leía la naturaleza y me la contaba a través de sus historias..., luego me invitaba a leerla – vivirla con mi propio cuerpo para crear mis propias historias. En palabras de Paulo Freire (2004), “la lectura del mundo precede a la lectura de la palabra” (p. 94); de ello se ocupó mi padre, de enseñarme a leer nuestro mundo rural. En mis pinturas-narradas se entrecruzan sus historias, las mías y las de otras gentes campesinas que al igual que padre aman el campo y encarnan las escuelas rurales como espacios potenciales.

Los tiempos compartidos con padre me dejaron en el cuerpo tres asuntos:

- a. El cuidado con la tierra y todo lo que en ella habita. Esa intencionalidad de querer conocer (se) a propósito de las relaciones con el mundo.

- b. Las formas creativas para sobrevivir que padre inventaba. Recién descubro que la mía es pintar en óleo.
- c. La familia que uno se puede inventar con las personas que le cuidan. Acudo a las enseñanzas de padre y a los planteamientos de Silvia Bleichmar (2008) “la protección y cuidado de los más débiles para garantizarles un lugar en el mundo y un desarrollo que no los deje librados a la muerte física o simbólica” (p. 127); al proponer como función central de la familia, el cuidado.

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Presto Chango: Moving from “Looking at” to “Being with” People Experiencing Homelessness through the Lens of the Magician

Bozz Connelly
Antioch University
bozzconnelly@gmail.com

Abstract

I’m going to tell you a story. Drawing from my M.A thesis of the same title (Connelly, 2021), I am going to describe a study that has unfolded over more than 15 years in different locations. I have been blown away by magicians, what they do, the skill of their hands, how they masterfully direct and misdirect my attention and I wanted to know more about that. Therefore, I created my own project where I explored how magic can be used as a bridge to understanding and inner growth centred around my interactions with people experiencing homelessness in Southeast Queensland, Australia.

Keywords

Critical Autoethnography, Wonder, People Experiencing Homelessness, Lens of the Magician, Magic

Acknowledgment of Country

I acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the land upon which this project was carried out and upon which this presentation was written, this includes Gubbi Gubbi Country and Darumbal Country. I pay my respects to the Elders both past, present, and emerging and acknowledge that the sovereignty of these lands was never ceded and that I live and work upon stolen land.

I opened this presentation, as I always do, with some magic. This was a piece of magic I shared with my learning cohort during my MA program at Antioch University. I recommend watching the video of my presentation to experience it as it was intended, the video can be found here: <https://youtu.be/p3xEEIiw3BQ>

To position this presentation, I am going to share three snapshots that illustrate my evolving relationship to my intra-actions (Barad, 2007) with people experiencing homelessness.



Figure 1. UC Berkeley, west entrance from the perspective of a skateboard (Connelly, 2007).

When I was 20, I spent a semester at Berkeley, California (See Figure 1). Not as a student, but as the partner of a student, meaning I had a lot of spare time to experience being where I was. It was here that I was exposed for the first time to a whole population of people experiencing homelessness. It's not like I hadn't seen people experiencing homelessness before, but this was the first time that I had that experience en masse. It affected me deeply. When I arrived, I was outraged that such a widespread condition could be allowed to exist, and I was disappointed and angry at my partner's supposed lack of concern. But I noticed after having been there for only a few short weeks that my attitude and reaction had changed from automatic outrage to complacency and blindness. I befriended, through chess and the occasional joint, a man who was living at the people's park, a local hub for the population of people experiencing homelessness, and over the course of the months that I was there we got to know each other, and I learnt his story. This was the first time that I had engaged on a one-to-one, human to human level with someone experiencing homelessness.



Figure 2. Walking the Cliffs of Muir (Connelly, 2018).

Fast forward over ten years later, I am 31 and I'm walking along the Cliffs of Muir in County Clare, Ireland (See figure 2). I've been living in the UK for the last 2 years, and while I have noticed the populations of people experiencing homelessness there, I have become somewhat dulled to it. As I walk along, I have a deck of cards in my hand. I started practicing card magic the previous year as I began my MA programme. It was a way to give my hands something to do whilst my mind stayed focussed as I have never been one to sit still without fidgeting. As I was practising a new sleight, I had an image come into my mind of my used decks of cards that were becoming an ever-bigger pile and what I could do with them. I saw myself armed with these decks of cards going out onto the streets of the cities that we passed through and striking up conversations with the people experiencing homelessness and showing them how to do a few simple tricks, giving them a few sleights to practice and a deck of cards to practice with and hoping that maybe by this simple act that some of them might be able to take back a modicum of control of their own lives. This stemmed from my own acknowledgement that I do not give money to people on the streets with signs or with hats on the ground in front of them, but I'll stand happily and watch a street performer and put a few coins into their collection plate at the end of the performance. The seed of this project grew from the idea that by sharing a few basics of magic that some of the most vulnerable people in our society might gain a little empowerment.



Figure 3. A Pandemic is declared (Connelly, 2020)

It's 2020, I'm 33, it is the year of Covid-19 (see Figure 3). In amongst the chaos comes the news that yet another Person of Colour has been killed in police custody in the USA. There are protests worldwide, people are risking their own personal health and safety to take a stand against prejudice. This has caused me to reflect upon my own often passive role in the continuation of white supremacy. It causes me to reflect upon this idea of the white saviour in terms of my thesis project. I have arranged with my local service for people experiencing homelessness to run fortnightly workshops. But who am I to come in and tell people what they need to do in order to better themselves? It was during this time, thinking these thoughts and processing them that I began to move away from my idea of going in and teaching with set outcomes in mind. I moved instead towards the idea of a skill share, where I would go in and interact with people and show them some magic, elicit some moments of wonder and play, share my knowledge with anyone who was interested and be open to any knowledge that they might want to share with me and just hope for a ripple effect to come from it. My hope was still that people will gain empowerment, but it was no longer my expectation.

In terms of my MA thesis project, I realised that I wasn't going to go in and analyse these people experiencing homelessness and look at outcomes of how much magic they had learnt and how much they then earned etc. It wasn't a straightforward qualitative study looking at their opinions about my sessions or how or if they had helped. It was directly connected to me and my journey. This led me to autoethnography, a method where one critiques oneself within a culture (Spry, 2001).

Through further reading, I understood that what I was engaged in was a critical autoethnographic study. Holman Jones (2016) argues that:

Where autoethnography brings the personal, the concrete, and an emphasis on storytelling to our scholarship, it often leaves us wanting for clear and powerful theoretical frameworks for understanding how such stories help us write into or become the change we seek in the world. Critical theory provides us with such frameworks... The "critical" in critical autoethnography reminds us that theory is not a static or autonomous set of ideas, objects, or practices. Instead, theorizing is an ongoing process that links the concrete and abstract, thinking and acting, aesthetics, and criticism...
(p.228)

I realised that I needed to do more work on myself to explore my perceptions of people experiencing homelessness and my ability to help and that the lens of the magician, explored in my thesis, would help me scaffold this journey.

I designed a series of workshops that assumed no prior knowledge of card magic, or even basic card handling, that was designed to give absolute beginners a solid foundation upon which to build their magic skills. It was well-planned, well-researched and painstakingly prepared. It fell flat on its face. No one came. I had literally one attendee and they just happened to be in the space while I was setting up my first session. I was devastated. I thought quite seriously about giving up after my third consecutive session of having no one attend. But I believed in the power of what I was trying to do. Magic had helped me through hard times, and I believed it could help others, I wanted to help others.

So, I adapted. In consultation with the staff members at the service, I developed a new format. I let go of the idea of workshops and scaffolding sessions and all the clever ins and outs of this routine I'd worked on for so long. The primary aim of this project was to move from "looking at" to "being with" through magic and it was obvious now that setting myself up on a table inside one of the rooms wasn't the way to accomplish this. There were tables outside where people come to sit, chat, drink cups of tea, smoke cigarettes and eat their provided breakfast, so that's where I situated myself. And I came earlier when there are

people coming for breakfast and to collect hampers. My plan was to come and stay for an hour and a half, to sit myself down at one of these tables and interact with people, chat with them, hang out, get to know them, all the while playing with a deck of cards with the hope that somebody would prompt me to perform a bit of magic, or that I would find the confidence to perform a bit of magic unprompted. I liked this plan. I liked the feeling of adapting to the situation and not trying to push ahead with a format that clearly wasn't working. My willingness to adapt paid off. This new format allowed me to forge real connections with people through magic.

Stepping out of the story here I take a moment to breathe and, whilst playing with my cards, I reflect on my story, my autoethnography, realising the imperative role of performance as a magician. I am, following Spry (2011) engaged in performative autoethnography, understanding that “Performance is not an added scholarly bonus...performance does not “illuminate” the text, rather it assists in the creation of the text; it is in itself performative” (Spry, 2011, p. 28). Knowing the role of performance within my research allows me to be open to others.

Something that took me completely by surprise was the revelation that my brand of magic could be healing. I wasn't expecting that magic could have a potential healing aspect. I just hoped to entertain, to give people a moment of play, of wonder. The real punchline is that it took literally the entire project for me to come across this idea, and it was fed to me directly by someone with whom I'd had very little interaction up to that point. On a different side of the building to the one I frequented were a group of holistic practitioners who provided free services such as reiki and tarot reading to the users of the service. The in-house reiki practitioner dropped this line on me after I, very reluctantly, allowed him to, as he put it, 're-adjust my aura'. He said to me, “You know, you come in here and you do your magic. This is MY magic. We each have our own method of achieving the same end”. I was blown away by the obvious truth in that statement. The moment that he said to me “That's your magic. This is my magic”, everything changed. It was a fundamental shift in my outlook and in my reality that cannot be overstated.

The source of this revelation was just as amazing. These holistic practitioners were so far outside my own personal zone of truth that I hadn't even really registered that they were there, much less that what they were doing and what I was doing might be two sides of the same coin. It was completely unexpected! I went into this project, and I went into the service for people experiencing homelessness knowing that I was going to be challenging and disrupting my own views and preconceptions and prejudices surrounding people experiencing homelessness. I went in there expecting my views to change through the interactions I'd have. What I didn't anticipate or really make any allowance for was this discovery of what I do being compatible with things like tarot and reiki. This is explored in much greater depth in my thesis.

So, magic can heal. Am I also healing myself? What am I getting out of this? There's a lot that's happened in my life that needs to be healed, the same as any other person. Is magic my therapy? Is the performing and sharing of magic my therapy? If so, is it ethical of me to be getting these therapeutic moments from my audience? I believe it all comes down to intent. I attended an autoethnography conference in Bristol, UK, in 2018. One of the presentations was an utterly harrowing account of the presenters' battle with an abusive psychiatrist that still occasionally haunts my dreams to this day. There was no preamble or warning before the presentation, and I can't think that this was anything other than free therapy for the presenter to share their demon with those of us in the audience. My intention has never been to go and use strangers as unwilling therapists to help me overcome my own inner demons. My intention is, and always has been, to entertain, to share moments of wonder with people and to try in any small way to make someone's day a little easier, to help

lift their spirits, make them smile, with no expectation of receiving anything back for myself except for the pleasure and fulfilment that comes from sharing that moment together. If I benefit from some healing as well then, as it is not my intent but rather one of the side effects, I do not believe it to be immoral or unethical.

So, where am I now? What is my relationship to homelessness and those who are experiencing it or have experienced it? Well, I myself am currently transient, of no fixed abode. And not by choice. The Covid-19 pandemic has driven my family and I from place to place since March 2020. Sure, we had 10 months in one spot, but that was still temporary housing and now we have a granny flat in a friends' backyard until the start of 2022. After that, who knows? Now, more than ever, I dance that line between homed and homeless, aware that I still have so much privilege compared to many of the people I met throughout the course of my project. What has really been driven home by my experiences of the last 2 years is that anyone can experience homelessness.

It is an uncertain future. I am living the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) definition of homelessness. Most of our belongings are in storage and we have no real clue where we will be in a months' time. What I do know is that I will be meeting the challenges ahead with a deck of cards in my hand. Thusly armed, Bozz the Magician has the power and ability to forge connections through magic wherever we may go. Magic is reciprocal therapy, the potentiality of friendship, connection and relationship that can stem from a shared moment of wonder simply cannot be overstated.

Magic can be used to relate to people, any people, on an equal, human to human level.
It all begins with one simple phrase.
So, pick a card.
Any card.

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A Painter's Palimpsests: Visual Autoethnography in Lockdown

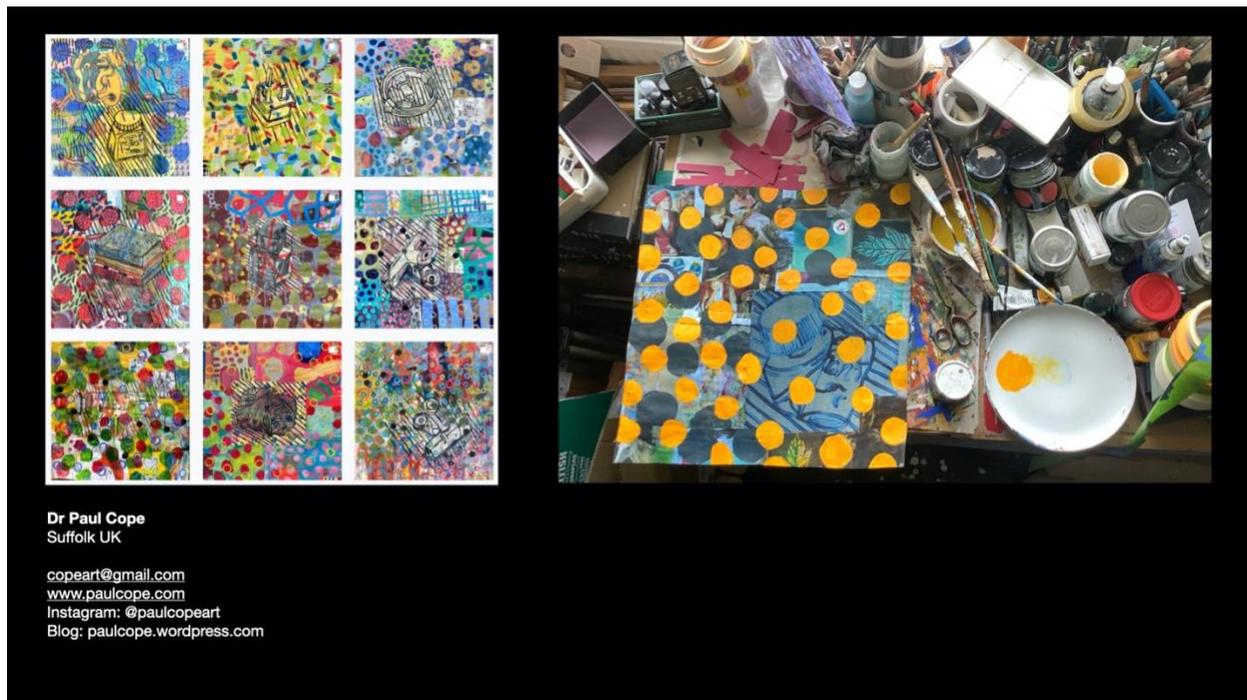
Paul Cope (copeart@gmail.com)

Abstract

A contribution to visual autoethnography through a series of collaged and painted works made during the pandemic lockdowns of the past two years. The works explore the restricted life world of the clinically extremely vulnerable through still life paintings made on collage patchworks of found materials and old drawings and prints from a studio clear out of work made during an art teaching career. The works represent an exploration of creativity within limited means, starting from where you are, using what is available and doing what is possible. The work has been shared on social media as a way of collaborating and communicating with a circle of artists and artist teachers.

Keywords

painting, collage, visual autoethnography, pandemic



My partner was officially listed as clinically extremely vulnerable and instructed to shield which has meant that we have both led very restricted lives over the past two years. At the beginning of



it all, I set out to make a body of artwork which would mark our passage through the pandemic.

