

Narratives on Longing, Being, and Knowing: Envisioning a Writing Epistemology

Devika Chawla* & Amardo Rodriguez**
Ohio University Syracuse University

Abstract: In this paper, I problematize the inextricable relationship between how I constitute knowledge and how I articulate knowledge. Through various narrative reflections I explore my own reckoning with dominant ways of articulating knowledge that reinforce ways of constituting knowledge that are inherently strange to me. I also outline my sojourns and departures into and from emergent modes of articulating knowledge such as personal narrative and autoethnography. Even though I acknowledge the emancipatory nature of these modes, I show my own tensions with them in terms of fitting well with my own geographies and topographies. I conclude with a discussion of a larger project I envision which implicates new modes of articulating knowledge that assume a much larger notion of self and personhood. I argue that a larger notion of self is vital to the making of a more expansive and inclusive definition of knowledge

* Devika Chawla, Assistant Prof., Ohio University School of Communication Studies,
Chawla@ohio.edu

** Amardo Rodriguez, Associate Prof., Syracuse University Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies rodrigu@syr.edu

This is one story about writing¹. This is also many stories about writing. It contains stories of loss and recovery, of forebodings and longings, of love and tears. This is a story about writing, about the experiences of one person who discovered what the words style, rhythm, and form meant long after she discovered the performance of self in writing.

Questions and Answers

I am in boarding school in the foothills of the Himalayas in India. I've been here for almost three years. I must be 12 now. I was barely 10 when my parents brought me here. I have been missing my parents for sometime. We meet once, maybe twice in a year. One visit is only 10 days long, the other is a three month trip home, and then I am back to this school-home. The reason I am here, so I believe at that time, is that there are religious riots in Punjab, the north Indian state where we live. We are Hindus, so my family has received many threats. My parents feel better with me here. It is safe².

This evening, I am feeling very angry about this unnecessary distance between my parents and myself. I am missing my dog, Whiskey. I am missing the parrot, Mithoo. I'm even missing pumpkin curry, something I can barely stand to eat when it is cooked at home. I am just missing home -- its smells, its sounds, its hominess.

I am angry. I don't know how to think about it. I can't think of what to say.

There are some other girls here who cry about going home to be with their mothers. I don't feel like crying, but today I am angry. Not at my parents, but at those terrorists who want a separate 'country.' They want to split the state away from India and form another nation. They want to call it Khalistan. I am in this home-school because of them. Do they know what they have done? Can I tell someone? How? I can't speak. I am too angry. I begin to write.

¹ This paper was conceptualized, theorized, and stylized equally by both authors. For reasons of coherence and clarity, we have made a deliberate creative decision for the paper to be narrated by one author, the first one.

² I have written, in greater detail, about my stay in this boarding school in an auto/ethnographic essay entitled, "Two Journeys" (2003).

When it is finished it is a letter to the editor of a children's magazine, Target. All of us read it. It is like the New Yorker in kiddi-land. We also read Nancy Drews, Hardy Boys and Enid Blytons. But, in Target, children like us tell their stories. I have read them before. I need to make sense of why I am angry. I battle with my anger in the letter. It shows me the origins and secrets of my anger.

I wish I had saved this letter. In fact, I have no memory of what I put on the title. I've always needed titles for anything I wrote. It is almost as if the writing cannot begin without it. I have not understood why that is so. I wish I could have read the future and have known that in almost 19 years, I would be trying to remember what I wrote to the editor of *Target* that evening in boarding school. I do know that my English teacher, who lived in school like I did, encouraged me to send it. It never saw print. I know that in it, I spoke to the uselessness of 'terrorism,' of how children like myself had to live without their parents just because we happened to be of the wrong religion in the wrong place. I wrote about my mother who was forced to be by herself all day waiting for her husband to come home. I spoke about missing my brother who was in a boarding school like me. I came to know the symptoms, the causes, the complications, and the intensities of my anger in the letter.

The letter was rejected. It came in the mail. Some explanation about the editorial board receiving too many excellent submissions every month. I took the rejection letter to Ms. Diaz, my English teacher. She told me that I should be happy to have received a letter from the editor. If they had not read the letter, they would have just not acknowledged it – not even replied. The letter would have been lost. I was happy, but I

really did not care. I must have saved the rejection somewhere. I don't have it now. But, I came to know my anger in writing it.

This was a time when I was friends with writing. She came to me whenever I needed her. She needed no invitation. We were inseparable as best friends often are. I told her my troubles and she made sense of them for me. With her I helped my mother see my days and months in school. In her, I could return home and even imagine other homes. In her, I knew I would find some answers to some questions. But our relationship would change. One of us was forsaken.

