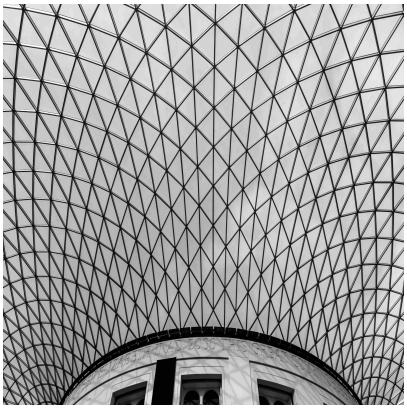

Never Quite The Same: Fluid Meanings in Autoethnography

Description

The AutoEthnographer

Never Quite The Same: Fluid Meanings in Autoethnography

Authorâ??s Memo

In this piece, I describe dimensions of *craft* from my perspective as an autoethnographic researcher and artist. I write from my orientation as an a/r/tographer (artist/researcher/teacher). These three identities are central to who I am as an autoethnographer.

Each of my *AutoEthnographer* columns discusses connections between an autoethnographic idea, term, or related thought with the creation of an autoethnographic work of art. This column illuminates the relationship between autoethnographic philosophy and artistic craft.

In this instance, I am inspired by the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus. He famously said that one can and cannot step into the same river twice. Each autoethnographic project is a product of the unique configuration of circumstances within which it was made. Each interpretation of the same text is influenced by the circumstances of the encounter. Even an autoethnographer experiences their own work anew each time they return to it. Each encounter contains innumerable opportunities for reinterpretation, because time is a constant source of change, regardless of any other circumstance.

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PERFORMATIVE PROLOGUE

Take a moment with me

forget

and then remember:

time, space, silent storiesâ?¦

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Look! How hard a people works

to distract you with

canticles of power?

Think! Do you see how they toil to

mask the shame of pillage, plunder, and rape?

Do you recognize the dusty bones that built this?!?!?

Talk with me!

Iâ??ve been in school a long time! I can help

you pull on the edges of fairy tales, cut through

the sheen of hoarders and preservers of

History! *You need to know these things!*

Hell

Iâ??ll even help you with your homework!

(Creps, 2020, p. 117).

In this excerpt from my performative autoethnodrama, *Letâ??s Count Off One More Time: Adventures in Education Abroad Pedagogy* (2020), I share the complexity of my frustration about a failed site visit to the British Museum and wonder about the meaning of the experience. The content of performative texts like this one can mean many different things, depending on countless variables. For instance, the *shape* (Leavy, 2015) of text on the page gives the reader a map of ideas to follow. How a performative autoethnographer communicates a text through performance can powerfully impact audience interpretations of a text. Myriad factors contribute to the fluidity of meanings derived from a text.

RESONANCE

Performative autoethnography (Denzin, 2014, 2018; Spry, 2011, 2016) is an artistic practice replete with vulnerability. It is an intimate sharing of information because, in one way or another, it is about the self. Performers and spectators occupy this sacred shared space of thought, feeling, and artistry that aspires towards revelation. Consequently, my autoethnographic performances invite interactions with research in ways that are not possible with words on the page alone. During performances, I provide my

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performing body [as] praxis of evidence and analysis. I offer [my] performing body as raw data of a critical cultural storyâ?¦ [which] rests upon reading and writing the body as a cultural text, as a personally political reflection whose evidence is an aesthetic/epistemic praxis based in performative writingâ?• (Spry, 2011, p. 19 â?? 20).

In autoethnographic performances, I exit the comforting raiment of authorial anonymity. In other words, performances lay bare my mind and heart for the variable flesh and blood of interaction with an audience.

PERFORMANCE

Performative autoethnography allows a researcher to explore meaning through dramatic and performance texts. Richard Schechner explains that a *performance text* is â??everything that takes place on a stage that a spectator experiences, from the movements and speech of the dancers and/or actors to the lighting, sets, and other technical or multimedia effectsâ?• (Schechner, 2002, p. 193). The *dramatic text* exists on the page. â??It is the play, script, music score, dance notation, etc. that exists whether the work is performed or notâ?• (Schechner, 2002, p. 193). So, dramatic and performance texts exist in different interpretive contexts. They are imbued with and enhanced by unique and overlapping infinities of interpretation.

TEXT AND CONTEXT

Historical moment, performance space, and audience all contribute to meaning making during a performance. This is true whether it is live, recorded performance, or merely text on a page.

The aim of performance is to bring self and other, the performative-I and the audience together so they can question, debate, and challenge one another. The performance resists conclusions. It is open-

ended and is committed to creating and keeping a dialogue ongoing. It is more like a hyphen, than a period (Conquergood, paraphrased by Denzin, 2018, p. 55).

Context impacts every performance, even with the same performer, text, or even the same audience in the same space. Each successive encounter occurs during a different historical moment in the lives of audience member(s) and performer(s).

â??When a performer other than the autoethnographer performs a text, they, too, open up new opportunities for insight.

The time of day impacts meaning, as well. Hungry in the morning? Drowsy in the evening? Similarly, age and state of wellness can inform oneâ??s interpretive experience. A congested four-year-old will respond differently than an athletic septuagenarian to the same performance. Likewise, sociocultural context also impacts meaning. A text featuring the date, *January 6th*, would inspire different imaginings in the U.S. in 2020 than in 2022. Performance texts are perpetual sources of new ideas, even when shared through seemingly static audiovisual recordings or printed text.

When a performer other than the autoethnographer performs a text, they, too, open up new opportunities for insight. For instance, a performer could learn something new through rehearsal *and* during a performance. The performerâ??s unique combination of life experience and artistic craft impact how they understand a text. These factors could impact how audiences (and the autoethnographer who originally wrote the text) understand performative autoethnographic texts, as well. Why see two (or more) productions of the same play? Each new production is different and can bring new ideas and/or perspectives to the same script.

IMPACT

I create performative autoethnographic texts with knowledge gained *from* my own lived experience to enter into discourse *about* those experiences. My performative autoethnographic work invites dialogue about the phenomena described therein.

Finally, I am not interested in singular interpretations of art/i/facts to develop *best practice* in an area of research. Instead, my work invites *reflection and dialogue about what is possible*.

NEXT COLUMN PREVIEW

In my next column, I will examine the interplay of artistic autoethnography and a/r/tography. A/r/tography reflects an autoethnographerâ??s interwoven identities as an artist, researcher, and teacher.

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