My question was how it might be possible to use an autoethnographic inflected creative practice as a way of documenting and reflecting on the pandemic experience from our particular viewpoint as clinically extremely vulnerable in a rural town in Suffolk UK. I wanted to think about how to use creative practice to research something that is happening quite slowly, a change of consciousness which we may not understand until much later. How can we create documents and artworks that can track incremental shifts and provide some sort of map?



I also wanted to use the isolation time to develop my art practice from an immediate post-doctoral phase towards a new way of working for myself. I set out to use a blend of visual autoethnography and art practice as research methods to explore these themes. I have also written an autoethnographic text describing the making of the works.

In my research over recent years, I have used a bricolage method with some elements of autoethnography, blended with ideas about art practice as a research method. This presentation represents a slice of this bricolage.

Autoethnography is an approach to research which has its roots in a literary method. Rolling (2013:137) suggests that autoethnography can be part of art practice-based research to explore questions of identity, history and memory in visual art making. In the methodology applied in this case study, I have applied a visual approach to autoethnography (Holt 2003, Ellis 2004, Duncan 2004, Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010) in the writing and in the visual reflection on memory, family, and background in these works. Embedded in the artworks are collaged the remnants of my career as an art educator in the old drawings, demonstration pieces and resources that form the patchwork surfaces. The paintings themselves reflect on colour exercises and the tropes and memes of the art classroom. Ellis and Bochner (2000:739) suggest autoethnography is best understood as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.” As we progressed through the pandemic, these artworks were my way of coming to terms with our situation and reflecting on what we have lost through our confinement and a coming to terms with the end of a school teaching career.

This research is an example of arts-based research. McNiff (2008:29) defines arts-based research as “the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expression in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both

researchers and the people that they involve in their studies.” Cazeaux (2017:43) defines it as “creative work undertaken in a systematic basis that leads to new insights, acknowledged by members of a subject community.” This type of research is conducted in the process of shaping, documenting, theorising and contextualising artworks and the processes of making them. Bolt suggests that the insights which can develop out of this research forms a 'praxical knowledge', which is “the particular form of knowledge that arises out of handling of materials and processes” (Bolt 2007:29). This idea of a material-based research, about interactions and ‘material thinking’ (Carter 2004) which might produce shifts in thought and record those shifts in the research was very interesting to me.

My research approach is most clearly articulated within Rolling’s (2013:131) improvisatory research practice approach which is characterised as being inter-textual, post-modern, reflexive and interested in a continuum of instinctual, intuitive and fully-cognitive modalities. This would be the case in the research as I explored my own tacit understandings of practice, built up over many years and excavated, through material thinking to a more fully cognitive level. Rolling suggests thinking reflexively is at the core of the strategy, with a cut and paste approach to autobiography, autoethnography and embodied research. This description is the best articulation of the form of practice-based research that had developed through the application of my bricolage of methods.



The Tholian Web
October 22



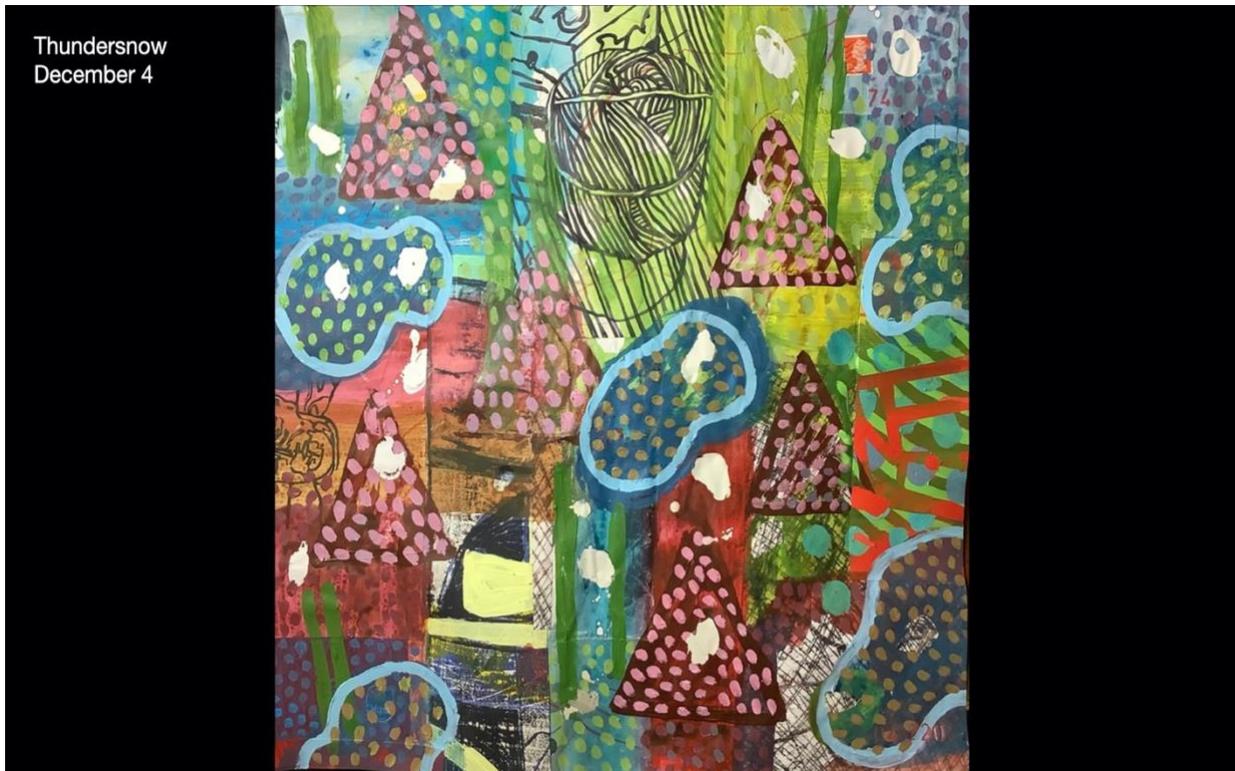
At the start of the UK lockdown in March 2020, I began the practice of depictive, narrative drawing on paper folded into simple sketchbooks. These sketchbooks unfolded into single sheets which I photographed daily and uploaded to social media. The deadline of sharing and the contribution to an online community became an important part of the working method.

Gravity
August 26



Throughout the project, there have been various collaborations and connections made over the internet. I developed the surfaces of the pages I was working on, and the drawings and layering became increasingly complex.

After a short break in August 2020, I redesigned my creative methodology to enable me to produce a daily painting which might track the slow changes of a life locked down by the pandemic. By incremental steps, I set out to create a series of richly coloured, textured, and patterned paintings made on collaged surfaces, each 50cm square, which reflect on the



experience of lockdown, restrictions, stasis, and vulnerability.

The collages are a new patchwork surface remattered from the old teaching materials and then worked over, obliterated, or extended, with new painting, colour, and collage. These palimpsests represent a coming to terms with leaving classroom teaching, a dialogue with the past whilst seeking a renewal through creative reuse. I learnt and relearnt about colour and marks, forgetting teaching, and recalling different forms of practice through the daily work. Central to each artwork is an act of depictive drawing, a daily engagement with observing an external reality.



Back view of a collage patchwork



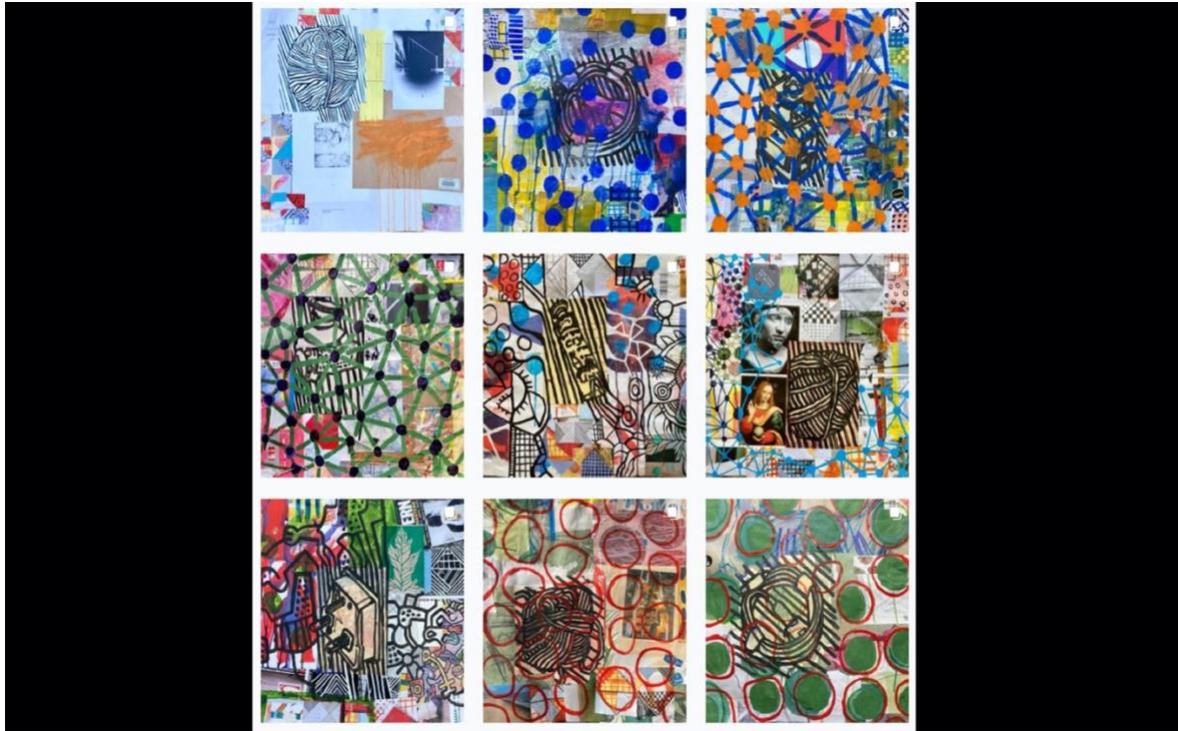
The subject matter has reduced to a small cast of tabletop objects which endlessly recur in a visual representation of the limited routines of lockdown life. The autoethnography is not just in the narrative of the imagery but is embedded in the materiality of the work, in the chopping, gluing, editing, recycling, and reworking.

The paintings mirror the disordered attention span of lockdown life, constructed each day from fragments and leftovers. The ideas and influences and collage detritus which sweep through the



online grids of images track gradual changes within limited subject matter. The works represent a sort of mindfulness practice, an engaged distraction, keeping busy with a creative project, meaning making within the limited options available. The titles form a concrete poem of lockdown concerns.

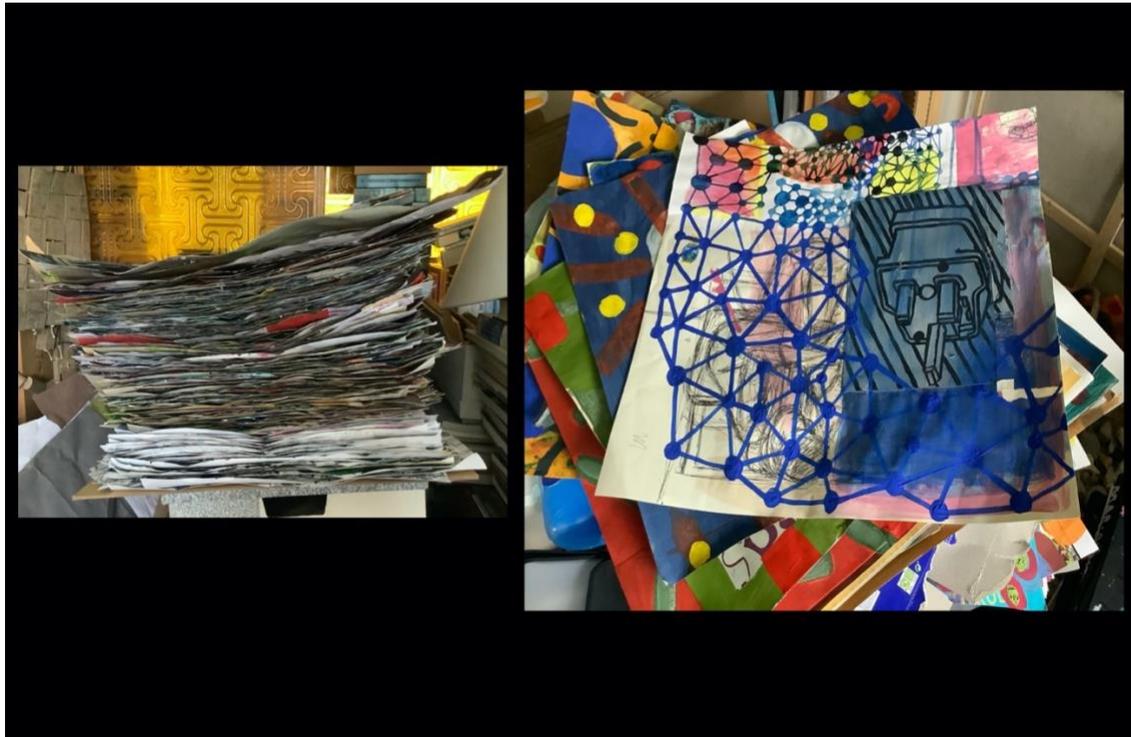
The series of over 300 artworks represent a visual narrative and a creative response to the experience of the pandemic from this perspective.



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Pedagogy in and through Paradox: A Migrant ‘Asian’ Australian Teacher’s Excursion with White Students through Sunnybank’s Market Square

Aaron Teo (aaron.teo@uqconnect.edu.au)

Abstract

Changing geopolitical conditions in the ‘Asian Century’ (Australian Government, 2012) coupled with transnational migration patterns where at least 34% of Australia’s foreign born population hail from ‘Asian’ backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020) has meant that one of the Australian Curriculum’s three cross-curriculum priorities centres on ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’. In particular, the curriculum propounds the importance of Asia literacy in developing active and informed Australian students (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.). However, despite this cross-curriculum priority that purportedly empowers students to “recognise the diversity within and between the countries of the Asia region” (ACARA, n.d., para 3), variance across different classroom contexts in the implementation of key ideas and explanatory materials related to this priority (Ma Rhea & Zhang, 2017) contradicts the curriculum’s stated purpose, and arguably, perpetuates the homogenisation of ‘Asians’ as outsiders in the Australian national imaginary (Lo, Khoo & Gilbert, 2000). In response, drawing on a recent Junior Geography excursion through the central food precinct of Sunnybank, an ‘Asian’ ethnoburb (Li, 2014), with predominantly white students and teaching colleagues, this critical autoethnographic account chronicles a migrant ‘Asian’ Australian high school teacher’s attempts at interrogating the covert essentialising borders in place, and in so doing, advocating for an understanding of intragroup diversity that reverses deficit discourses around the ‘Asian’ diaspora in Australia.

Keywords

Critical Autoethnography, Critical Pedagogy, Migration, Asian Australians, Australian Curriculum

To begin this story, I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this land, the Turrbal (Tur-a-bal) and Jagera peoples and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and emerging. I use this opportunity to recognise that this country always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Once, at a preliminary gathering of young married couples who would later become close friends, the topic of past life experiences came up. This gathering was held potluck style in the dining room of one of the couple’s houses and was buzzing with a tangible excitement that stemmed from the anticipation of getting to know seemingly similar individuals in a similar phase of life.

My wife and I decided to be adventurous and had painstakingly seasoned, rolled, folded, and concocted a loosely pan-Asian offering for the potluck comprising of raw salmon nigiri, pork and chive guo tie and a chicken mie goreng.

As dinnertime approaches, the hosts call us to order, and, as the conversation dies down, request that each couple take a turn to introduce the dishes they had brought along.

As fate would have it, the host couple decide on an anti-clockwise progression and so, I am the last to speak after all the other introductions. I take a quick second to gather my

thoughts before stepping through the ingredients, origin and eating norms associated with each of the three dishes.

