7.

INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING INSTRUCTORS TEACH AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CREATIVITY AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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What You Will Learn in this Chapter

- Explain the methodological purpose and value of autoethnography;
- Describe the intersection of creativity and methodological precision associated with this research;
- Analyze autoethnography to understand its political nature and focus on social justice;
- Identify the challenges associated with this genre of writing;
- Review and apply the steps of writing an autoethnography.

Key Terms:

- Autoethnography:
- Identity Politics:
- Postcolonial Theory:
- Queer Theory:
- Feminist Theory:
- Critical Race Theory:

Overview

This chapter explores autoethnography as writing that values first-person experience as a means to better understand the self and the complex socioeconomic and sociocultural phenomena that shape/are shaped by our daily interactions. We review the balance required between storytelling and methodological accuracy, consider the political/social justice-based significance of such research, and address the challenges this methodology and writing presents. We next distinguish between multiple autoethnographic genres and conclude with a step-by-step process for its development and craft.

Personal Narratives to Political Insights

Coined by Hayano (1979), autoethnography is a qualitative research method that originated out of the crisis of representation in the 1980s (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). Ellis and Bochner (2016), originators of the method, observe that there is no consensus about its definition, but Ellis (2004) has flexibly described it as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (p. xix). As Reed-Danahay (1997) points out, in treating the self as a point of departure, autoethnography values self-representation and insider expertise. This contrasts with its progenitor, traditional ethnographic research, in which scholars adopt the traditional stance of anthropologists, presenting themselves as objective observers of a culture foreign to them, implicitly contending that this alleged neutrality grants them greater expertise about that culture's beliefs, practices, and experiences than cultural members (pp. 2-9). In autoethnographic research, researchers curate, narrate, and analyze their own experiences to improve outsiders' understanding of a community to which they already belong. The result is an approach that affords writers the opportunity and ability to "examine everyday interpersonal and cultural experiences from the inside out" (Boylan & Orbe, 2014, p. 10), placing a premium on storytelling, theory, experiential knowledge, plurality, and multiplicity. This makes space for "ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us" (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 3).

Autoethnography meshes creative writing techniques with conventional qualitative research methods to make the argument that, while any review of culture is relative to group dynamics, it can be done, and done well, through an exploration of the self (Chang, 2008). To accomplish this task, individual voice is infused with nuance into local, regional, and global dialogues by striking a balance between "intellectual and methodological rigor...and creativity" (Adams et al., 2015). Accordingly, writers rely on techniques like autobiography, narrative inquiry, narrative analysis, performance art, archival work, and meta-ethnographic research. These approaches provide the freedom to "blur the boundaries between humanities and social sciences [to express] concrete lived experience in novel and literary forms [by] depicting local stories and including author's critical reflections on their lives and writing process" (Boylan & Orbe, 2014, pp. 9-10). The genre welcomes *all* stories from *all* writers but requires the inclusion of context, detail, depth, and evocativeness sufficient for critical interpretation. Per Denzin (2013), "the emphasis on self, biography, history, and experience must always work back and forth between three concerns: the concerns of performance, of process, and/or of analysis" (p. 129): that is, the tale and its telling, the epiphanies and social forms that organize the project, and the interpretation of the tale and the cultural forms that explain and challenge it. Significantly, while the central story should first resonate with the writer, the topics and issues addressed must be extrapolatable in order to effectively speak to and address a larger contingent of subjects and audiences.

The Self and Social Justice

As a genre of academic writing that considers the intersection of the lived experience, communal identity, and sociocultural and socioeconomic variables that influence interaction and communication, autoethnography explores "people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggle. It is writing and research that strives for social justice... to make life better" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 2). Issues of social injustice and/or inequity are interrogated through day-to-day occurrences often overlooked or discarded as *normal* or *natural*, that when left unaddressed uphold larger systemic issues related to racism, classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia. The genre decolonizes our modes of knowing. Asking whose voices have been "left out," "erased," and/or "marginalized" in academic scholarship, along with "whose stories were privileged and why, and which stories are important and why" in academic and public discourses (Chawla & Atay, 2018, p. 3) interrupts hegemonic knowledge structures and legitimizes alternate epistemologies. A self-reflective practice that considers local phenomena within the context of time, space, and actors, autoethnography encourages visceral texts and performances that recenter minoritized bodies and experiences, "shift marginal voices to the center" (Chawla & Atay, 2018, p. 4), and destabilize Western academic knowledge