Double Lives/Two Voices

I am an undergraduate at the University of Delhi in the year 1993. I am studying literature. We are reading the Greeks. These days we have been reading the Odyssey. I am enmeshed in the books of the Odyssey (1996; first published in 800 B.C.E.). I think, dream, and live the plots. I walk along with Odysseus, pretending that I am a fellow traveler.

I write long essays about what I believe are the moral challenges faced by the characters in the stories. I converse with Odysseus's struggles. My reading is simple. I am not a chic reader. I think of the plots of the ten books as I would live them. I want to be able to imagine the writer and then imagine myself inside the book. Writing and reading become travels for me. I imagine myself in the places the writer finds for me, and those I discover in the reading. I write autobiographically about my association with the characters in the book. I am a 'radical empiricist,' (Jackson, 1989) only I am not aware of what that means. I am seventeen and I am traveling in these books. I imagine myself in Homer's worlds, I find myself in (unworldly) places. But, to Professor Rao who teaches the Greeks, I turn in tutorials in which I am a tourist

who identifies, critiques, applauds the literary allusions that Homer seems to be drawing upon when he recited the Odyssey. I make an object of what is already been made into an object – by its translation into text.

I am rewarded for this. My tutorials are read in class as excellent critiques that are skillfully argued, and analytically written. I am praised for the structure of my essays – they include clear introductions, arguments, and conclusions. I do well. Yet, I am left unmoved. The writing leaves me cold. There is a mismatch in what I read, how I live, how I experience, and how I narrate it in text. Is it a mismatch of medium? Or is it more than that? I cannot know. I am new to this. It will take years before I begin to know. I have no saved copies to show. This was 15 years ago.

Learning/Refining Patterns

In a university in middle America I am taking a graduate seminar for master's and doctoral students. I go to that class every Tuesday evening. It is an introduction to graduate studies. It could be every class in graduate school, save a few. It is no particular class. The department is one of the social science disciplines. This happened seven years ago.

Every other week, I have to write a five page paper. I read about the philosophy of science, about nomothetic versus idiographic approaches, about social constructionism, about conflict, about rhetoric, and so on. This, that, and the other. I understand some of it, some goes over my head. Sometimes, I pretend to myself, and to others, that I understand it. Then I have to write a reaction to it all. Every other week. Some nights, I cannot sleep because my experience of understanding these works never reveals itself in how I write about them.

One night when I am unable to sleep, I write two papers, thus officially beginning my double writing life. In the first or 'real' paper, I narrate what I feel and experience – there is

poetry, rhythm, even dialogue in the paper. It is multi-voiced. It is how I experience life in its rhythms, its sounds, sights, smells, and sensualities. I tell myself stories about the readings. In the second paper, I outline, I highlight, I use the right introduction, internal summaries, conclusions, I argue, I critique, I become the passive voice. I lose myself.

The next day it is the second paper that is turned in to be read. I have hated writing what will now be read. The first, the other, is placed in the closet. I have no courage to turn in the paper that follows no accepted academic structure, and is instead a stream of consciousness dialogue about what I think.

I am lonely during these times. I have not been sharing this suffering with anyone. Since when did writing become a chore? I met her so unconditionally in that year when I turned 12. Where did the honesty go? I am leading a double life. And only I know it.

And so began the process of losing her. I began to hide her from other eyes. I also began to write two versions of every paper. The first one was for me, the one I had to write, needed to write. It remained hidden away. The second one was for others, the one that was required of me, expected of me. This is the one I submitted to others to assess me.

The one for me...

My intellectual preoccupation with identity began with my geographic dislocation from India to America. Four years ago, I joined the ranks of thousands of international students who move to the United States for higher education. As I journeyed through graduate school in America, I found myself re-evaluating the past to try to understand who and what had shaped my reality. In my condition of differentiation through dislocation, I felt a sense of 'in-betweenness' in how I valued myself as an Indian in the United States – living and negotiating multiple realities. One of these is a semi-traditional Indian past, and the other an American present where I am constantly relearning some of the social rules with which I was raised. I continue to struggle between being a good individual and a good Indian woman. As a single Indian woman living in America, I am forever caught in the pull between separateness and connectedness, between dependence and

independence, between being a good Indian woman and a woman, between the euphoria about being alone and guilt about leaving home.

The one for others...

The first main argument will address the notion of identity as a social, relational, communicative, and cultural process. This will be developed by, first, reviewing literature on identity and gender. Thus, structural and process-oriented approaches to identity will be explored; as in identity as a socially constructed process that is influenced by everyday experience and time. Second, essentialist and non-essentialist approaches to gender will be overviewed. After this, emphasis will be placed on approaching identity and gender from a Third World, postcolonial stance. This section will address the need to study gendered identity from a non-essentialist process-oriented lens.