Just as I am about to conclude, I notice, from the corner of my eye, one of the other husbands stood beside me leaning in.

“Wow, Aaron, your spoken English is *really* good. Where are you from?”

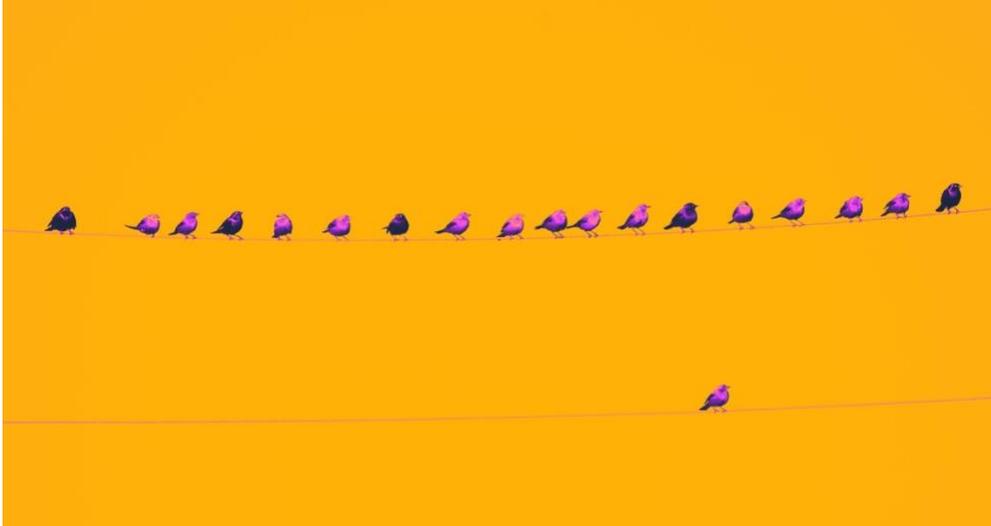


Image credit: <https://hbr.org/2020/10/whats-wrong-with-asking-where-are-you-from>

Despite having received similar ‘compliments’ in the past, I am caught off-guard by Sterling’s comment yet again. I respond instinctively by trying to read Sterling’s face for any sign of malice or ‘jest’.

I pause for a moment.

Nothing whatsoever – instead, a look of genuine curiosity. I respond tentatively.

“Umm... Brisbane?”

“Oh yeah, but I meant originally, before that. As you were talking through all this Asian food, it made me wonder... Like where are you *really* from?”

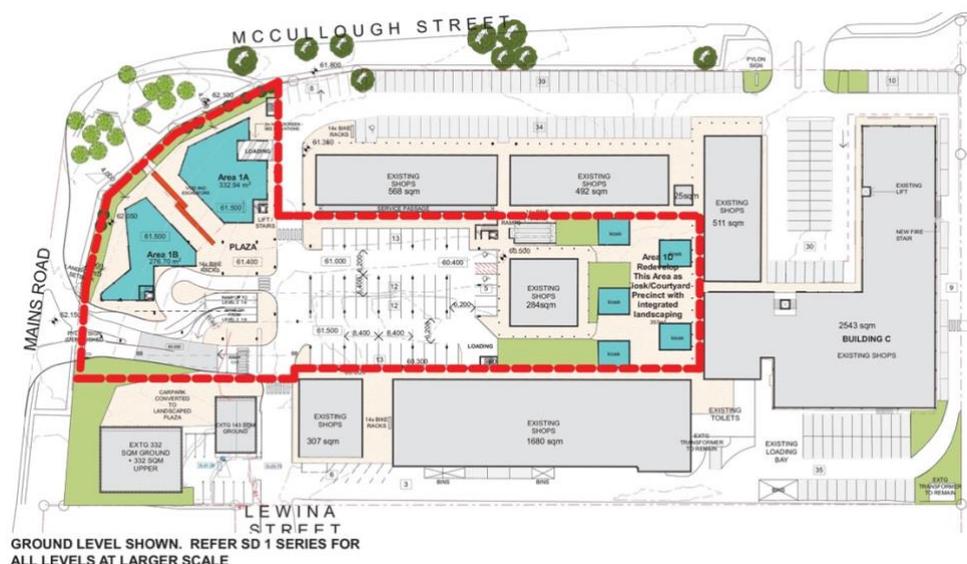


Image credit: <https://brisbanedevelopment.com/look-sunnybanks-market-square-redevelopment/>

As the lunch bell rings, I quickly shoo my senior humanities students from class and make a beeline for the car park. I have half an hour to be at Market Square, Brisbane’s main ‘Asian’ ethnoburb (Li, 2014) for a junior geography excursion on Asian migration patterns in Australia. With twenty minutes of driving to get there and a usual scarcity of parking space, I wonder why I hadn’t asked for a replacement teacher for the senior humanities class that just concluded.

I haul the driver’s door shut and yank my seatbelt across my chest, growling frustratedly at each unsuccessful attempt at fastening the implement. It is on my fifth unsuccessful try that I simultaneously give up and slam both palms aggressively into the steering wheel.

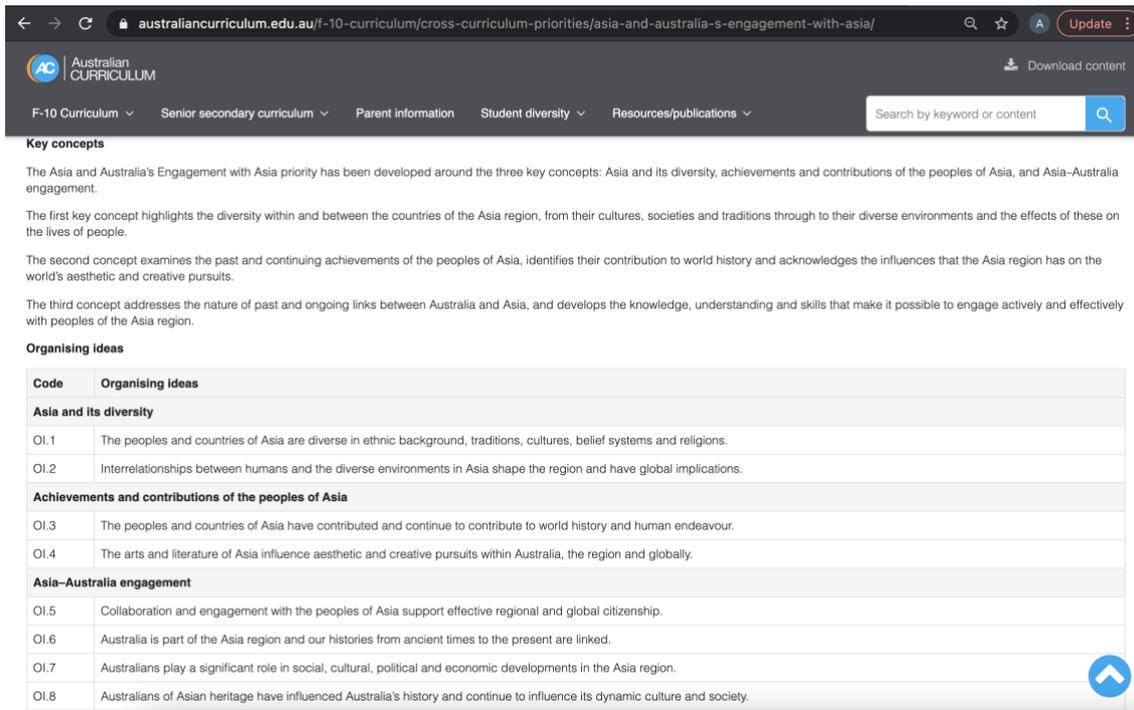


Image credit: <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/asia-and-australia-s-engagement-with-asia/>

I take a deep breath and eventually realise that my head and my heart are at war with each other. Rationally, I know the importance of the excursion I am heading to from a curriculum perspective. As a racial minority in a predominantly white institution, I am also keenly aware of the excursion’s importance from a personal-political-pedagogical (Mackinlay, 2019) point-of-view. Despite this, I had absolutely no idea what exactly I was going to say to the students, and earlier attempts to concoct some sort of script to highlight the importance of understanding ‘Asian’ intragroup diversity had been thwarted by the still, small voice of self-doubt (Ellis, 2004) – after all, what gave *me* the right to speak for a group with such a wide heterogeneity of characteristics due to diverse class, ethnic, and immigrant experiences (Yu, 2006)? Alas, as a minority, I defaulted to staying silent and smiling politely – as I had done in response to Sterling – in uncomfortable racialized situations, so who was *I* to be proclaiming some sort of antiracist pedagogy with such audacity? How would I even enact an antiracist pedagogy in this circumstance? Would the students (and teachers) take what I was going to say seriously? Would the presence of my non-white body make any sort of difference?



Image credit: <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/2392606021905883/>

“Hey, I know you’re just about the head back to work, but do you have time for a quick chat? I don’t have much time anyway – the Year Eights are meant to be here in the next five minutes or so.”

“Yeah, sure, bub, what’s up?”

Before responding, I nestle the phone between my right shoulder and right ear and straighten out the excursion worksheet I had been scrawling on since I arrived at Market Square.

“Okay, great. So, you know how I was still struggling to figure out what to say to the students on the excursion later?”

“Yeah, you looked pretty troubled about all of it even before leaving for work.”

“Hmm... Maybe. I didn’t realise it was showing...”

My wife interjects with the fact that I’m not fantastic at hiding my emotions.

“Right, well, anyway, I thought a bit more about what I might say on the drive in. Be honest and tell me if it sounds stupid, okay?”

“Alright, Year Eights, eyes on me in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...”

As I bellow out the numbers, I let my right hand linger in the air as outstretched fingers drop in unison with my verbal countdown. This seems enough to momentarily quell the students’ palpable excitement at being outside school during school hours.

Just as I am about to address them, I feel anxiety and self-doubt turn from a small, light tap on my shoulder to a large, heavy lump in my throat. As time stands still, I take a deep breath in an attempt to still my nerves and in that moment, replay my wife’s encouragement at the end of the earlier phone call.

“Bub, weren’t you telling me something that you read recently about your methodology being a ‘courageous moral act’ (Lapadat, 2017, p.591)?”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what? Fundamentally you agreed to be involved in today’s excursion because you wanted to speak back to the racism you’ve experienced and continue to experience, no? You’re sick of people assuming you’re part of this homogenous ‘cultural’ whole (Yu, 2006) with all its associated deficit assumptions (Chang, 2013). So, how is writing about it in your thesis any different from what you’re about to do with the students? If anything, I’d argue that it’s likely to have a more immediate impact!”

“Hmm... I suppose...”

“Of course, it will. So go on, set the scene, tell your story, share your experiences with the appropriate explanations and you’ll be just fine! (Holman Jones, 2005)”

As time with the Year Eights resumes, I am spurred on into just “letting go, hoping [that my captive audience] will bring the same careful attention to [my words] in the context of their own lives (Holman Jones, 2005, p.765).”

NAME: _____ CLASS: _____

STATION 3: Sunnybank Market Square

TASK 4: Evidence of Asian immigration at Sunnybank Market Square

NOTE:
Take photographs of TRANSPORT (traffic), LAND USE (shopping precincts) and DEMOGRAPHICS (typical population) in Sunnybank, as well as restaurant names, menus, road signs, shop fronts, etc. as evidence of immigration to Sunnybank. You will use these in your assignment.

GUIDE:
Mr Teo will be your guide through Sunnybank Market Square.

THE ROUTE:

The route around Market Square

WORK IN PAIRS:

- ONE PARTNER will tally the number of restaurants & other shop fronts from each country in Table 5.
- The OTHER PARTNER will take photos as evidence.

FIELDWORK AIM:
Collect evidence of Asian migration trends at Sunnybank Market Square, using the top 10 source countries of migration to Sunnybank (2016 data) as a point of reference (Table 5).

7

“Okay, Year Eights, thank you to those of you who have followed my instruction and have their eyes on me. Before we make our way around Market Square, I would like to make a few things clear. These are deeply important to me – in fact, those of you who do Business are aware that you’ve recently submitted your assignments and normally, I would be marking those – instead, I’ve chosen to be here, so, please make sure you’re listening closely.”

I pause and scan to ensure that I have every student’s full attention. This seems to be the case, and I notice my white teaching colleagues leaning in ever so slightly as well.

“Right, I know this excursion is all about ‘Asian’ migration, and that we’re aiming to use the range of predominantly ‘Asian’ eateries here as evidence for that. BUT, before we get started, I think it’s crucial for us to recognise that there’s a *tremendous* amount of national diversity under that one label. For instance, most of the restaurants here are mainly from East Asia – so China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea Japan, Taiwan – and Southeast Asia – like Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and so on. And guess what? That’s not even *all* of the continent

we know as Asia – Central, South and West Asia aren't even represented here! Why I'm telling you this is because even though I *am* 'Asian', I'm aware that I can't speak for *all* 'Asian' experiences, with migration, or even food, for that matter. What I can do though, is share *my* experiences and things that I've learnt from other people in the diaspora."

"I think it's crucial to acknowledge this diversity because let's face it, many of us here who are white Australians can identify our heritage with *pride* – oh, I'm 50% Irish, 30% German, 15% South African and 5% milk bla bla bla..."

The more attentive students pick up on my joke and giggle to themselves.

"Unfortunately, it's not the same case for many non-white people I know – certainly not the case for me. I know I found it tough to explicitly verbalise my Singaporean heritage straightway because it was just another reminder that I don't belong here. And on top of that, I think there's a real danger in lumping such a diverse group of individuals into this one... blob... because it conveys that their heritage is of less value. Does that make sense?"

The nodding heads indicate that I just might be getting through.

"That leads me to my second key point – besides national diversity, the other thing to note is that there is *huge* diversity even in which generation of migration someone might be part of. I say this because firstly, unless you're Indigenous Australian, you *are* a migrant. So really, it's important to note that there isn't one group of people that is more Australian than the other, or that has the right to tell someone else to 'go back to where they came from', unless you're Aboriginal, of course."

"So, yes, if there's anything I want you to remember, it's this idea of diversity. Me – I'm a first-generation migrant; I moved here for university. But you all know Mr C and Mr H at school? See, they're second-generation migrants, meaning that they were *born* here. This brings me back to my point about not lumping people together just because they're not white – actually *get* to know the person instead of making lazy assumptions."

I pause to catch my breath.

"Does anyone have any questions with my little spiel?"

A handful of shaking heads tell me that there are no immediate questions, and the now-solemn demeanour from the rest of the students suggests that at the very least, they had heard me.

I take this as my cue to start the excursion proper. By this point, self-doubt seemed preoccupied elsewhere, and I am looking forward to talking about the eateries. I motion the group of students in front of a bubble tea shop and quiz them about the Taiwanese origins of bubble tea. I point out the shop's clearly Japanese name and décor and share how I used to be the bubble tea mixologist at a Vietnamese restaurant in my undergraduate days.

I then twirl towards the ostensibly Singaporean restaurant beside it, being mindful of asking the Cantonese waitress who is opening the restaurant what the owner's heritage is. She tells me that it was originally owned by a Malaysian but has since been taken over by a South Korean. I pass this on to the students and am thrilled to see them scribbling away furiously on their excursion workbooks.

As we pass a Vietnamese restaurant in Market Square, I share what I learnt about the Vietnamese language during my undergraduate mixologist days. In front of a cluster of Chinese-looking eateries, I distinguish Cantonese, Northern Chinese, and Southern Chinese cuisine. With the assistance of the store owners, I allude to the geographical differences and rough migration trends in these regions that have shaped the style of these respective cuisines.

I continue in a similar fashion with the other establishments, relieved to see what looks like continued engagement from the students and staff.



Image credit: <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/2392606021905883/>

“Hey bub, how did it go?”

I am excited to pick up my wife’s call and proceed to animatedly regale her with a detailed report about the excursion.

“See, I told you it wouldn’t be that bad! You sound like you had fun and it seems like they took what you were saying on board?”