production. This work aligns directly with Critical Race Theory, as it creates room for "cultural intuition" and diverse stories that speak from and interrogate colonial histories, exposes how institutions are shaped by racism, and challenges the privileging of whiteness and Eurocentric, colonialist ideals in these spaces (Martinez, 2016).

This methodological design draws on and overlaps with other academic lenses and paradigms, like feminist, critical race, and queer theories and disability studies. Ettorre (2017) aligned autoethnography with feminist tenets, including its ability to create transitional spaces, actively demonstrating how "the personal is the political," uphold practices attributed to women, like embodiment, emotion, and the arts, and raise oppositional consciousness through revealing precarity (p. 4). Jones (2016) observed that telling queer stories is about ascribing legitimacy to identities that become unspeakable, and embodying and enacting change, both of which are key to autoethnographic research (p. 8). Additionally, "through its empathic form, autoethnography provides a tool to fashion a 'non-dualistic ontology' of the mindful body in which emotions play a central role in human experience and cultural scripts of health and sickness" (Ettorre, 2017, p. 44) and speak back to medical institutions, making it a useful tool for disability justice. Narrative inquiry/analysis illuminate issues of agency that reflect and form political identities, sensibilities, and responsibilities, central work for feminist and queer theory and disability studies to occupy positions of cultural mediation.

Recently published autoethnographies display the depth and breadth of this work in addressing inequity to develop a more just world. Carr (2017) focused on the killing of Michael Brown and the subsequent social and racial unrest related to police brutality to better understand 21st century protest from the perspective of "young people who are experiencing these modes of civil resistance for the first time" (p. 6). Svendby et al. (2018) explored cultural ableism by narrating and analyzing their non-disabled perspectives and experiences to critique and challenge the biomedical lenses through which disabled bodies are perceived by the non-disabled (p. 225). Miheretu and Henward (2020) used Miheretu's personal experiences to examine mothers of interracial children who identify as Black to understand the experiences of women who cross color lines as couples and parents. And Holt (2003), Johnston and Strong (2008), Wall (2008), Saldana (2014), Forber-Pratt (2015), and Blockmans (2019) have interrogated their experiences as qualitative researchers in academia to make visible academic biases about autoethnography and the author's social location, which is "always racialized, classed, gendered" (Martinez, 2016, p. 82) and otherwise embodied. These are only some of the ways in which autoethnography has been applied. Our goal in relaying this information isn't to provide a literature review but rather to show how the method lends itself to writing that explores and challenges prevailing social, cultural, and economic structures.

Issues of Divulgence and Exposure

Autoethnography is a personally challenging method, necessitating self-awareness, reflexivity, objective distance, and narrative veracity. Researchers must remain vigilant against allowing the self to become overwhelmingly central, marginalizing collective experience. Autoethnography may leave them feeling personally vulnerable, such that they have to quell feelings of defensiveness when faced with scholarly critique (Ellis et al., 2011). They may incur personal and professional costs in writing about their experiences (Dashper, 2015). It can be difficult to get institutional approval for autoethnography since it challenges traditional forms of academic knowledge-making. And its detractors contend that it lacks generalizability and objectivity and is self-indulgent, non-rigorous, unethical, and — due to the fallibility of memory — inaccurate (Holt, 2003, p. 24).