The night before I am to turn in the paper with the 'acceptable' stanzas, I am in pain. I feel invisible in the writing, as if the research that I speak of is taking place in a body outside of mine. At seven the next morning, I make a decision to 'come out.' The paper written in autobiographical voice which interrogates the personal roots of my interest in identity sees the light of day. It becomes the official paper. This is not my first 'break' with conventional writing styles, but all the 'breaks' have occurred in this fashion.

During these times, in class after class, symposium after symposium, I write 'reaction' papers that show my mastery of the materials and my expertise in the use of the academic jargon that we are all required to master. In one particular class, I am feeling beaten down because all my attempts to relate to the material on a personal level are being shunned. The professor desires writing that toes the line, exhibits academic jargon, and utilizes a conventional format. I am being urged to write in 'a' specific way. I am struggling to remain impersonal, and so apolitical in how I engage with the reading and my writing.

Then, a moment occurs in the class that re-fashions the way that I view writing and knowledge. We reach the segment on power and begin reading about class conflict, hegemony,

Marxism, Neo-Marxism, ideology, and so on. As we discuss some texts, words such as 'resistance,' radical,' 'colonialism,' 'emancipation,' 'transformation' are thrown around freely. We are engaging in, albeit in an abstract fashion, the meaning of class reproduction and how it comes about, hegemony and how it is transmitted and understood, emancipation and how one can be emancipated, if at all. I am excited about the ideas that I am reading.

The moment comes when I am to write the infamous 'response' paper. When my fingers hit the keyboard, I am unable to feel the meanings of the words that I have read. I am unable to connect with the language. It is an alien language that just scrapes my skin. I want to feel it inside my pores. I find myself unable to 'regurgitate' and 'critique.' I feel no connection with the words in the text and how I am trying to represent them. After much struggle, I do what I have been doing, I co-opt the dominant writing style and write the 'acceptable' paper.

After completing it, I feel the same sense of incompleteness. I feel compelled to rewrite it. I know that I am being intellectually dishonest by turning in a type of writing that I consider impersonal and apolitical. I read and re-read the paper and decide against owning it as my own. I make a decision to come out of the closet and write a paper which I am proud to own as mine. As my writing emerges, I reflect upon the assignment and find it ironic that I am being told to write about resistance in a class that reproduces the dominant order, akin to intellectual imperialism. I decide to write about my experience of hegemony in that class. Since I cannot do so overtly, I use my role of teaching assistant to show how I reproduce an intellectual imperialism in my classes. The big difference is that I am really writing about the class I myself am enrolled in. In fact, I am even using comments given on my own papers as examples of hegemonic discourse. I explore the ideas in the readings by interrogating my own experience as a teaching assistant who teaches undergraduates and reproduces the 'voice of order, a kind of

intellectual hegemony. The paper is inherently reflexive and reflective – it is a resistant act, a ‘coming out.’ Consider the following paragraphs from the paper:

When do we know that our “acts of resistance are ineffectual and impotent versus emancipatory and transforming?” As I began reading the topic questions for the week, I began to ponder upon the notion of emancipation? What does it mean to emancipate and be emancipated? How can we be transformed? And, can we be transformed? What are “acts of resistance” and when do they become impotent and/or ineffectual? I engaged Paul Willis’s *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*, with the hope of finding answers to some of these questions.

As I began to understand Willis’s claims, I began look inward and around me. As a teaching assistant, I am entrenched in the institution of academe where I find myself, to some extent, reproducing a pedagogical order that is as hard to resist as class reproduction. In this paper, I hope to explore, in brief, some characteristics of this form of reproduction of the pedagogical order as I myself perpetuate it. I try to understand the “acts of resistance” that I, as an instructor, engage in and how this resistance is perhaps no match for the formal structure. Finally, I hope with the aid of Paulo Freire’s (1970) ideas about education, to support a model that can perhaps foster greater emancipation than our current pedagogical models. My goals in this paper could perhaps be considered too “grand,” yet, I am ‘beginning’ a process of reflection that presents one ‘micro’ way at looking at pedagogical order...

As I read Willis, I was well aware that he had made the decision to study the school from the point of view of “the lads.” Yet, as I read further, I became intrigued by the notion of pedagogy as a hegemonic order. This notion interested me because it was an area of silence in the book. This area of silence helped me to investigate my own role in the reproduction of a pedagogical order. The question that I wanted to explore from my own positionality became—How do dominant pedagogical practices reproduce subordination and marginalization? Is there an interplay of class and culture in this reproduction? What are the acts of resistance in this form of reproduction? What is the penetration, if any? Does this system foster acts of agency and can it be transformed?