“Hmm... I don’t know. I just hope I helped make everyone a little more aware, and perhaps, with that awareness, they can start to ask the right type of questions. I don’t know if that makes sense – do you get where I’m coming from?”

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Learning to Disclose: A Journey of Transracial Adoption

Joni Schwartz-Chaney (jschwartz@lagcc.cuny.edu)
Rebecca Schwartz-Jackman (rschwartz@lagcc.cuny.edu)

Abstract

Learning to Disclose: A Journey of Transracial Adoption is a collaborative autoethnography by an adult Black adoptee and her white adoptive mother. From the authors' positionalities and the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory, the institution of international transracial adoption is analyzed as it intersects with the personal narrative of mother and daughter. Using sociological imagination (Mills, 2000), three voices are employed – the voice of Rebecca—daughter, the voice of Joni—mother, and the voice of history. These three voices speak from geographical sites and contexts where the researchers lived and worked: Port-au-Prince, Minnetonka, Gulu, Vienna, Bunia, Czech Republic, and Brooklyn. Data collection included collaborative interviewing, journaling, ethnographic fieldwork, and email correspondence. Grounded theory was the method of analysis. The multiple positionalities, histories, and geographical contexts connect personal dialogue with larger issues of race, white privilege, colorism, and institutionalized racism in the spirit of sociological imagination (Mills, 2000). Findings speak to racial identity development within transracial mother/daughter relationships and blended families and problematize the role of international adoption as a tool of white supremacy.

Keywords

Collaborative autoethnography, Critical Race Theory, transracial adoption, racial identity, disclosure

Introduction

In a world where transracially blended families are not uncommon and juxtaposed with the current racial tensions ongoing in America, this is a collaborative autoethnographic study of the development of unconditional love, racial identity, a mother/daughter relationship across racial differences, and selective disclosure. It is a journey of multiple border crossings, narrative burdens, and code switching. Furthermore, the authors are adults voicing their truths together from the perspective and lived experience of nearly thirty years after the initial adoption in 1990.

Collaborative autoethnography analyzes personal experiences in the specific context of the surrounding culture. As autoethnography, *Learning to Disclose* is autobiographic, ethnographic, and interactive. Autoethnography is a critical research method with the “auto” meaning the self, “ethno” meaning culture, and “graphy” meaning writing; it uses personal experiences to critically examine sociohistorical grand narratives and discourses in which we find ourselves embedded. This is something that autobiography and memoir does not do. We write dialogue using social imagination to critically understand our lives together through the global, national, and local histories of the places and spaces we lived, worked, traveled, and called home (Mills, 2000).

We don't pretend to be historians, but we recognize the power of places entrenched with complex histories, told and untold stories; and we tell how select places in the world speak to us, interact with us, live in us, and affect our relationship. Place is personal, and the personalities that constitute a place speak (Deloria and Wildcat, 2001). We are convinced that history lives in the present and history is selective. We tell our personal histories from our own positionalities; therein, these histories are not exhaustive or the only truth.

As adults and co-authors, we explore our mother and daughter relationship through selective disclosure; therefore, major events and people who are dear to both of us are sometimes left out—they are perhaps stories for other days or maybe stories that need to be left untold. We went where the research took us (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underlying this research is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT asserts that racism is endemic to American life (Dixson, 2007) and thereby endemic to American institutions: public education, real estate and housing, criminal justice—police, prisons, immigration—as well as the institution of adoption. CRT maintains that race is prevalent in any discussion of America and its institutions and cannot be separated from a larger social context. Race is full of contradiction and complexity particularly as it is institutionalized. CRT emphasizes the importance of the voices of people of color (Delgado & Stephanie, 2001) and the centrality of experiential knowledge through counter-storying (Solórzano, 1998). This research is a counter-story of sorts, although not in the familiar sense - this is the story of transracial adoption and yes, race through both the eyes of the privileged mother and the Black child. It is both their stories intertwined.

From this framework, the study does not shy away from explicitly addressing and including discussions of white privilege, white supremacy, white cultural identity, white allies, and the CRT concept of interest convergence. CRT as a framework does have its limitations as it is primarily an American construct, and this book is about both an international and interracial adoption. Race travels, too. The concept of race is cosmopolitan with varying global narratives around what race is, how it is interpreted, and how racism is experienced; these variant concepts of race are braided into the dialogue and the context for each chapter in the final research manuscript. For example, post-colonialism as it relates to transracial and international adoption is explored in select chapters, and the authors' discuss what it means to be Black or white through variant global narratives and definitions of race is unpacked.

Research Questions

We began with several interconnected research questions: What role does race play in transracial adoption? What is the nature of the relationship of a mother and daughter connected by transracial adoption? How does history, especially as it relates to race, impact our private relationship? These questions with the theoretical framework of CRT guided our autoethnographic data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis was like parallel play. Joni started writing in 1990 but as the years went on, it became clear that this was Rebecca's story as well. Therefore, the research was put on hold for twenty-five years. As an adult, Rebecca was ready to do the research. We began in earnest in 2015, and the project took steam when we published an article in the Journal of

Transformative Learning entitled *Learning to Disclose: A Postcolonial Autoethnography of Transracial Adoption* in 2018. (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2018)

We collected data in Haiti, Brooklyn, and Uganda where we spent time together. Our method was to audio record our guided conversations then transcribe them for collaborative analysis. We drafted open-ended interview questions prior to these recorded conversations. In addition, we had consistent electronic and digital communication when we were apart. Data collection occurred over a four-year period, and we collected fifty-three hours of conversations.

After transcribing the interviews and historical research on each chapter, we combined the two and did thematic coding for each chapter draft identifying themes that linked our relationship, adoption, and the history of each location. This theme includes but is not limited to the mother and daughter relationship as evolving and a non-biological construct, self and racial identity, interest convergence, cultural appropriation, transracial adoption as colonization, erasure, colorism, death, and faith. This was messy work as we communicated back and forth and did member checking while writing. We sent evolving drafts through email, giving each other feedback, then revising and editing. We found our methodology more systematic over time.

We became more at ease with our process, each other and the writing relationship as the months went on. We communicated regularly: face to face over food and while traveling, through What's App, email, and phone conversations at all hours of the day and night and across multiple time zones. We hit our stride in Rebecca's home in Uganda where we spent a month together. Rebecca increasingly took ownership assuming responsibility for the research, analysis, and writing. As qualitative researchers making known your positionality is important, alerting the reader to your potential biases and the framework from which you see the world and your work. Our positionalities are from the perspective of a mother, daughter, social activist scholar, international human rights advocate, anti-racists, and Christians.

Memory work through journaling and then writing and revising a final manuscript aided the co-researchers in digging deep into memories and emotions that had not previously been discussed (Monaco, 2010). This memory work became space for unearthing of painful emotions linked to abandonment and adoption. The memory journaling as well as subsequent writing and publishing reflect movement from first person narrative to third person – this shift reflects emotional distancing. Memory work also assisted in identifying the eight geographic locations that became the research sites.

We used grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to code our data which were transcribed from audio tapes, journaling, emails, and WhatsApp. Initial codes were based on the research questions. We used NVivo and also color coded manually. From this coding we established categories that were our findings. Data analysis produced four categories: 1) race is present in the relationship but not defined by it; 2) understanding racial identity both Black and white is a deliberate and painful process; 3) interracial adoption as a part of a historical and global phenomena – colonialization and American institutionalized racism, and 4) learning to talk about race.

Findings and Publication

Based on the four findings previously stated, we wrote and published our research as *Learning to Disclose: A Journey of Transracial Adoption* (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2020). Due to the collaboration of this autoethnographic research, the findings and subsequent book was organized with a braided and collage essay structure. (Tedlock, 2013) This format allows the co-authors and collaborative auto ethnographers to interweave their voices and stories of mother and

daughter, their races as white and Black, and their journey as adopter and adoptee. Their two stories are braided within each chapter and then assembled through the book chapters to create a collage of their emotional, psychological, and physical travels. This collage of times and places in the authors' lives evokes from the history of the location, context of the event, and lived experience of the authors the resulting dialogue.

Each chapter is a mini-narrative marked by a location in the world, a space where the authors lived, worked, and spent time; these spaces are embedded in their personal journey of adoption and connected to a wider global and historical context. This context, the history that often addresses race is included in the opening of each chapter – these histories are then braided and embedded in the mother/daughter dialogue which then develops in each chapter. Beyond the four major findings sub themes of abandonment, racial identity, bonding through adoption, acceptance and forgiveness are broached but also hair, fashion, dancing, and changing roles. The later chapters introduce role reversal as this mother and daughter mature and age.

Despite this deliberate historical and social justice lens, the book resulting from this study is also very personal – thus the title. This is the sensitive true story of a daughter and mother trying to make sense of their intimate relationship amidst larger historical and social context that looms over the relationship. It is the story of how they transform, struggle, and thrive in this relationship. This is soul work.

Brief Overview of Book

Chapter 1: Carrefour, Haiti

The birthing of the nation of Haiti is juxtaposed with adoption as a type of birthing. This metaphor is carried through the chapter in prose-poetry style. The authors discuss the birthing of their adoption relationship in the context of the birthing of Haiti. Issues around transracial adoption as a tool of colonialism are broached. The mother and daughter authors reflect on these larger issues through personal dialogue while examining their own lived experiences particularly as they relate to racial identity.

Chapter 2: Flatlands, Brooklyn

Within the context of Brooklyn, New York, in the 1990's and before gentrification; this chapter describes the neighborhoods of Flatlands and Downtown Brooklyn and the authors' early years into adoption when Brooklyn, New York was a rough, crime ridden location. The struggles of the early years of adoption and the struggles of a city are interposed. Both authors discuss, compare, and contrast memories from this time in their relationship. Personal narratives are interjected in their dialogue. This format of placing the conversation within a time and place is carried through the book.

Chapter 3: Minnetonka, Minnesota

Chapter 3 intertwines the death of the authors' mother and grandmother to which they both were witness in the location of Lake Minnetonka, Minnesota where W.E.B. Dubois spent a summer on a resort raising money to attend Harvard University. However unlikely and incongruous these stories seem – they raise the issue of Du Bois's double-consciousness – and mother and daughter grapple with the multi-faceted conceptions of self and the two cultures that compose both their identities. Ethnographic research was done near Lake Minnetonka and informs this chapter.

Chapter 4: Czech Republic

This chapter was researched through memory work of the time Rebecca spent doing missionary work in the Czech Republic. Literature review consisted of a brief history of the republic and the ROMA in the Czech Republic. Marginalization of Czech nationals, Joni's ancestry, and racism toward the ROMA are interwoven with the death of Joni's mother and Rebecca's grandmother, Mabel Hlavacek.

Chapter 5: Vienna, Austria

While Rebecca is hospitalized in Vienna, Austria for the removal of a cyst on her ovaries, Joni spends time with Rebecca in the hospital and explores Vienna with its dark history of racist mania and genocide of the Jews. From this historical context, the authors explore suffering, disappointment, illness, fear while bonding during this particularly difficult season in their lives. Rebecca's fear of not being able to be a mother and give birth to her own children due to the surgery broached.

Chapter 6: Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Returning to Haiti and the orphanage from which she came, mother and daughter look at the past on how it plays out in their present relationship. Now an adult, Rebecca returns to Haiti and works for a Christian Missionary organization. This chapter explores the colonistic and white supremacist underpinnings of some missionary organizations. While acknowledging the complicated paradoxes of missionary and international adoption related to "doing good" or "doing God's work in the world," mother and daughter explore the tensions inherent in American Christianity as it squares with their own religious faiths.

Chapter 7: Gulu, Uganda

Rebecca is now Country Director for an NGO serving victims of torture – predominantly refugees from the civil war in South Sudan. Joni spends Christmas 2017 in Uganda, Entebbe, and Kampala as well as traveling with Rebecca near the Democratic Republic of Congo border for several safaris. The time is outrageously funny as they go out dancing at nightclubs, smoking hookah, swimming in Lake Victoria, and generally carrying on. Rebecca takes on a motherly role, and Joni reverts to an adolescent on several occasions – a mother and daughter role reversal. Amidst the backdrop of the famed rescue at Entebbe, where over 100 Jewish hostages from an Air France flight was hijacked by Palestinian and German terrorist and supported by Idi Amin and the move to independence from the British colonizers – this chapter investigates the themes of adoption as rescue and colonization's hold on identity on Ugandan blacks. Identity as it varies internationally is explored.

Chapter 8: Bunia, Democratic Republic of Congo

Rebecca spends two years as a program director for three Congolese refugees' camps and Joni plans to visit her there but shortly before she arrives, there is a massacre of UN peacekeepers in the Congo, and she decides to meet Rebecca in Uganda. Nevertheless, the history of the Congo and its colonization by Belgium and specifically the brutal reign of King Leopold is told. The authors reflect on their social justice orientations toward life and how as mother and daughter the thread of social activism envelopes and defines both their careers and relationship.

Chapter 9: Bedford- Stuyvesant, Brooklyn

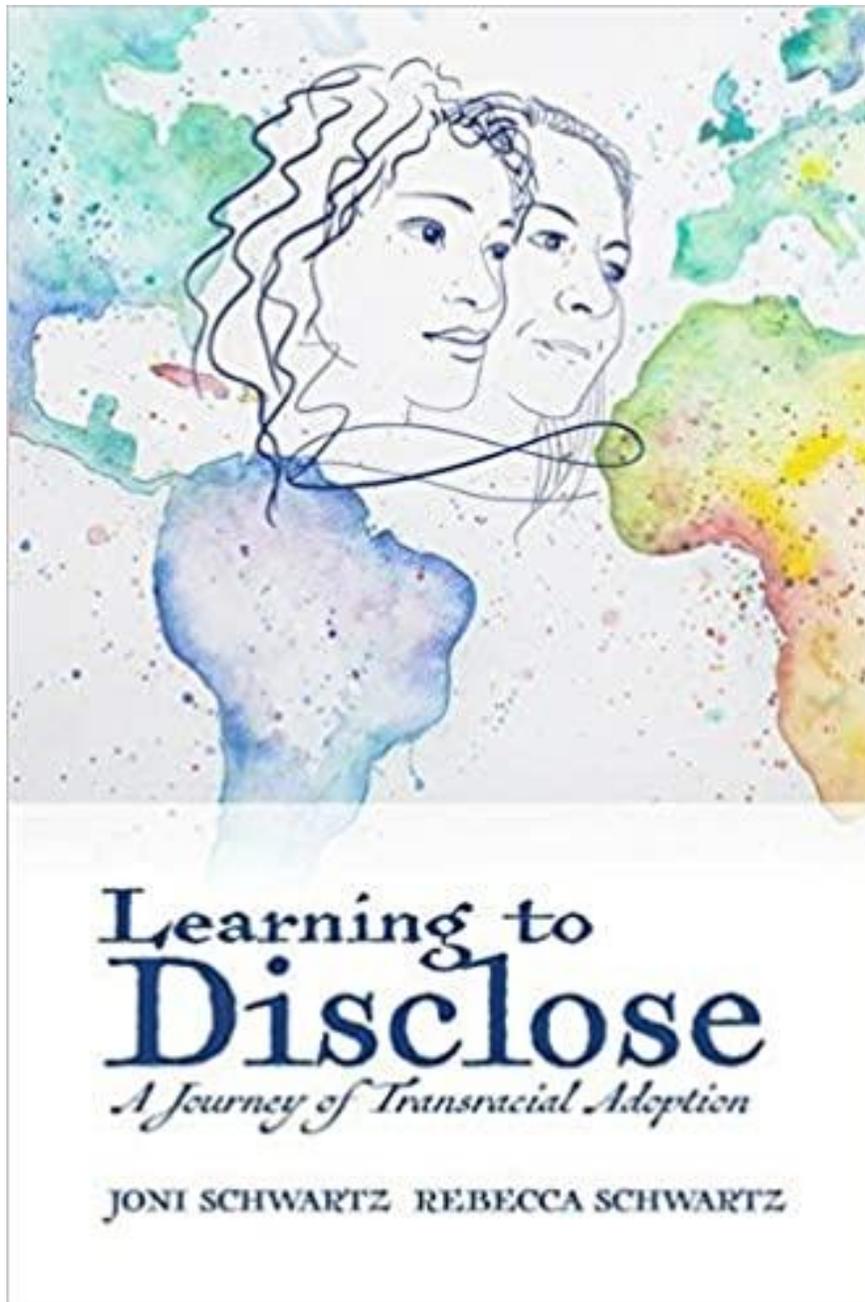
Home is the subject of this chapter. Rebecca returns “home” to Brooklyn after her years abroad in Holland, Austria, Haiti, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. But is it home? Where is home? How do we find home? Also, Brooklyn is not the Brooklyn of the 1990’s – gentrification has taken hold for better or for worse. Rebecca and Joni dialogue about losing home, finding home, and still searching for home within the framework of their travels, their decisions, and their relationship.