Many of these methodological concerns have been addressed by prominent qualitative researchers. Some autoethnographers insist autoethnography is about seeking verisimilitude, not precision, and what is generalizable about such research is not the particulars of an experience but how it represents a facet of collective experience. Though it's derided as "navel-gazing," autoethnography is intrinsically collaborative and polyvocal, as the stories we tell about ourselves are co-constructed with people in our lives. Holman Jones (2016) addressed the charge that autoethnography lacks theoretical rigor by suggesting, "theory asks about and explains the nuances of an experience and the happenings of a culture; story is the mechanism for illustrating and embodying these nuances and happenings. Because theory and story exist in a mutually influential relationship, theory is not an add-on to story" (p. 229). Finally, although issues of relational ethics plague autoethnographic work, other people's identities can be masked without altering

the story's meaning, and when masked identities may be discoverable, creating composite characters offers further anonymity (Ellis et al., 2011).

Some of these issues are subjective. Degrees of personal and professional precarity will affect what scholars choose to disclose in their research (Dashper, 2015). Member-checking processes, in which characters are asked to assess the credibility of the research, might be impossible or might be comprehensively conducted with reviewers with whom the autoethnographer is intimately connected (Forber-Pratt, 2015). Doing this research for institutional approval comes with risks, as institutional members might question the project's validity (Holt, 2003; Dashper, 2015). Autoethnographers should consider their personal and professional circumstances when making these determinations.

Genres of Autoethnographic Writing

A capacious, interdisciplinary methodology, autoethnography contains numerous approaches that might be used independently of one another or in tandem, including (but not limited to) evocative autoethnography, analytic autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, and performance autoethnography, to name a few. Autoethnography is an orientation to research that prioritizes the craft of writing as much as the research. This writing may take a variety of forms with diverse stylistic features, but it always combines the systematic, empirical methodologies of ethnography with the aesthetic elements of storytelling (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 67).

Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggest that many of these methods are different types of evocative autoethnography, rather than equivalent genres (p. 59). In evocative autoethnography, evocation is a fundamental tool to emotionally move audiences and engage questions of race, gender, sexuality, and social injustice. Analytic autoethnography emphasizes theoretical analysis, perhaps to appropriate it into mainstream qualitative research methods. Collaborative autoethnography co-constructs the research story by inviting participant accounts of the experience (Ellis et al., 2018). Performance autoethnography recenters embodiment through reflective performance (Spry, 2001). These are foundational and influential autoethnographic genres, but they are not the only methods available to researchers. Ultimately, researchers must select the mode of inquiry and writing style that seem best suited to their research, weaving theoretical prose with narrative strategies to help outsiders better understand the relational practices, value system, and social logics of the culture through moments that impacted a life trajectory (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography permits a certain freedom in both process and product, but — like all research methodologies — all of its genres adhere to a set of common protocols, regardless of the product's final form. These conventions are delineated below.

Toward an Autoethnographic Process

1) The Personal: Mining Memory & Sculpting Scene

Begin your writing process by mining your memories for significant personal experiences. How do you choose? What stands out as a moment of transition, change, turning point, or epiphany for you? By choosing a time in your life when you experienced great evolution, you are opening up an opportunity to dig into not only how your own personal identity was sculpted, but universal types of experiences which are archetypal to all human beings. These moments are likely to resonate with your readers, and will allow you to connect to broader social concerns and conversations.

Now write about your memory and the feelings and beliefs you have associated with it by *freewriting* for 15-30 minutes. Freewriting is a process wherein you write without judgement. Try writing quickly, without stopping to edit or revise. By freewriting, you can achieve a state of *flow* which connects you to your subconscious, and allows writing to become a process of discovery and excavation, through which you find and investigate hidden understandings and wisdom.

After freewriting on your memory, you will have created a powerful, albeit messy, text. It is likely that you ended in a place that

you did not anticipate. Now identify some of your surprising insights. Circle or highlight them and consider them treasures from your excavation process. These are not only personal revelations, but cultural ones. Take for example a personal realization about the divisions of labor within your household: how might you connect this conversation to broader concerns about gender, race, and class?