I began by interrogating the syllabus which I have crafted for the interpersonal communication class that I teach. Stylistically and semantically this syllabus resembles (consciously or subconsciously) what I have been given as syllabi in all of my own classes. It begins with a discussion of the objectives of the course, which, in many ways, are an outline of a political (academic/mine) agenda. It looks and reads like other syllabi. For example, my syllabus contains a

course description, an outline of assignments, a course schedule, assigned readings, a break down of grade percentages, and written (and oral) assignment guidelines. On the surface level it is a socially produced cultural artifact, yet it functions at a deeper level to shape expectations.

The paper entitled, “_____” is a ‘resistant act’ that frees me, but I discover that freedom in the process of writing alongside understanding rather than ‘after’ understanding (the distinction is not merely temporal). As in, writing ‘with’ rather than ‘about.’ In it, I make an argument against the ‘bourgeois model’ of the academy (West, 1991), and how this model is stultifying for academics whose ideas and ideologies may not be part of the dominant order. As I do so, I am careful in expanding the stultifying nature of this model to those other than minorities.

Later, this exercise culminates into a paper about the writing of this ‘reaction’ paper for my class (see _____, 2001). I publish an article about the process of writing this paper. Even though, I know I have risked my grade in the class by writing about the class (even if it is veiled), my bravery is restricted. I send the paper to a marginalized publishing outlet because I am afraid of being found out and of having professional doors closed upon me. I truncate my own resistance as the anxiety of being shunned takes over the act of courage.

It was in these times that I played hide and seek with writing. I found her in some places, and I played with her. We would depart only to meet again. When I was brave, I would show myself to her. When I was not, we met as strangers.

This is my first substantive resistance to the apolitical treatment of writing in graduate programs. I have directly resisted the ‘writing skill-set’ that I am being forced to imbibe by

writing a paper that critiques the system from within and then publishing a narrative about the process of this writing. This is the first step in what becomes, for me, a commitment to trying to understand writing as an epistemology, as a process of coming into understanding. Yet, I do not come by this commitment so soon after that one paper. Nor does my style change in any drastic manner. I move in and out of many styles, genres, and modes. One of these is the very influential and generally controversial, autoethnography.

Finding Auto/ethnography: A Detour

My movement into (and later out of) autoethnography occurred as a graduate student when I was searching for embodied writing, for a writing that carried me beyond representation and expression. I was seeking an experience of writing that demystified my understanding of my understanding. There is no doubt that autoethnography fulfills all the goals that I had set for myself as a student writer. In fact, it is one of the movements that has returned 'life' to writing. Yet, it remained for me a temporary home for many of the reasons upon which I now briefly ruminate.

When I began exploring autoethnography, I believed (and still mostly do) that autoethnography, perhaps, more than any other writing genre illustrates my 'ownership' of my life. Or, in other words it allows me to discover that the only discourse that I own may very well be just my 'own.' I was and am aware that an ownership of ourselves is highly contested in post-modern times because we are presumably artifacts of discourses that are social, political, ideological, religious, institutional, and so on. These discourses, we are told, run through our beings in different ways such as positionality, agency and voice. I understand autoethnography as a return to the subject. Autoethnography may be considered the post-colonial that ethnography traditionally rooted in colonial discourses has taken because it centers the researcher

as integral to the field (Clair, 2003; Crawford, 1996; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In other words, this genre has reclaimed the subject and recognized that it exists; this time the subject is the ethnographer who is really in the process of autoethnographic construction when s/he goes out in the field. While there are various debates about the blurred lines between ethnography and autoethnography, autoethnography has been recognized as a separate genre within ethnography.

I came to experience autoethnography as a reflexive stance about text, context, and participants, and less about deconstructing my own life or transitional life events. I also experienced it as a coming to awareness about the embedded relationship between the culture that I observe and the one that I have a hand in 'making.' It is perhaps a new name for gaining voice and living agency. Yet, the troubling questions that I always encountered was: Who gets to speak as an autoethnographer and how is voice constituted in autoethnography?