Chapter 10: The Yellow Dress

This chapter opens with the yellow dress Rebecca wore leaving the orphanage upon adoption and a second yellow dress she wore as a young adult. Through an autoethnographic lens, we explore the following questions: Where do we stand now as mother and daughter? Joni decides to divorce – what does this mean for their relationship? How does the role of mother change for an adult child? How do we evolve with it? Aging for both of us is examined – what are the joys and triumphs of growing older for both of us – what are our fears? How does our relationship withstand them? What can be learned about race and racism from the lived experience of transracial adoption?

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Website: <https://jonischwartz.com/>

Anti-Blackness & Black Fatigue Embodied by Black Students: An Autoethnography of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education

Nicholas B. Lacy
Purdue University
NLacy@purdue.edu

Abstract

This autoethnography explores my experiences and the experiences of 14 Black students in (higher) education. This narrative explores the richness and depth of what it feels like to be a Black student in dominant culture. Experiences in (higher) education are explored, with a particular interest in diversity, equity, and inclusion and their lack of tangibility. Accordingly, this study highlights consistent disregard for Black students as it answers, what do Black students communicatively describe as positive/negative instructor-student interactions that informed their (higher) educational experiences based on race, and what does Black identifying students offer as potential strategies that will improve instructor-student relations for future Black identifying students? Subsequently, this study offers a pedagogical framework of B.R.E.A.C.H. for instructors that combat inequities in (higher) education.

Keywords

Racial Battle Fatigue, Microaggressions, Critical Race Theory, Social Justice, Pedagogy

Talks of higher education regarding campus/university diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice are all critical components of a campus climate; however, administration and staff are not absolved from addressing these issues. Equity, inclusivity, affirmation, and social justice are all part of the job of administration as well as the faculty and staff. Black students, like myself, often grapple with the material consequences for the actions of others long after they have occurred. This is something that must be fixed. What follows are several reasons why narratives from students of color are needed. This manuscript will explore two research questions and expand on the methodological approach, wherein, I continue to explore and unravel the complexities of positionality, such as being Black and a student in higher education as I formulate a pedagogical model that explains current obstacles therein. In the following section, I explore the method used in the current project to begin to make sense of my narrative, as well as other Black student's higher education experiences.

Methodology

The current project uses autoethnography in conjunction with narrative analysis to answer posed research questions:

RQ1: What do Black students communicatively describe as positive/negative instructor-student interactions that informed their higher educational experiences based on race?

RQ2: What do Black identifying students offer as potential strategies that will improve instructor-student relations for future Black identifying students?

To answer these research questions, I use autoethnography to inform a narrative analysis of Black students' in an attempt to create an educational model and framework for instructors.

I chose to perform an autoethnography for this project as the methodological approach emphasizes the importance of storytelling, personal narrative, and the integral facets of the researcher's perspectives as a methodology (Adams et al., 2017; Fetterman, 2020). More specifically, autoethnography "is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, et al., 2010, para. 1). The focus on my experience in this situation simply cannot be ignored as the material consequences of said experience have negatively affected me – even to this very day. Therefore, the autoethnography as method is most necessary to resist structural and colonialist ideals of authority (Ellis, et al., 2010). Moreover, doing auto/ethnography requires the researcher to operate in between the intersection of autobiography and ethnography while relying on past experiences and memories (Adams et al., 2017; Fetterman, 2020).

In addition to conducting an autoethnography, I employ the use of Critical Race Methodology (CRM) (Delgado, 1989). CRM is developed from a law derived theory of Critical Race Theory (CRT) attributed to the late legal scholar Derrick Bell. CRM is the intent focus of racial being and how racial inequities disparage folks of color in everyday life. Distinguishing systematic imbalances from one racial group to another, CRM is the frame by which the narrative analysis will be examined. For example, understanding Black students' experiences through the apparatus of race (Delgado, 1993; Sekimoto, 2018; Sekimoto & Brown, 2016), and very embodied (Ellingson, 2012) phenomena better helps audiences ascertain how Black students feel, and why they feel such a way. As an autoethnographer, it is imperative to be self-reflexive as a researcher, and include thick description (Geertz, 1973), which is exactly what I outline in the next section.

Self-Reflexivity & Introspection

Although my opening vignette occurred in the final semester of my undergraduate matriculation in communication, I wrote the majority of this autoethnography as a form of healing, and closure of the experience during my master's program in communication. Serving as a Graduate Teaching Associate (GTA) and instructing three courses of Public Speaking per semester, I learned the positionality of being/becoming an instructor of higher education. For example, as a student affairs special cohort instructor, my experiences were further nuanced in this capacity as I was the only Black instructor the first year of my program, and one of three Black instructors my second year. This experience corroborates Anthym and Tuitt's (2019) findings that speak of a sheer lack of Black instructors in all departments outside of African/African American/Africana Studies.

In addition to being a Black graduate student, and special cohort GTA, I have worked in education for fifteen years. I would be remiss if I did not state that I gained a decade-plus of experience working with diverse, lower socioeconomic Black and Brown students across two underserved, highly minoritized afterschool programs. I worked at the second afterschool program at the time of the opening narrative, where I served as a Site Assistant, which is a supervisory role. As a supervisor, I hired, coached, trained, and performed quality assurance

performance assessments on five to thirteen Program Leaders at a time. From that position, I transitioned to higher education where I worked for a prestigious Southern California private university as a full-time staff member – serving as the only Black male in my department.

Currently, I serve as an educational consultant. In my consulting experience I have learned that “research” is, in fact, “me-search.” To elucidate, I co-facilitated a webinar series for a California State University faculty professional development. Here, at my alma mater I co-facilitated a five-part series of webinars on equity-mindedness titled “Equity & Inclusion in an Online Teaching Classroom” for preparation for online learning during Covid-19/SARS CoV2. From there, I consulted with my masters institution, a different California State University as a quality assurance advisor in regard to “Social Justice Curriculum Development.” In this role, I analyzed all undergraduate curriculum for course competencies, emphasizing diversity, and social justice, grounded in communication. Additionally, I co-facilitated an anti-racist pedagogy professional development training for a university in Arizona. Here, I developed and talked through strategies of anti-racist practices in the classroom. Moreover, I have been invited to guest lecture on leadership, racial and social justice topics. I have participated in a university panel that produced scholarly discussion on systemic racism for a California State University’s Dialogue and Social Justice. Likewise, I participated in developing a California State University’s implicit bias, microaggression, and equity professional development training for all their faculty and staff.

My experiences as a Black man do not end there. Now would be a great time to explain how I am unapologetically Black. What I mean is that I love Black communities, support Black owned business, protest in favor of Black Lives Matter, conduct applied research Black students, and love my Black hair, and my Black skin. Additionally, I attended a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in Louisiana in my early collegiate years, wherein I encountered an early exit due to police profiling. After being surveilled and arrested for standing in a parking lot while Black, I decided to drop out of the HBCU only to return to California due to racial tensions in the south. Due to very intense racially driven encounters, I can relate to many experiences other Black students encounter. Accordingly, the next section details the recruitment of participants.

Participants & Recruitment

This research study was conducted at a large university in the Southwestern region of the United States. For the current project, I sought Black identifying college students and their experiences. After receiving an “Exempt” IRB certificate I moved forward in my recruitment. To recruit, I used a university research participation pool. The participation criteria detailed the need to be a Black student, who is currently enrolled at the university. Next, I detail the demographics of the participants in this study.

Demographics

The demographics for this study were as follows, all students were Black, and currently enrolled in a large university in the southwest region of the United States. In total there were 14 students who participated in the narrative analysis. Of the eleven undergraduate participants, there were three undergraduate 1st years, one undergraduate 2nd year, four undergraduate 3rd years, two undergraduate 4th years, and one undergraduate 5th year. Of the two masters-graduate students, two were 1st year graduate students. Ages of the participants ranged from 19-45 years of age. There were eight cisgender females, one queer identifying female, and five cisgender males.

Participants majors included psychology – pre-med, engineering, political science – prelaw, psychology, mass media/journalism, health communication, and communication studies. All participants were allowed the option of selecting a pseudonym for themselves, some chose their own, and others entrusted me, wherein I assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities. With a nice array of majors, I received different perspectives in the interview process, which I explain in the next section.

Interview Process

I interviewed 14 Black student participants to augment my experiences. In this experience, I asked participants to reflect on their past experiences wherein I learned, laughed, and became upset, hurt, and angry all over again. The 14 interviews totaled nearly eighteen hours of research time that produced 792 pages of double-spaced interview transcripts. Interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two and a half hours. Due to the COVID-19/SARS CoV2 pandemic and shelter in place orders, interviews for the current project took place via Zoom. A Zoom link was provided to a Zoom waiting room to prevent “Zoom Bombing”.

Analysis

Analyzing nearly eighteen hours of research time that produced 792 pages of double-spaced interview transcripts, I used Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet and the NVivo platform to break down this autoethnography’s data. In measuring the data, I used Ellingson’s (2012) interview as “embodiment” as a communicative tool to measure Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF).

As such, I developed over ten emerging themes. From the ten themes, I narrowed the themes to six overarching themes into an acronym B.R.E.A.C.H, (a) Be real about race/racial implications in society, (b) Re-orient your mindset to an open mind, not empty head, (c) Empatheti-size your environment for communal learning, (d) Actively listen to students (audience), (e) Compassionately respond to new ideas, and (f) Have a culturally affirming curriculum (policy).

Using a combination of Tracy’s (2020) coding and big tent ideas, as well as Ellingson and Sotirin’s (2020) field notes by short handing field notes in real time to record any visceral reactions to the interview in a notepadnote pad. I used a four-tier coding system where I first analyzed the descriptive codes, second analyzed the interpretations of the data, third created a set of claims, and fourth and finally, applied said claims thematically. In the following section, I present the findings of thisfindings this research project. The findings explore the themes of my participants’ voices which are interwoven with my own voice – as a form of Black student lived experiences and sensemaking. What follows are the findings presented via the B.R.E.A.C.H. model.

B.R.E.A.C.H., a Transformational Model

Studies such as this one can benefit Black student experiences in both higher education and primary education. Consistent with the lens of Critical Race Methodology, understanding the contemporary and historical issues from a Black student perspective is perhaps the best way to elicit change. For example, listening to the marginalized and otherwise discounted narratives of Black students can aid educational practitioners and administrators. For instance, in the present research, Black students share the mental, emotional, and physical fatigue, and conversely, what they feel instructors and administrators could do to improve Black student experiences. As such, I have utilized my experiences as a full-time university staff person, social justice quality

assurance consultant, and university instructor to create a model based on the findings of this project that speaks to the communicated inequities described in this study. These experiences, including my own, reveals an incessant need to re-evaluate institutional initiatives of diversity, equity, inclusion, and innovation in (higher) education; consequently, I propose the following B.R.E.A.C.H. model.

B.R.E.A.C.H. is a six-step guide that is designed to support faculty and staff to better serve Black students in racially heightened times. This guide can be effectively employed by professors, lecturers and teaching associates, and teaching assistants. There are many overlaps where B.R.E.A.C.H. can be adopted and adapted to counseling, financial (aid), and staff contexts. The first three steps are intrapersonal techniques that if kept in mind will enable the latter three interpersonal, and sometimes intercultural steps to be more effective. That is, steps one through three are more self-reflective, reflexive internalizations. Contrarily, steps four through six are more public, private, or even small group displays of introspection, personhood, and philanthropy.

B – Be real about race/racial implications in society.

R – Re-orient your mindset to an open mind, not empty head.

E – Empatheti-size your environment for communal learning.

A – Actively listen to students (audience).

C – Compassionately respond to new ideas.

H – Have a culturally affirming curriculum (policy).

What follows are the foundational principles and examples of how and why the B.R.E.A.C.H. model is needed.

B – Be real. To effectively support Black students in racially heightened situations, you as the instructor, staff or faculty must be real about the historical longsuffering of the Black community, or any minoritized community for that matter. In being real, the instructor must also recognize the roles of intersectionality, and include their own identities when attempting to aid Black students (Allen, 2011; Jackson, 1993; Rendon, 1994). Beginning with this step is important because without self-reflection, understanding and reflexivity, an instructor is not being real about positionality and the complexities of intersectionality. Addressing intersectionality through self-reflexivity is critical, a great example of this comes from Angie,

My [XXX] class, and you know and her syllabus she made it like explicit that she was like you know, I support this, I support that I support this, I support that. That's who I am you know, she was not Black, but she was like I support what's happening right now the Black lives matter movement, I support that on full time here.

As Angie states, non-Black instructors are more than capable of being real. Albeit, being real will take a conscious, concerted effort, because as Nia states, “it’s like something that, like, you can’t fake and like that really comes off to the students and like beyond that, just like genuinely

caring about the students in your class and like caring” As such, to be real means, you must profess the ugly truth about racial disparities and check your privilege, intersectionality, and positionality.

However, there is a caveat to “being real” as students will quickly discern the levels of performativity in an instructors delivery, tone, and overall demeanor. A great example of this comes from Willie as he states

I do get worn out when it doesn't come up naturally, when I feel like it is, like I'm like who's the person who's bringing it up. I'm like do you have an agenda behind this? Do you really care, I mean, do you? Like what's your angle on this, you know? You know, like a real like issue or something or somebody has a real question and whatever I like it when it comes up, naturally, but sometimes I feel like there's an agenda behind like somebody pushing the diversity issue and doesn't mean it.

As Willie states here, instructors should not press the diversity, equity, inclusion, and innovation button for a sake of “going through the motions”. Willies assertion is consistent with Ballard et al.'s (2020) notions of words being meaningless in academia when genuine care is not initiated along with said words. Hence, real must be exactly that, real. Fraudulence in this model is unwarranted.

Being real with one's self and students can address invisible white privilege, which is prevalent and remarkably undetectable for those who possess it (Rozas & Miller, 2007). Additionally, the “Ethic of Personal Accountability” in the pedagogical sense (Ladson-Billings, 2014), is part of being real, meaning it is the instructor who largely responsible and accountable for student engagement. Fostering real, personable, down to earth atmospheres in education begins with the energy and vibe of the faculty/staff person and colorblind approaches are negligible.

R – Re-orient your mindset. After being real, this transformative process moves on the next step, which is re-orienting your mindset in a way that is equity advancing for Black students. As the instructor, staff or faculty, you will need to adapt the idea of equity and dismiss equality and colorblindness. Re-orienting your mindset to adapt a counter-narrative as method: race, policy and research for teacher education (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019). As Angie shared, “it is not enough to not be racist, you have to be anti-racist, you have to” (Angie, 2021, Mar. 15, p. 18). Students can sense authenticity, and inauthenticity; furthermore, the minimization, and denial of racial tensions by uttering phrases such as “I am not a racist”, subverts the overall issue of systemic issues.