Take this block of text and render it into a *scene*. A scene is a captured moment, played out in real time for your reader to observe. In the exercise above, you will have brought to light many of the compelling ideas and considerations related to your personal experience. By turning these subjects into a scene, you *embody* these ideas. In this way readers can witness these moments for themselves, and thus be allowed to evaluate, be changed by, and feel the weight of that moment. Scene is an important tool in giving your reader this power. Choose a scene that shows you in interaction with the outside world, either through dialogue or action, letting the reader see and understand both your interior and exterior experiences.

2) Fieldnotes: Further Excavations, Finding Personal Artifacts

In the field of anthropology, historically, ethnography has relied on fieldnotes to provide evidence for readers. Ethnographic fieldnotes are recordings of what the ethnographer has witnessed. Fieldnotes offer the reader an opportunity to view the world through the gaze and lens of the ethnographer. For this reason, they are subjective evidence, colored by the beliefs, ideas, and views of the writer. This is why ethnographers often collect other evidence of their time "in the field"—to add context and to provide a more objective image and understanding. Sometimes these are other recordings like photographs or video; sometimes objects like money, calendars, receipts, or maps; and sometimes written correspondences that include other voices, like letters, emails, or text messages. At this point, to fulfill the process of member-checking, refer to the Issues of Divulgence and Exposure section.

One of the richest opportunities we have as autoethnographers is the freedom to create multimodal texts. This means that when we research our own lives the evidence we provide can be a fascinating mix of materials which document our realities. In what ways have you recorded your life? What kinds of fieldnotes and evidence might you be able to include in order to give your reader a more detailed view of the world you are situated within?

a) How to Decide—Evaluating Materials:

Think about the value of the various kinds of fieldnotes you might include, and what additional perspective they offer. In the digital age, we often take for granted how much of our lives is recorded and preserved. Since you have so many to choose from, make choices based on what details and layers you can add to your work that couldn't be achieved otherwise. When you read through your memory scene, what feels like it's missing? Fieldnotes can be a way to add richness to your *setting*.

b) How to Curate & Organize—Composition of Materials

Now that you have gathered fieldnotes, how will you present them? It's important to consider the significance of the organization of these materials. You may decide to embed them throughout the body of your written work, adding a photograph to the scene you describe, for example. You also might decide to make a collage, grid, template, or map. Think about how these different presentations impact the experience of your reader. Think of this process as building the scaffolding for an idea. How will the architecture change the way your reader interprets the information?

3) Creating a Narrative

You're probably familiar with the traditional plot structure and story arc we all learn in high school: first the rising action, then the climax, then the denouement, and then the resolution. Is this the shape of the story you've told? While all stories are different

"shapes," this traditional diagram is helpful for thinking through what keeps readers engaged and satisfied. Look back at your memory, scene, and fieldnotes. What order allows your reader to experience tension and resolution?

4) Meaning Making: Reflection and Analysis

Once you have decided how you will present your fieldnotes and the order to your story, it's time to reflect on and analyze your work. Look through and meditate on your materials. What new revelations become apparent? How have initial insights evolved?

5) Making it Larger: The Individual to the Universal

Now that you have discovered your own personal story, consider how it connects to the experiences of others. This last part of the process is all about drawing out these connections. Try diagramming, concept mapping, or freewriting to discover this last element. Ask yourself, *if this story were a fable, what would be the lesson?*

Conclusion

Autoethnography is a process of turning your gaze within and onto the outside world. We have included here one approach and process for writing your own autoethnography, but the nature of this type of writing encourages experimentation. Consider rearranging, playing with, and adding new elements. Most importantly, autoethnography is a genre of *discovery*, of the self, culture, and ideas. There are infinite ways to find oneself and one's voice through writing, and to make that writing significant to a broader cultural context. In order to begin that process, consider the questions below.

Questions

1. How have personal events affected or shaped your academic writing and research?
2. What academic opportunities have you been afforded to consider who you are as a person and/or writer, and how those identities are shaped by social, cultural, and economic factors?
3. What lived experiences have most directly impacted your individual sense of self?
4. How were these experiences reflective of larger systemic issues?
5. If you were to write about one of these experiences, why would your story resonate with readers, and how could it possibly affect social change?

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