Is autoethnography about writing the 'self?' Or is it about writing culture 'personally?' I place my own experience of it in-between the two previous questions. Autoethnography, for me, is about writing culture as we experience and make it through the process of self-reflection and reflexivity. While this is one of my own various understandings of this genre, ethnographers have understood it in many other ways. I look specifically at some directions in which it has gone.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as, "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). They suggest that the autoethnographic process begins by first gazing through an "ethnographic wide angle-lens," (p. 739) at the social and cultural aspects of their experience and later turning inward and looking at personal experiences. Often this going back and forth between the social, personal and cultural reveals to the ethnographer that the lines

between the three phenomena are blurred. To make it more complex, autoethnography is referred to variously -- as personal narrative, radical empiricism, reflexive ethnography, personal writings, confessional tales, ethnobiography, ethnographic memoir, and so on. Even though proponents of this strand of the genre believe that the lines between the personal and the cultural are imaginary, they nevertheless maintain a distinction between the two. In this school of thought, autoethnography is somewhat disparate from ethnography in being something that is especially written out in the form of an essay, stories, poems, photographs, sculptures, and other performances.

Others have taken a more fluid approach to autoethnography and explore how perhaps a distinction may not be made between ethnography and autoethnography. For instance, Crawford (1996) explains, "Autoethnography epitomizes the reflexive turn of fieldwork for human study by (re) positioning the researcher as an object of inquiry who depicts a site of interest in terms of personal awareness and experience" (p. 167). For Crawford, as it is for me, autoethnography is a stance and a sensibility, even perhaps a 'post-colonial spirit' that privileges writing 'with' participants rather than writing 'about' them and theirs in elsewhere places (see also Jackson, 1989; Kondo;1990; Narayan,1993). It comes with being self-consciousness of my 'self' in the ethnographic process. For example, why one chooses a line of research and worries about positionality within that area may be a matter of personal history, a history that must be acknowledged and recognized at some point/s in the research process. At the same time, we must also reveal other histories that we encounter in the research process. Whether we need to make ourselves 'particular' case studies, as is encouraged by some proponents is a point to be debated elsewhere in other textual spaces.

I came to understand autoethnography as a claiming of my selves in ethnographic fields and accounts. I am always a persisting presence in the fields that I make my own, but I do not become the field. Instead of becoming the field, I want to be ravished by the field, so that the contexts, words, texts, and voices course through me, not inside of me. For instance, in my own ethnographic work, I do not become one of the women who were involved in urban Hindu arranged marriages as I did not experience their experience, but I reflexively translate what I experienced of their stories. The stance I am privileging is one of reflexivity and ‘radical empiricism’ (see Jackson, 1989).

As my travels into autoethnography continued, I also saw the field being dominated by a turn toward the study of the detailed deconstruction of personal events and experiences that deal with illness and difference. Arthur Frank’s exemplary book, *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995), explores illness-narratives and giving ‘voice’ to sick bodies, and argues the need for ill bodies to have a ‘voice.’ Frank’s goal is more political and his hope is to “to shift the dominant cultural conception of illness away from passivity-the ill-person as ‘victim of’ disease and then recipient of care-toward activity” (p. xi). For Frank, telling an illness narrative is giving voice to a body, so that the body can begin to heal in its changed state. This illness narrative is about the ‘sick body’ and the institutions that sustain it may or may not enter the frame. Frank’s call is truly for the mingling of the personal, cultural, and political in medical discourse. I experience his call as a call for action.

In a recent essay, Bochner (2001) defends stories about illness and points out that these stories show us struggles between cultural and personal meanings. He tells us, “the ill person must negotiate spaces between the domination of cultural scripts of bodily dysfunction out of which one’s meanings are constructed and defined, and the situated understanding of one’s

experience that seeks a unique and personal meaning for suffering. This struggle is personal, cultural, and political” (p. 147). And, indeed, I fully agree.

As I read through these writings, I get a sense that there are two types of autoethnographies/personal narratives emerging. On one hand, both deal with change and transformation; however, whereas one deals with ‘change’ events, the other deals with bodily illness events. The sheer physicality of bodily pain, illness, death, birth and bodily change are very concrete experiences, which in my mind sets some stories apart from others. While I am uncomfortable making a mind-body split, I still believe that there is something very profound about bodily change/illness that makes these narratives different. These are essential stories that need to be heard, in order to, as Frank tells us, change the dominant medical paradigm which makes the patients into warriors who finally finish successfully. There are tales of suffering that need to be made public for the dominant paradigm to acknowledge pain, suffering, healing, coping and loss, rather than merely victory over illness.

At the same time, even though I understand their importance in our world, I do not want to privilege illness narratives. As we voice stories about illness do we de-privilege stories about the ordinariness of living? What becomes of those who experience miniscule transformations that may never be spoken of? Who gets to tell those stories? In my own readings (and these may be limited) the stories that have tended to dominate autoethnographic narratives are those that involve tragedy/sensationalism/body change/death. Of course, there may be others that I am yet to encounter, and my apologies to those people that attempt to study the average, the everyday, and the ordinary (about themselves). But my attempt here is to explore reasons for my own movement out of autoethnography.