A re-oriented mind sees education as more than a Euro-centered model. A mind anew sees education as more of a collaborative process. Here, Vince illustrates the need for re-orientation as he states,

I would change how professors have to start classes and what I mean by that is, I think, professors need to have almost like an open house or some opportunity to formally meet their students, um so it can be difficult when you're teaching a large lecture, of course.

As Vince stated, getting to know students in an open house manner is perhaps more beneficial to learning and life-long relationships than it may seem. Fostering open and inviting climates can bridge many existing gaps in students' experiences that are not always visible. Therefore, the mindset from day one, should be one of an open mind, not empty head (Fetterman, 2020).

Helping Black students, and all students means you shift your mindset to an equity-minded perspective, specifically a Black inclusive perspective.

On its face, it would seem as though Black students are the problem due to lack of conformity to the Eurocentric structure. However, Black students are not the problem, the problem is the educational system (Glocke, 2016). A great example of this comes from Kimmy as she recounts a vivid example of her sister

So like my sister had this big problem where she ended up like crying in a bathroom because her teacher was like oh, like you should be allowed to say the N word like and she was like the only Black girl in the class and so she was really upset she was like that's not how this works. Then, I remember in high school, our Vice principal at the time had been caught saying the N word in locker room and the teacher brought it up and he was like, how do you feel about this. And he was saying, like oh, this is like America freedom of speech, like you should be able to say whatever you want, and the majority of the classroom was saying the same thing, and she was like no. And so, she ended up crying and it was a whole thing we met with the principal, but nothing was done.

Although Kimmy's account does not explicitly state that she was a victim of the n-word in person; however, she tells of her sister's run in with the n-word in high school. Kimmy's narrative highlights the prevalence of the n-word, as well as the mindset of both the vice principal and teacher. The vice principal actually used the n-word and was a white male, yet a white male teacher believed freedom of speech allowed anyone to say anything. This mindset is problematic as the use of n-words in educational contexts serve as additional barriers for Black students extending Harper (2009), as n-words are the ultimate racial epithet as no other racial epithet strikes and weighs as much (Kennedy, 1999).

E – Empathetic environment. Once the educator has been real, and shifted their mindset, it is imperative that you employ empathy, not sympathy. For example, Black students at both HBCUs and PWIs revealed that positive campus climates are associated with positive impacts on students' social and psychological college perspective, educational passion, and the efforts they exert (Chen et al., 2014). While Black students do experience many inequalities and intolerable circumstances, the sympathetic approach is counterproductive to ensuring advocacy, instead, empathy is necessary for a positive environment. A lack of empathy is evident here, as Tiana shares her experiences as a first-time student:

I believe within my [University] experience I had one of those where I kind of suffered under the radar so as a first-generation student, um I really didn't know how to reach out for help, so I did fail a class my freshman year first semester.

Tiana's experiences showcase the need for an empathetic environment. If the instructor in Tiana's case showed empathy, perhaps the instructor would have reached out to see how this student was doing, personally. Being a first time, first generation student would have been easily discerned in the prior step (re-orientation). However, Tiana's narrative is further augmented by Karissa's as she states,

I can very much just slide on the under the radar and just mind my own business and just be like the resident Black girl in the room...That first semester in [the university] I did not interact with anybody at all unless it was like you have to talk to somebody during class,

for whatever discussion or exercise nope I was like I take my notes and I go that's how I was

Karissa's experiences as the resident Black girl in the room, she seems to go at this thing we call education alone. This is something that must be corrected with an inclusive, empathetic, and engaging environment. The detached feelings Black students often demonstrate are in many ways proactive protection against potential egregious and unpunished acts. However, ensuring an empathetic environment from the onset fosters an inclusive, non-threatening environment where students are not the "resident Black student" in class. Similarly, Angie speaks to a needed empathetic environment by stating,

I just feel like if you as a professor also, if you see something happening like, even like if you see a student who's also potentially being a certain way to another student calling that out also you know because that's also part of that acknowledgement, you know, you can't, you can't ignore it. You can't pretend.

As empathy goes, instructors should empathize with marginalized students, and stop harassment, racial aggressions, and actions of hate. Being empathetic prevents situations where Black students are unfairly targeted in acts of "sympathy." So, engage in empathy with Black students and not sympathize or pity them, instead build relationships (Brooms & Davis, 2017). An example of the harms associated with the lack of building relationships comes in Blue's narrative as she shares

I was in the classroom once in a kid thought it was like funny to me. He would like show me videos using the N word or he would call me the N word again and again, and the teachers would make eye contact and like look away so I was like?... But academically, I honestly think that affected me academically because I was thinking like if I'm not getting this social support why am I going to ask them a question? So my freshman year I struggled a lot and I ended up getting a D in math my freshman year when I'm actually really good at math but I was just too scared to ask questions because of situations like this.

Like Blue, I too had a professor ignore the use of n-words by looking away and not addressing the student. Equally, like Blue, I too was good at a subject, communication, and yet, I too received a failing grade in the undergraduate communication independent study based on no support from the intercultural professor in which my entire issue began. Blue's notion of being academically affected rings true as my battle with the institution ensued, not once did that professor intervene and release me from the independent study, so I failed. Just as Blue insinuated, without support, Black students fail, and continue to fail. Case and point, Blue is really good at math, I am really good at communication, yet she failed math, and I failed a communication independent study.

Students in the current study experienced increased feelings of isolation in higher education, which is similar to McDougal et al.'s (2018) findings of lack of Black student engagement, and increased resilience and success under duress at PWIs. The lack of empathetic environments perpetuates ignore-ance of race and racial disparities experienced by Black students. Therefore, creating an empathetic environment is imperative as visible and invisible

barriers stand to be removed. Taking a holistic perspective of how-to best service Black students, it would behoove universities to provide supportive initiatives, beginning with instructors.

A – Actively listen. Active listening is a very important role in the communicative process. Listening actively is, as my grandmother would always say, “we have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as we speak.” That saying is especially true here with Black students as Angie states,

So, like, acknowledgement I think that's one big thing another thing is listening... If you know the student does come to you and say you know this other student is giving me a problem or bothering me you're making me feel uncomfortable those also come into play, actually listening to me. It's like what are you here for?

Angie tells of the need to both acknowledge and actively listen as they are imperative to removing barriers in education. If not, then why be an instructor? Active listening and acknowledgement of Black students means more to Black students than what meets the eye. Actively listening moves beyond listening with ears, but observing and reading the room, and understanding your environment. This is consistent with Liou (2019) as the author explains that disrupting the racial contract of whiteness in higher education begins with listening to minoritized students.

When it comes to Black students, I believe Carter G. Woodson had it right with his book “Faces at the Bottom of the Well” wherein he depicts how Black folks are at the literal bottom of the racism pole. Now, this is evident in the lack of listening to Black students as Vince states

It wasn't productive and constructive space for us as Black students and it was like we were maybe like one class away from falling through the cracks, there wasn't a lot of reinforcement, for us, but when we turn around, our Hispanic and Latino counterparts have so much support. There's support groups galore there's events and so many things.

Vince brings up the feeble strings of Black students' needs falling by the waist side in comparison to at least one other ethnic and racial group. Black students are still at the bottom of the “educational” well as many initiatives are just not translating to Black student bodies. As a result, the material consequences for Black students is evident in Martin's take on support as he states, “I think Black, African Americans are the most under educated right now, currently, just like in history, and it is still true” (Martin, Mar. 21, p. 65). Martin is only but reaffirming what we all know, but somehow compassionate change is not occurring at a fast enough rate. For example, over one hundred and fifty years after slavery was abolished, the U.S. Department of Education (2015) illustrates that Black students' academic outcomes are continuously much lower in math and reading areas compared to other ethnic groups (Howard, 2016). The sad truth is, we may have to wait another hundred and fifty years. With Vince and Martin's take on listening, there is some validity to being at the very bottom, for so long. Although there are new administrative initiatives to assist Black students, the lack of listening to the source continues to hurt Black students.

The need to actively listen to Black students is imperative because their stories are often times very personal and extremely difficult to share. Therefore, when Black students do share, they are taking huge risks in having their stories invalidated and mis-perceived. Consequently, instructors should offer extended support to Black students (remember the Black equity focus) and give them opportunities to speak, and when or if they do, listen actively, and attentively.

Many times, when Black students speak, they open up and are not taken seriously. So, hear them out, do not dismiss or criminally interrogate them.

C – Compassionately respond. Compassion is similar to empathy; however, compassion adds another level of a sense of humanity and humility. Compassionately responding is indicative of responding to cross-cultural perspectives, and wrongdoing immediately, in the way the act occurs. For instance, if an insensitive statement is uttered publicly, then the teaching moment requires that the behavior be corrected publicly, and perhaps privately in an additional one-on-one. Conversely, if a private office hours moment needs to be corrected, then the act should be addressed immediately in private, and perhaps subsequently in public as a general announcement (anonymity is critical) to all courses taught to prevent further similar acts moving forward. The compassion demonstrated here is more applicable for the students at large as they are the audience and several, if not all students may take offense to the insensitive act. One thing remains constant, all students are watching the instructors reaction (Rudick et al., 2018, Ch. 4).

As is evident, compassionately responding is more applied and focused on combatting systemic issues and lived experiences that individuals perpetuate. Empathy is more concerned with one on one, or small group contexts, whereas compassion is more rooted in systemic broad change.

Not displaying compassion in this way can cost you respect as an instructor.

Having compassion for Black students will allow educators to not only make intrapersonal and interpersonal change, but it will also allow for opportunity for system change. For instance, Jayda’s feelings help to explain systemic compassion,

And please know these are Black people who are actually out there on their business and are being targeted by police, you know? I mean like expressing that and making sure to teach that properly to their white students, I think that is the best type of support ever, I think, honestly.

As Jayda feels, support is showing compassion for her reality, the fact of systemic targeting, and racial inequalities. Teaching lived experiences to dominant culture can help classroom discussions as Abdul-Raheem’s (2016) findings assert that Black students still contend with many barriers in higher education classrooms. This compliment’s Arroyo’s (2010) assertion well, as classrooms are not colorless, and the color you see is occupied by experiences you do not see. Another example is my own, the independent study. My undergraduate institution did not compassionately respond to my request for release and I failed a course as a result. My prior experiences of being physically assaulted by police officers was something that was not seen, yet played a role in my distrusting of educators as I sought refuge in higher education, only to be once again disregarded.

Compassionately responding and teaching these ideas is support in the form of acknowledgment, and beyond, however, Karissa also weighs in on compassion. Compassion is also the way in which a people are addressed as Karissa shares, “I don't know it's just like it's tiring for me because it's like you either don't address Black people at all, or when you do it's only about Black violence” (Karissa, 2021, Feb. 25, p. 31). Karissa tells of the lack of compassion for Black students and the uphill battle that ensues. The lack of compassion in classrooms and campus climates is summed up by Vince as he states,

Like I don't want to say the wrong thing or be perceived incorrectly and that's even happened to me just in instances where it's like I'm presenting in front of a class or like I'm talking to coworkers, you know, on campus about what something looks like for

Black students or what that environment is like and it's like how, how are you going to perceive me and other Black people as a collective based on what I say right here, right now, in this face.

Retracing back to embodiment, Vince articulates the lived experiences of having a black face, which causes him to think about his responses to classmates and coworkers. The need for a reciprocated enactment of compassion is what I highlight here. Stated differently, compassion means treating Black folks as people, with dignity. Displaying and enacting compassion is perhaps an important step for by standing Black students, in essence, the display of compassion shows your interests are equitably advancing for Black students (Shappie & Debb, 2019). In other words, compassion is hyper visible on many a front for Black students as this finding is consistent with Griffin et al. (2011), who maintains that people of color are more cognizant of campus climate and overall atmospheric culture pertaining to being racially supported, recruited, and retained.

H – Have a culturally affirming curriculum. The final step is perhaps the most actionable. You as the instructor, should proactively arrange assignments and readings to include books, articles, book chapters, theory, and research from Black scholars, and scholars of color. Becoming culturally literate is essential to developing an equitable, culturally affirming curriculum (Bell, 1980; Jackson, 1993; Rendon, 1994). Glocke (2016) asserts that Black students will benefit from an African centered pedagogy, however, the simple inclusion of scholars of color will suffice. Again, compassion is responding to cross-cultural perspectives and wrongdoing immediately, whereas having an culturally affirming curriculum is the teaching of relevant cross-cultural scholarship. There is an incessant need to teach cultural difference in this way, as difference matters (Allen, 2011), and that is when true learning occurs. For example, Martin highlights the disparities within curriculum as he states

Most of them are performative in a way, where they just don't do too much, I do think when you like, promote Black excellence, professors should research Black scholarship too, and read the articles by both white and Black scholars so they're more accessible for everybody.

This step will align all of the above with course material, which is important because Black students will see a more complete picture when the scholars, they are researching look like them. In transforming curriculum, Black students do not have to constantly be the teachers of Black culture, and likewise other minority groups and international student do not have to be the sole teachers of their respective cultures. This ideal is substantiated by Smith (2020) which illustrates how California Secretary of State Dr. Shirley Weber initiated a bill that California Governor Gavin Newsom signed that requires all incoming students in the California State University system to take an ethnic/culture course.

Essentially, the lack of diversity in curriculum and across instructors makes having to constantly defend and explain Black experiences is extremely taxing and frustrating for Black students (Simmons et al., 2013). However, as the instructor, the way in which you present the cross-cultural scholarship is paramount. For example, Kimmy, now a third year, vividly remembers nefarious experiences of her first year:

Yes, my freshman year at [University] my history class. So, it was um we were in American history of fall Semester and we're going over like slavery, like it was that period where we're going over slavery in class. And so, there's like two incidents, I

remember one wasn't like directed towards me, but I remember the teacher was just reading a passage from like a slave. And like you know slaves weren't taught how to read it right so like there was misspellings and stuff. And still like the way she was reading it, she was just laughing because she thought it was funny on like the grammatical errors and stuff and you know, being a Black person, so I was like what's funny about this and it kind of rubbed me the wrong way.

As you can see, Kimmy was “rubbed the wrong way,” meaning she was upset and uneasy with the incident where the instructor was clearly culpable. Laughing at a passage written by a slave, who was lawfully, and systematically kept illiterate is first inappropriate, second unprofessional, third, sends the wrong message to white students, and fourth is the epitome of being insensitive toward Black and African American identifying students. Having a culturally affirming curriculum does not always guarantee a culturally affirming pedagogy, as is evident here. Therefore, being real, reorienting your mindset, empathy, active listening, and compassion are all appropriate here. Exemplifying this idea is Vince as he shares,

I mean like it's emotionally draining because it's like you feels like you're constantly fighting to have your place right here, right now. In higher education you have to constantly redeem yourself in class, you have to show you know the material and you're working hard and you're doing this and that still just have moments where you're most likely going to be invalidated by those around you.

As Vince stated, Black students have to work extremely hard, and in essence, teach cultural relevance only to be invalidated. However, with a desegregated curriculum, Black students, and all other students for this matter, will experience new perspectives on literature, pedagogy, and performance. This shift puts all students in a position to learn from another culture's perspective that is rooted in empirically backed, peer-reviewed scholarship.

Moreover, when Black students are exposed to the many possibilities of extant Black literature and scholarship, students may be interested in careers in academe as a result. As Jacob “it's a shame... especially the fact that we're culture makers, you know, I'm saying basically not having more, Black people in in investigative journalism in broadcast journalism” (Jacob, 2021, Mar. 5, p. 10). To his point, Black students and all other students miss out on the culture created when a culturally affirming curriculum is not implemented. Aside from teaching performance, curriculum stands to be the most impactful stance of solidarity with Black students based on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the scholarly conversation. Taken together, the last step is indeed perhaps the most actionable because this step is outwardly displayed on a continuum.