When I first encountered this genre/mode/style/methodology, I deeply wanted to find a writing home inside of it, but my stay remained a hiatus. I believe that there were several reasons for this temporariness. First, I was seeking stories of everyday political struggles that seemed to me to be erased from the autoethnographic discourses that I was reading. Second, I was finding ‘other’ writing that was intricately personal and inherently political, but was treated as ‘outside’ of discussions about autoethnographic writing. I began to wonder why Gloria Anzaldua (1987), bell hooks (1994), Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989), Cherrie` Moraga (1993), Sandra Cisneros, and others were not appearing in these vital discussions. Was I becoming complicit in a new movement that ignored, thus further marginalizing work that was already thriving in the area of personal narratives? Was I helping to perpetuate new forms of marginalization, even neo-colonization?

Finally and most importantly, I began to feel enslaved by the personal. I felt bound to myself, conducting internal conversations, showing myself my own transformations, when what I had hoped for was a ‘personal conversation’ with the text, the context, the reader, and the participant. I came to agree with Trinh T. Minh-ha whose critique of the overtly personal best fits here:

I am so much that nothing can enter me or pass through me. I struggle, I resist, and I am filled with my own self. The “personal” may liberate as it may enslave. We set it up against “impersonal” as if the two were mutually exclusive of each other. (1989, p. 35).

For myself, I wanted to reside in the space between the personal and the political. I wanted to become the writer who resists both author-saturation and author-evacuation. I was seeking what has been referred to by anthropologists as the “missing genre” (Geertz, 1988). In autoethnographic writing, I detected movements from the personal to the personal, but there

never seemed to be a movement or even a bypass from the personal to the cultural. My comments are generally directed to autoethnographic work that stands out for its insidedness. An overt emphasis on 'insidedness' makes me a voyeur 'about' myself. I remain imprisoned in writing that is still 'about.' When all is said and done, it remains limited by its desire to represent and express. The one difference being that the 'about,' the 'object' is oneself. In the other 'distanced' writing (the one I had first met), I was writing 'about' others. Therefore, 'about' remained a prison in both genres. I wanted to breathe in and breathe with words and with understanding. I wanted words and understanding to give birth to each other. I began other sojourns.

So I lost her again. This time it was more painful because we had become so close. But there was too much confusion – we didn't mingle, we merged. I lost her to myself. There was too much myself.

Leaving Insidedness: Moving Ahead

After my detour into autoethnography and an exit from the over emphasis on my own self as the object of writing, I find myself robustly engaged in demystifying the relationship between writing, knowledge, and understanding for my own intellectual evolution. The process of understanding the entwined relationship between these three began with reflecting upon how writing is approached in graduate programs in the social sciences. To do this, I again turned to Marquez, whose struggles in so many ways parallel my own.

The way in which we both had experienced it, writing (whether author-saturated or author-evacuated) in graduate school is an apolitical process which involves mastering a 'writing

skill-set' that allows for a production and dissemination of knowledge. Learning this skill-set occurs in different ways. We are instructed in the reading of journals that display and reproduce this skill-set. We are also instructed in an understanding of knowledge that recursively institutionalizes, reinforces, and thus re-legitimizes this skill-set. Ultimately, we are expected to acquire a certain level of proficiency in this style. There is hardly any discussion about the epistemological dimensions that come with writing. There is also no discussion of the inextricable relationship between how we constitute knowledge, how we frame knowledge, how we relate to knowledge, and how we articulate knowledge.

In other words, by emphasizing logic, lucidity, coherence, structure, grammar, clarity, and so on, we infantilize writing and make it a tool to be used when our thinking is done – it becomes a pen. Ultimately, we infantilize ourselves as our writing estranges us from the world and from each other. Writing, on the other hand, can and should be approached as a constant learning of the alphabet, a re-visioning (not re-finishing) of the slate in order to think, to know, and to understand. As Trinh T. Minh-ha has so elegantly told us, “To write is to become. Not to become a writer (or a poet), but to become, intransitively” (1989, p. 90).

However, our current models – the ones I was disciplined into – teach us to privilege the research product, rather than the process whereby, very often, we come to knowledge. We pretend that thought occurs, unfolds, and organizes itself, and then we begin to write (see also Richardson, 2000). We pretend that writing is an expression, the means we use to represent ourselves and articulate our stories. So, a book, an essay, a story, perceived as “an isolated materialization of something that precedes and exceeds it (the author’s life, her/his thought or passion) is therefore bound to be a finished product, one whose content is expected to be entirely predetermined, but whose form can always be ameliorated and further polished according to the

ruling ideology of the “well-written” (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 29).” In short, writing is reduced to craft, skill, art, and style.