B.R.E.A.C.H.'s communicative six-step guide is both iterative and non-cyclical. For instance, an instructor can develop a culturally affirming curriculum before actively listening. This communicative process is infantile, and is still in developmental stages; however, implementing some, if not all aspects of B.R.E.A.C.H. could help to better engage with students of all backgrounds. B.R.E.A.C.H. is developed to be employed by faculty and staff better serve minoritized students in racially heightened times. This guide can be effectively employed by professors, lecturers and teaching associates, teaching assistants and extended to administrators, counseling, financial (aid), and staff contexts. Moreover, the versatility of B.R.E.A.C.H. is such that organizations can employ a B.R.E.A.C.H. approach with minor modifications, substituting curriculum for policy, and teaching with professional development trainings.

Closing

As I write this autoethnography, I heal, I transform, and I grow. While the experience of the n-words damaged me in the very last semester of my undergraduate schooling, I transform through complex experiences in education as they now lead me to a communication Ph.D. program. Like my participants, I experienced very nuanced barriers in education, as well as overt barriers, yet with the complex of needing a host of education degrees to be deemed worthy and successful, I press on through systemic barriers. Even after I represented my school as a young scholar at a highly competitive undergraduate conference several states away, was I in the wrong for simply being Black and wanting someone to do something about n-words being said in a classroom? Actually, there was something done, I received an F in an independent study, a specialized course that holds special academic reverence for scholars. The irony. The lack of support, and invalidation I experienced in my last undergraduate semester caused me anger, disdain, and subsequently caused me to not only drop out of, at that time the upcoming research symposium, but also caused me to momentarily leave my discipline. But what if I dropped out for good, just before graduating? The systemic disregard overcame me and delayed my path to a master's in communication. Perhaps, this was always a part of my journey, not absolving the professor, the student, or the system for the sheer negligence, no matter how well intentioned their actions may have been. The fact of the matter is, Black students are smart, Black students have intelligence, yet Black students have many obstacles to face in the process. That is why models like B.R.E.A.C.H. are needed, because after one hundred and fifty years of abolishes slavery, Black students still feel inadequate, the hope is that we do not wait another one hundred and fifty years to elicit tangible and sustainable change.

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Our Unseen Bond: A Father and Daughter's Story of Mutual Diagnosis

Sharon L. Wight
(sharon.wight09@gmail.com, wighsl01@pfw.edu)

Abstract

On March 23, 2010, the Affordable Care Act was passed in the United States. This was a mere ten days before one of the worst medical crises imaginable would befall my family; my father went from a healthy fifty-one-year-old very ill with a rare condition called catastrophic antiphospholipid syndrome. His diagnosis came to define my life, as I was diagnosed with antiphospholipid syndrome nine years later. This diagnosis, mere months before the COVID-19 pandemic, connects my story to my father's, to the act that helped millions, and the pandemic. This was originally developed as a photovoice piece.

Keywords

Antiphospholipid syndrome, COVID-19, hereditary autoimmune disease, Affordable Care Act, photovoice, invisible illness

Presentation available on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3OihuopqgA>

Our Unseen Bond: A Father and Daughter's Story of Mutual Diagnosis

When the COVID-19 pandemic started to take over the world, no one knew the exact cause of the various symptoms that were the cause of serious disease in patients. However, within the first quarter, the public was aware that blood clotting was occurring in patients causing much of the death that was being seen. From the beginning, I read everything I could on the pandemic, wanting to know about all the science that I could. In May 2020, there was a random article one afternoon that put me into a cold sweat. This article stated that the pulmonary clotting in the individuals passing from COVID-19 was being caused by antiphospholipid antibodies (Park, 2020; Volansky, 2021; Xiao et al. 2020).

On April 2, 2010, a mere ten days after the Affordable Care Act had been passed by the United States Congress and signed into law by President Obama, I received a call. My father was being taken into the ER, after having had flu like symptoms for several days. Everything seemed routine, he just wanted to get checked out. This would quickly go from routine to the most surreal nightmare I, at only twenty-three years old, had ever experienced to that point. This is the story of how the Affordable Care Act, my father's diagnosis, my own diagnosis, and the COVID-19 pandemic are all linked in my life, how one piece cannot exist without the other.

This piece was originally developed as a photovoice autoethnography. In photovoice, much of the story is told through pictures. Those pictures are getting written into story for this piece. Photovoice was used as the original approach because I had access to Facebook memories from the exact time of my father's diagnosis, and therefore could tap into the emotions that I was feeling at those moments. One memory, from October 22, 2012, stated "you never remember the day before your life changes forever, because that day feels like just any other day" (Switched at

Birth). In beginning the with this quote, it sets the stage for the concept that this piece is about moments...moments in time that change lives, and how those changes can then ripple out to others.

Moments

One such moment was March 23, 2010. This was the day that the Affordable Care Act was signed into law (Stolberg & Pear, 2010) by President Obama. This is a moment that impacted every American. The ACA provided protections to individuals with pre-existing conditions, provided preventative care for individuals, removed annual and lifetime coverage caps that existed through insurers at the time, health care could no longer be canceled if someone were ill, and more. At the time, in fact, one of my greatest fears was losing my father, due to my younger sister and mother both having pre-existing conditions that are easily managed with medication but need that medication to be managed. So, despite having had care my entire life, this was still important to the me as I knew what it meant if we lost my dad. The year prior, as a newlywed, I had experienced exactly what can happen when a pre-existing condition does not allow an individual to make needed changes to insurance and was paying more for health insurance than the mortgage but could do nothing to change those circumstances.

And then, came April of 2010. A month that began with plans for a special Greek themed Easter quickly turned to a family in crisis. In the seventy-two hours, it appeared that my father would need a simple gall bladder surgery to feel better. But then those three days turned to four, then they put him into a medicated coma. The doctors were not giving a lot of answers to the family, largely because there were not answers to give. After six days in the coma, on April 9, 2010, doctors had what seemed to be their first break – we were told doctors were running a test called the Lupus Anticoagulant test (Kazzaz, McCune & Knight, 2016). At the time, we thought this might be the condition that was causing the delay in surgery, but it turned out it was a blood test that tested for several conditions, including antiphospholipid syndrome. This was documented via a Facebook memory with a question about the test. They were given no other information on how the test might be used; if the test was testing for something viral, bacterial, genetic, or otherwise. But it gave me, a graduate student at the time, something I could research in the journals available to me. This test was also the first link to my own life, as this is the test needed to diagnose antiphospholipid syndrome.

As things go with medical mysteries, things got worse before they got better. My father was moved to a university hospital in Indianapolis, IN. This is where the family spent the rest of April 2010, rotating in and out to go to school and work at home in northern Indiana as needed. On April 16, 2010, I received a text that would define not only the rest of my father's life, but also my own, from my mom. There was a diagnosis...Catastrophic Antiphospholipid syndrome (CAPS). The text also read that my mother got to see my father's beautiful brown eyes, another thing we share as father and daughter. My previously healthy father had a rare autoimmune condition that only three hundred others in the world in 2010 were known to have had, and there was a mortality rate of 50% at diagnosis. How it has always been explained to me as a lay person is that Catastrophic Antiphospholipid syndrome causes the patient to have two equal and opposite things at the same time. Throughout the patient's body, there are teeny tiny blood clots formed, all the way into the capillaries. These generally tend to affect the core organs such as kidney, lungs, the heart, and the brain. At the same time, though, the rest of the blood is being told to become very thin. So, doctors cannot just go in and clean the blood clots out of the patient; they have to use a fine-tuned treatment plan. The treatment for CAPS at the time was

plasmapheresis, kidney dialysis and steroids, with post-treatment heparin. This was the treatment in 2010; treatment today includes other methods (Kazzaz, McCune & Knight, 2016).

Within 24 hours a ventilator was no longer needed, and he was talking. Boy, was he talking! He had no idea of the time that had passed since he had last been awake; his last memories were of being wheeled away for surgery. Having to explain to my father, a man that I rarely said no to, that I indeed could not give him the food or the water that he was asking for but instead had to give him drops of water off of a sponge because he had been asleep for two weeks was one of the hardest conversations I had ever had with my dad. In fact, at the time, I was not at all comfortable driving on the highway, so the way mom and I explained the situation was to tell him that I had been driving back and forth from home to the hospital. His eyes got big, and he grasped the severity of the situation after that moment. Conversations with him were hard for the first few days. He was there, though not fully, and it was clear that the anesthesia he had been given for weeks had caused some intense dreams. I did not care what my father had to say though; I just wanted to hear his voice forever after almost three weeks of not being able to hear it.

We were one of the initially lucky families who had a family member that was diagnosed with CAPS. My dad is, technically, not counted in that 50% mortality rate because he got to come home. Once my father was awake, the first thing he started asking me about was if I was still going on a trip planned to Japan. I had been seriously considering canceling; nothing had been purchased yet and it could be put off until he was healthy. But considering it was the primary thing he remembered, and he was so excited, I said yes daddy, we are going. Once my dad got home, he had a mission. He started contacting companies to install needed repairs at their house, making suggestions about how to fix things at my house, almost immediately went back to work and I gave him full control to plan the trip however he wanted. He had a blast helping me look for my tickets and figuring out places to go while we were there. When in the hospital mom and I had often joked that we knew he was in there trying to figure things out for himself and come up with a game plan; this activity once he was home only confirmed our suspicions. July 15, 2010 was the last day I would spend time with my dad as my dad, to hug him, to joke with him, to talk with him face-to-face about important things. I had a dream the night before that was so real, that my dad was going to pass when I was there. As I left my parents I said, "I better have a dad when I come home." He looked at me and said of course, everything will be fine. I left on my trip for Japan the next morning, early in the morning.

With a week left in Japan, dad became sick again. He and I spoke for awhile over chat; and the basic essence of the conversation was me hinting around coming home early, and him, much like with the look on his face when I told him he could not have food and water, telling me absolutely not. He never SAID absolutely not, but I knew how to read between the lines that were my father's words. So, I stayed until my planned return of July 31, 2010. Dad also came home that day from the hospital, and I was able to see him after a couple of hours of sleep. My gut was screaming at me to get to my parents' house as soon as I could. I walked into the house and my mom asked me to be quiet because dad was sleeping, but he walked out a few minutes later... gaunt, hunched over. I walked a little closer to him and showed him what I had gotten him and said gently, "I love you daddy.," and he responded in kind. On August 4th, ten days before my dad's birthday, my dad would return for the last time to the hospital in Indianapolis. I had been slowly doing laundry and recovering from a horrible cold when my mom called and said we had to go. I threw together what clean clothing I had and went with my mom, planning to settle in for a few days.

We arrived at the hospital a little while after my dad. He was unconscious again, and I started begging and pleading with the doctor, offering any and every body part of mine that I thought they could do something with to save my dad. I was young and healthy, I thought surely all they needed were my body parts. The doctor, somber yet kind, looked at me, then my mom and told us that whoever needed to be there needed to get there. We sent for my sister, still at home, two hours away, and some close family friends agreed to bring her. My husband stayed at home because none of us believed this would be the day. My mom and I went to check in to the hotel, the one we had spent all of April rotating in and out of. This next part is written as I wrote it originally for my photovoice piece.

Raw Emotions

I called a friend who lived in Indianapolis and asked her to be with me. We were talking and I received a phone call from an Indianapolis number. It was the hospital; I was second on the call list; they were trying to find my mom. My mom was there with my sister, I said. Immediately after I got off the phone my heart started to palpitate. I couldn't cry, my body went cold and numb, it was like my entire body had pins and needles. I couldn't feel my legs, but I couldn't sit still either. My friend asked me what was going on. All I could do is look at her, color drained from my face. I couldn't get words out. She snapped to action; I don't know how I got to the car. As we drove the less than 2 miles to the hospital, I thought I would need to stop at least three times on the way, I thought I might throw up. I couldn't cry, why the hell couldn't I cry, isn't this the time to cry? We pulled into the hospital, she asked if I wanted her to stay, I managed to squeak out "no, I think its ok". I knew it wasn't ok. But I didn't need her to see my meltdown. Emotions are something we hide in our family.

My mother met me in the lobby, I somehow managed to walk; my legs felt like they weighed ninety pounds each, how could they weigh so much? All I wanted to do was get up to his room, to find out that the feeling I had deep in the pit of my stomach was wrong. It had to be wrong, right? It wasn't wrong. I text my husband as we ride the elevator and tell him I think my dad is gone. I get upstairs, they haven't made him look peaceful yet, I go in with our family friend and just cling to him, sobbing. I yell damnit over and over then apologize to our family friend who just hugs me harder. Then I see the nurse and tell them to clean things up a bit before my little sister, my seventeen-year-old baby sister, comes in to say goodbye. I walk out, three missed calls from my husband, trying to figure out what is going on. I can't call him back. I text him. Dad's gone. My dad was one of his best buddies. I still can't call; texting the words make it feel less real, the minute I have to say the words it becomes real, and I can't fall apart now. I need to be strong for my sister, my mother, our friends.

Carrying it Forward

August 4, 2010 around 9:30 PM was when it felt like my world ended forever. I slowly started telling my closest friends; my mom and I got back home around 2 AM that morning. We had barely spoken on that drive home. But my world did not end forever. In fact, the world kept turning, and nine years later I would go on to receive my own diagnosis of antiphospholipid syndrome (APS). And, in large part, that was because of the two events of 2010; the signing of the Affordable Care Act, and the loss of my father. After years of chronic pain and unexplainable symptoms, I finally got a rheumatologist to listen to me in 2019. Due the way the ACA is written, he was able to write blood orders for me to get tested for several autoimmune disorders largely because of symptoms and family history; something that would have been difficult before

the passing of this law. He, along with both of my specifically obstetricians, cited that since we lost my dad, insurance would be more likely to accept the request for the tests. Earlier, another doctor had tested me for antiphospholipid syndrome, an obstetrician, when we were trying to develop a treatment plan for managing another condition I have, largely because APS is often attributed to miscarriages. My tests were \$1300 each, required thirteen vials of blood be taken both times, and can take up to two weeks to receive results.

For APS diagnosis, one must have two tests for the biomarkers done at least twelve weeks apart, or the lupus anticoagulant test (Kazzaz, McCune & Knight, 2016; Xourgia & Tektonidou, 2022), and I meet that criterion. In my case, I am what is known as a triple-positive, with remarkably high biomarkers, which makes me more complex; if or when I become an active APS patient, I will have to be on blood thinners as well as other medications because I am more likely to develop co-occurring conditions such as lupus or rheumatoid arthritis. However, I have not had an internal clotting episode yet, and therefore cannot be put on a treatment plan. Thus, I live in hematological limbo, wondering if that will ever happen. This condition has kept me from considering having my own children, and anytime I have pain in my legs or chest, I wonder if that my clotting event has arrived. However, due to this diagnosis, before the ACA I still could have lost insurance despite not being an active patient.

And then came COVID-19, a mere eight months after I received my diagnosis. COVID-19, which eight weeks after it hit the shores of the United States, also brought antiphospholipid antibodies into mainstream media. I should not have been able to get my diagnosis, but because of the ACA, I did, and because I did, I believe that is why I was able to survive the pandemic. I can be supported at work because of having this diagnosis, complex though it may be, which allows me to continue to be an advocate for those in the antiphospholipid community and those with autoimmune disease, that are constantly fighting for additional supports with invisible illness.

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The Body Schema and Agency: An Autoethnography of a Dancer Who Accompanied Her Parents Suffering from Polio

I-Hsuan Chen
Yi-jung Wu¹
University of Taipei

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to describe how, during her childhood, I-Hsuan helped care for her parents, both of whom suffered from polio, and to show how disabled people faced prejudice and discrimination from the society at large. Guided by Dr. Yi-jung Wu, this work employed autoethnography as methodology to uncover I-Hsuan's suppressed feelings since childhood and how dance training provided tranquility. While dancing, I-Hsuan felt empowered and forgot discrimination that society had given to herself and parents. The ultimate goal of this work is to enhance support for the challenges faced by people with disabilities.