What are the consequences of leaving the relationship between writing and knowledge un-interrogated? They can only be tragic, and especially so for those of us who belong to historically marginalized groups and communities. However, I want to emphasize that these consequences are not limited to ‘minority’ scholars. Think to times in your own intellectual life when writing was a ‘chore,’ as something one did ‘after’ research as if the mind worked separate from the body. When we (anyone and everyone who is committed to knowledge) ignore the relationship between writing and understanding, we become complicit in the formation of and/or adding to a new imperialism that is directed at us intellectually.

Of course there is no denying that there are scholars from many disenfranchised groups who have been calling attention to matters of writing. For instance, feminist and postcolonial scholars have been emphasizing the ‘representational’ aspects of writing for a long time (see Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Said, 1979; Stacey, 1991). Yet, most of these projects save a few -- such as those of Anzaldua (1987), Anzaldua & Keating (2002), Ciscenarios (1984), Conquergood (1991, 2002), Madison (1999), Minh-ha (1989), Pollock (1998) among others -- emphasize writing in how it ‘represents knowledge.’ In my reading, what seems to always be left unattended is the profound relationship between writing and knowing, and of understanding writing as a ‘coming to know.’

When this relationship is bypassed in graduate programs (as they were in all my graduate classes, save the ones that focused on representation) we leave intact the illusion that there is no politics to the relationship between how we constitute and frame knowledge and how we articulate and engage knowledge. As we sustain this illusion we undermine our obligation to the

creation of knowledge, and we perpetuate understandings that mask the integral role that our fears, anxieties, insecurities, vulnerabilities, and paranoia play in shaping our view and knowledge of our world.

Ultimately, what this means is that in treating writing as a medium, we are complicit in the formation of an intellectual imperialism. In doing so, we help to maintain all the institutions that perpetuate and even legitimize this type of stance toward writing. Often, we believe that we are involved in research that is ‘radical,’ that it is capable of causing seismic shifts in the way readers will begin view the world. We believe we will shake the status quo with putting the product out there. I, for one, cannot name ‘studies’ that have shifted my world, but I can count on my fingers reflexively political writing that has caused some disruptions in the way that I encounter knowledge. Some examples of these are writings by Anzaldua, Didion, Madison, Minh-ha, and so on. My point is that as long as we continue to engage scholarship from a certain mode of writing, that scholarship will never really pose any threat to the status quo. Indeed, “the master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984).

I believe that if there is no disruption in how we articulate knowledge, then there is no disruption in how we understand knowledge, and therefore no disruption in how we relate to knowledge. I also think that for many of us these dilemmas are not new, yet they remain significant, primarily because when one begins to question what constitutes knowledge then we are engaging in more than an academic activity. We are, in fact, beginning to engage in a deeply political activity because knowledge is always entwined with relationships of power. I know that in taking issue with knowledge, I take issue with power. And so, in disrupting the way knowledge is articulated, I take a political stance.

We are often taught about such political stances in the form of critical theory when we are led into frameworks such as feminism, structuralism, post-feminism, postcolonialism, and so on. Yet, our engagement with the ‘critical’ is limited to representation, and not aimed at writing as a methodology/an epistemology. Undoubtedly, there are some references to writing as a method of inquiry in singular outlets and some spaces, but it is not an area of discussion given any space in graduate programs in social research (see Pollock, 1998; Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2004).

Some of the experiences I have articulated illustrate the sufferings that I underwent when I had to master ways of articulation that were rooted in abstractions and disconnections. My experience was one of classic alienation. I was finding a mismatch between how I experienced my research and eventually how I articulated it. I felt estranged from the matters I was engaged in. The writing that was supposed to represent my work, speak to others, and speak to me, was leaving me cold. My work would appear to me as a mental artifact with my human-ness erased from it. Such writing erases emotionality, sensuality, sexuality, and all the other dimensions of our selves that we draw upon when we engage with other human beings. I am quite confident that no human being comes to her work with the ability to pick and chose dimensions of their humanity. These include the relational, the historical, cultural, emotional, spiritual, sensual, sexual, and so on. If these are removed there can only be incompleteness.

Yet, I was being required to leave these ‘selves’ out, and no one can justify to me why we should leave these selves out. ‘I’ was being erased, this erasure a condition to conquer the skill-set.

Later, during my travels into autoethnography, a different type of alienation and erasure was occurring. This time I was alienated from con/text by drowning the writing with all of the personal. My own selves were being represented, so much so that I could not acknowledge a

oneness with those around me. My story is of someone being caught in the tension between the overtly objective writing ideology and the overtly subjective one. I find it important, even necessary to tell my story, but I find it almost crucial for myself and the reader to come to an understanding of matters beyond 'myself' from the story. The question is not one of the 'moral' of a given tale, but rather its connectivity and dialogue with others. This is the tension on which I presently reside. Sometimes, I sway one way, other times I sway the other. There is no resolution, but the tension has certainly been acknowledged.