Keywords

Disabled, caregiver, evocative autoethnography, dance learning

The purpose of this research paper is to describe the first author I-Hsuan's experience of accompanying her polio-afflicted parents during her childhood. Disabled people are often overlooked in society. After they have been categorized as disabled and provided with a disability card by a medical team, the public tends to think that impairment and disability are permanent and so they subjectively ignore or underestimate the abilities of disabled people and sometimes even stigmatize them. Because of this, I-Hsuan has suffered from peer ignorance and mockery and hence generally tries to avoid mentioning her family background. Through dancing, she has gradually regained confidence. Dancing brings I-Hsuan more than the free movement of the body; it enables her to feel the body schema of liberation, aesthetics, and empowerment, which are especially precious to her and her family. Her outlook on life and abilities have expanded and brought her greater respect and a stronger sense of her place and role in society.

Relying on recollections of her earliest memories when she was between the ages of 3 and 15 (1993-2003) and informal interviews with her mother as primary research data, I-Hsuan and her Master's thesis advisor, Dr. Yi-jung Wu, employed autoethnography as methodology to uncover the feelings she had suppressed since childhood and how, at that time, dance training provided her with tranquility and hope. Autoethnography is a research approach that uses evocative narratives to delve into and represent personal lived experience in relation to culture (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Denzin (2017) pointed out that an autoethnographic shift occurred in various research approaches in the 2000s to respond to questions regarding the mainstream assumption and expectation that the writer of a text should hold an objective position. Over the

¹Dr. Yi-jung Wu is the corresponding author of this study. For any questions or responses, please contact her at yijungwu99@gmail.com

next decade, as cultural, social, and economic devastation occurred more rapidly in relation to neoliberal politics and globalization, an increasing number of scholars advocated for autoethnography as a way of storytelling and sense-making for issues related to social justice (Jones, 2017; Faulkner, 2017). This research will present I-Hsuan's personal lived experience of being marginalized, stigmatized, and betrayed due to her family background.

A main challenge that I-Hsuan faced during the data collection process was trying to work with the indistinct and fragmented memories of her childhood. Many of them were deliberately forgotten, purposefully suppressed, or were incomplete, and stand as research limitations. In addition to recalling and reconstructing past events, during her undergraduate degree, she created a dance work, *Looking into You* (Chen, 2010), for the purpose of documenting and commemorating a painful experience of peer betrayal and marginalization (as delineated in her narrative below) during her childhood. The process of creating and rehearsing the work helped her to revisit and live with that memory with courage and insight. Selected footage of that dance work was included in her presentation video for the 2022 International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narratives.

In the first half of this paper, I-Hsuan will present the narrative of her lived experiences to allow the reader to more deeply identify with the events that unfold. Then Dr. Yi-jung Wu will further reflect on the meaning behind I-Hsuan's personal stories by holding dialogues with related literature on disability, dance, body image, and agency. The ultimate goal of the work is to enhance empathy and support for the challenges faced by people with physical disabilities.

I-Hsuan's Narrative of Her Lived Experience with Her Parents Stricken with Polio

Accompanying my parents

My parents suffered from polio, which was an epidemic in Taiwan from the 1950s to the 1970s. My father was paralyzed for 9 years because of polio and a genetic disorder. Unable to move, he suffered serious bedsores and in the final years of his life, had to rely on machines to breathe. My mother was also infected with the polio virus; her brain was affected and her leg was slightly crippled. She often lost her balance or fell, but still she worked to take care of my father, my sister, and me.

When I was little, I liked to be with my mom. When she started working, I would take a chair, sitting beside her in front of piles of hats to be manufactured. I saw her working on the hats and then followed her to the kitchen to cook. After the meal, my mom would hold my hand as we walked to see my father. When the door opened, there was a strong smell of medicines and disinfectants. Laying in the room was a man with his left limbs paralyzed and all limbs uneven. I would run to him and ask, "Daddy, do you know who I am?" My dad would murmur my nickname softly to me, and I would happily hold his cold hand, telling him how I had helped mom today. When I finished, I would look at him but the only reply was his weak breath. I would hold his hand to touch my head, as if he was touching my head. My mom would make vegetable juice and feed him through a tube in his nose. Then I would push his wheelchair to his bedside and help my mom to move him onto the wheelchair. Then mom took dad to the bathroom to wash him. Mom never complained. She thought it's what she is supposed to do.

Stepping into the Dance Space

I was very energetic when I was little, playing around in the house all day long. To release my energy, my family then enrolled me into a dance class. When my mom took me to the

class, I was deeply attracted by the bright layout of the dance studio and the beautiful dancing of the students. When the class started, the teacher found that I had excellent flexibility; I could do many movements with stretching and bending techniques. Her compliments would cheer me up for many days. Although sometimes I might still get punished by her stick when I didn't quite achieve the goal, I never cried. The only thing I wanted was to do the movement really well. My mom almost always sat aside to watch the class. She always had an expression of admiration and approval, which was one of my motivations to keep dancing.

Betrayal, shame, and loss

In 1999, I was in the third grade in elementary school. I made friends with two girls. We were really close at that time. One day, they came to my house. I was delighted. My friends met my mom and insisted on seeing my dad, so I took them to see him. When we were at the door, I asked them not to tell anyone. They nodded.

I took a deep breath and opened the door; there was a strong smell of disinfectant alcohol and baby powder. I took them to my dad's sickbed. I held my dad's cold hands, speaking softly to him, "Daddy, I brought my friends home to play with me." Like usual, he replied with silence. I turned to my friends. I could see the fear in their eyes and the strange expression on their faces, so I took them out of the room.

The next day, when I was at school, the class stared at me with a strange look. I saw the two friends of mine whispering to people. Some boys mocked the physical challenges faced by the disabled, and the two girls laughed with them. Suddenly, I had the feeling of betrayal and shame! Tears filled my eyes at once. I turned away and returned to my seat. The three of us were not close anymore. I distanced myself from people after that. Whenever asked about my family, I would always evade the question.

In the second semester of the third grade, my scores dropped. My aunt told my mom to stop me from dancing, hoping I would focus on my studies. After stopping, I felt lost both physically and mentally and unmotivated at all. I couldn't forget the feeling of dancing, which brought me not only happiness, but also self-confidence.

When I was in the sixth grade, I proposed to my mom that I wanted to study in a Dance Program for the Gifted in the city. My dance teacher helped me persuade my family. I enrolled in a 6-month intensive dance class to help prepare for the entrance exam. Couple weeks before the exam, my dad passed away. Although I was sad, I tried to pull myself together to get ready for the exam. Dance healed my sadness. I passed the exam.

The accomplishments dance has brought to me

After entering the Dance Program for the Gifted, I commuted to school every day because my family could not afford to rent a room for me in the city. Although it was tiring, I was happy because dancing made me feel fulfilled. In the summer of 2004, our dance class represented our school in a dance competition and won the national first prize. Then we were invited to a cultural and art exchange in Japan. Some of my relatives gave me financial support so I could attend the performance in Japan.

Yi-jung's Reflections Upon Reading I-Hsuan's Narratives

Disability and body image

For the modern public, the body image constructed by the media and internet values the integrity and even perfection of the whole, fully functioning body; therefore, the completion of body features is seen as normal. In contrast, when the body has been subject to physical and mental illness that causes long-term or permanent disability, people usually rely on medical evaluation to identify and categorize the type of illness and its expected prognosis. After the medical evaluation, the patient will be issued a disability card, which has the effect of stigmatizing people with impairment and disability as “abnormal.” Devva Kasntiz & Russell P. Shuttleworth (1999) claimed that impairment is not only an objective physical disability but is also connected with the negative understanding and association from social culture. This occurs because “disability” is usually perceived negatively in society; therefore, these types of negative features of the body are easily seen as “injury” or “impairment”. Anthropologists note that not all body features are seen as negative attributes. For example, being extra-tall wouldn't be seen as a disability because being tall is regarded as a positive trait in society. Thus, by adopting this perspective, it can be seen that impairment is defined by being different from normal people AND because the differences are regarded as negative traits by the culture.

I-Hsuan's confrontation with her friends' fear of her father during their visit demonstrates the social stigmatization with which Kasntiz & Shuttleworth (1999) were concerned. Her friends' reluctance to talk with her father made her feel sad, knowing that most people with disabilities usually have fairly innocent modes of thinking. To her, most people with disabilities are merely different in their appearance and ways of speaking. It is the society that affixes a stigma to them that results in their marginalization. The ridicule that I-Hsuan received from the entire class made her decide to conceal her family's situation from others. Hence, this type of decision can cause people with disabilities to be doubly marginalized, the first time by society, and the second time by their abled family members, who dare not show their affections in front of others to avoid being marginalized as well.

I observed that by doing this research I-Hsuan gradually re-opened herself to the public. Before deciding to write about her own story with her parents, she seemed unsure about the topic of her Master's thesis. Nearly a year later, she contacted me and told me she wanted to change her research topic on an evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) about herself and parents. Since then, she has become focused.

Dancing, body schema, and agency

Whether in East or West, much of the history and social constructions are rooted in the dominance of patriarchy. The resultant social values and ideologies have required females to be obedient in personality and body carriage. The appearance of modern dance in the beginning of the 20th century marked the emergence of discernable social changes that led to the advocacy of a more “free” and “natural” female body (Lin, 2020). Dance provided female modern dance pioneers in America and Europe with the opportunity to escape the bodily and social limitations imposed on them, leave the household, and become respected artists who were invited to travel around the world.

As modern dance was introduced from Europe to Taiwan via Japanese colonization in the early 20th century, dance also served as a motor of social agency that helped female dance pioneers, such as Tsai-er Lee, in Taiwan to be acknowledged as successful dance artists and

educators by participating in national [Chinese] ethnic dance competitions for patriotic propaganda after the end of WWII (Chang, 2019). In contemporary Taiwan, the purpose of political propaganda embedded in the national ethnic dance competition has been mostly replaced by the pursuit of artistic talents since the end of the 20th century. Young dancers like I-Hsuan can present themselves expressively through dance.

After returning from Japan, thus, I-Hsuan got the opportunity to participate in more performances and competitions in other cities in Taiwan. She has become a dance teacher, bringing the beauty of dance to more children. Her dance learning journey made me think of American female modern dance pioneers in the early 1900s, for example, Isadora Duncan, and the aforementioned Taiwanese female dance predecessors, Tsai-er Lee, who broke through the social constraints on the female body by presenting dance works in public and became respected dance artists and educators after the 1940s, fully demonstrating agency and freedom of the mind and the body (Chang, 2019). For I-Hsuan, dance means more than movement of the body; it enables her to feel the body schema of liberation, aesthetics, and empowerment, which are especially precious to her and her family. Although I-Hsuan's family might not have been able to provide her with much "cultural capital," the concept coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1983/1986), they have wholeheartedly supported her education in dance.

By accompanying I-Hsuan along her research journey, I understand that dance has helped her realize that her body is a practical and intuitive manifestation of her relationships with the world. As proposed by Merleau-Ponty, the body schema registers our attitudes and actions and provides the reference norm to which we contrast our perceptions (as cited in Halák, 2018, p. 41). In this sense, dance helped to reshape I-Hsuan's body schema, perceptions of herself, and worldview that have been influenced by societal prejudice and marginalization since her childhood. Not only does dance make her realize that she is a complete and capable being, but it enables her to express thoughts and emotions through artistic creation. Furthermore, through performances and teaching, she can interact with people from different cultures, regions, and classes. Her outlook on her life and abilities have expanded and brought greater respect and a stronger sense of her place in society.

Epilogue

I-Hsuan has visited many cities around Taiwan through her participation in dance competitions and performances. Her view and body schema have been expanded. She has also become a dance teacher, bringing the joy of dance to many children. Although dance has brought her out from the shadow of marginalization that obscured her disabled family, she does not want to leave her family. The admiring eyes of her mother, who has been watching her dance since she was three, will always accompany her on her journey as a dance artist and educator.

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Technicolor Third Space: Developing *The AutoEthnographer* Literary and Arts Magazine

Marlen Harrison (editor@theautoethnographer.com)

Abstract

In this brief, animated autoethnography, I utilize the concept of a sociocultural *third space* as explored by theorists Bhabha, Packer, hooks, and Oldenburg to consider why evocative autoethnography can benefit from its own literary and arts magazine. I also utilize this presentation as an opportunity for reflective practice, considering my various identities as a magazine-reader, writer, editor, and autoethnographer in order to examine my rationale for development of the magazine, and to explore how the numerous cultures in which I participate – online education, digital publishing, and the creative arts – have conspired to support my technicolor vision for a digital celebration of autoethnography. Link to video: <https://theautoethnographer.com/technicolor-third-space-developing-the-autoethnographer-literary-arts-magazine/>

Keywords

Third space, digital magazine, literary, arts

Welcome to [“Technicolor third space: Developing *The AutoEthnographer* literary and arts magazine.”](#) Hi, I’m [Marlen Harrison](#). I want to tell you why I created a literary and arts magazine for autoethnographers. I’m a longtime fan of print and digital magazines; I’ve been working in academia and digital publishing for over 20 years, and I’ve previously worked as a magazine columnist and editor. At heart, I’m a creative type who loves literature and the arts.

In my English PhD program, I was introduced to autoethnography as a way of exploring cultural phenomena via the lens of lived experience. I used both autoethnography and third space theory to investigate language and sexuality in my dissertation. I theorized communities of practice as symbolic third spaces where queer Japanese could use English to construct or reveal sexual selves.

Third space or third place has several definitions and applications. Ray Oldenburg writes, “Third places are where people spend time between home first place and work second place locations where we exchange ideas have a good time and build relationships” (in Butler & Diaz, 2016).

Randall Packer (2014) explains, “The third space represents the fusion of the physical first space and the remote second space into a third space that can be inhabited by remote users simultaneously and asynchronously.”

Zhou and Pilcher (2019) draw our central focus “beyond the entities that interlocutors are conceivably locked into towards a new site opened up between interlocutors.” They continue, “Such spaces are imagined to be a site of liberation, where interlocutors are freed from prior cultural roots and openly negotiate and reconcile issues emanating from differences between neutrally juxtaposed cultures” (p. 1).

Roy (2017) summarizes Bhabha’s idea of third space as “a metaphorical space in which two or more disparate social or cultural paradigms interact to form new or hybrid ways of thinking or being” (p. 3).

And bell hooks (1989) reflects on such marginal spaces as “offering the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.” She continues, “We are transformed individually and collectively as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world” (p. 24).

Recently I went back to school to pursue my MFA in creative writing. As I entered the literary world I considered what can I contribute in addition to my writing? Looking around the world of autoethnography I saw the *Journal of Autoethnography*, conferences like ISAN by IAANI, creative and scholarly workshops, book projects, and even vibrant social media groups. But I kept thinking back to my unpublished creative autoethnography students who felt their work wasn't quite right for academic journals. I considered the intersectionality of my editorial experiences, my interest in literary and expressive arts, and my inclination towards cultural inquiry using self-reflection. And I wondered, “What if autoethnography were treated not as an academic subject but as an artistic one?” How would presenting the process and product of cultural research as literary and artistic impact the emotional and cognitive experience of sharing one's work?

Technicolor emphasizes the move from black and white, academic, text based to more creative and multimodal expressions. Third space refers to the social space or opportunity created by a digital magazine framed as literary/artistic and the opportunities it provides for method, product, and practitioner.

What will readers find at *The Autoethnographer*? The magazine is literary and invites fiction and nonfiction essays poetry and other expressive texts. *The AutoEthnographer* is creative and invites multimodal, music, dance, photography, and other expressive arts. Check out our submissions page: <https://theautoethnographer.com/submissions>.

In addition to general submissions throughout 2022 we invite submissions that address our special annual theme climate change: <https://theautoethnographer.com/call-for-submissions-2022-special-issue-climate-change/>.

Who are we? Meet our international team; we hail from across 3 continents: <https://theautoethnographer.com/masthead/>.

Want to work with us? We're looking for volunteers to join our editorial board, especially folks who can assist us with our social media presence, and those interested in developing creative media such as podcasts: <https://theautoethnographer.com/volunteer/>

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