Why do I sway? Why not choose an in-between spot and be comfortable? I sway because the writing skill-set, the one that I inherited is embedded in larger institutional forces. These are forces that shape and maintain the integrity of the writing model that we inherit. They constrain and force us to keep writing apolitically, thereby binding knowledge. These are the forces that allow us to be employed and continue with our academic careers. How we write determines where we will be published, which in turn determines tenure and promotion, which determines job security, and later job options. So, even though I (and others such as myself) may come to a recognition that our writing is apolitical, we may not have the courage to make the seismic shift out of the writing skill-set. The epistemology of fear drives this swaying person. This is primarily so because there are immense career risks that come along with ignoring the existing model. Yet, I have never considered these to be intellectual risks. Such risks are intellectually liberating.

I myself found two choices as I began to learn and uncover this model. Choice one was easy. Remain and stay confined in the knowledge that was available. Or take a risk of moving away. Can one afford to take the risk? In the entry phase of my career, I have taken the risk to step outside the model. This essay itself is testimony to that maneuver. I am certainly not

oblivious to the price that I may have to pay for doing so, but the alternatives are not alternatives anymore. I need writing and understanding that embeds my humanity in the research, it is more than owning my 'I' in the writing process, it is about unraveling and uncovering newer truths as I write to understand, to know, and most importantly, to become.

Conclusion

I consider it tragic how dominant modes of inquiry violently oppress the human element. So much so that we have been literally forced to fight for our lives, to join and create the autoethnographic project to help reclaim our humanity in our inquiry. Yet, I also believe that this project is much larger than that of merely reclaiming a self that has been oppressed. Broadly, I believe that autoethnography is a beginning on our way to interrogating larger issues of writing epistemologies. Uncovering different writing epistemologies is fundamentally a project about changing our ways of being and understanding the world in writing. I acknowledge that other ways of being and knowing have been proposed and explored, especially performative ones. I salute those ways, yet my emphasis here remains on writing.

I believe that our notion of selfhood and personhood is inextricably bound up with the world and each other. To therefore speak of our relation to writing is to speak to our relation to the world, each other, and our own humanity. As such, to be estranged from writing is to be estranged from the world and from each other. Thus in striving to embody writing differently, I am striving to embody a project that fundamentally alters our ways of being and understanding the world.

For us, autoethnography merely skirts the surface of a much larger epistemological project by operating on limited notions of the self. Undoubtedly, it can create some instances of

local change, but we believe that pedagogically it is not a large enough project to alter and revision our ways of knowing and thereby altering life around us. In other words, autoethnography, by focusing on merely the personal and cultural, ultimately may pose no threat to the status quo. As the condition of the world is bound up with our knowledge of the world, the only way to change the condition of the world is by changing our knowledge of the world. This is our project and we believe that integral to the creation of a new and more heuristic knowledge is our centering of the human condition in how we constitute and articulate knowledge. For us, this project begins with how we embody and perform writing.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lutes.
- Anzaldúa, G., & Keating, A. (2002). *This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation*. New York: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1990). The third space. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity, community, culture, difference* (pp. 90-118). London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bochner, A. P. (2001). Narrative's Virtues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7, 131-157.
- Chawla, D. (2003). Two journeys. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9 (5), 785-804.
- Cisceneros, S. (1984). *The house on mango street*. New York: Vintage.
- Conquergood, D. (1991). Rethinking ethnography: Toward a critical cultural politics. *Communication monographs*, 58, 179-194.
- Conquergood, D. (2002). Performance studies: Interventions and radical research. *The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 46 (2), 145-156.
- Clair, R. P. (in-press). The changing story of ethnography. In R. P. Clair (Eds.), *Expressions of ethnography*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Crawford, L. (1996). Personal Ethnography. *Communication Monographs*, 63 (2), 158-170.
- Frank, A. W. (1995). *The wounded storyteller: Body Illness Ethics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

- Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Homer, (1996). *The Odyssey* (Translated by Robert Fagles; first published in 800 B.C. E.). New York: Penguin.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Jackson, M. (1989). *Paths toward a clearing: Radical empiricism and ethnographic enquiry*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Kondo, D. K. (1990). *Crafting selves: Power, gender, and discourses of identity in a Japanese workplace*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.
- Madison, D. S. (1999). Performing theory/embodied writing. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19 (2), 107-124.
- Minh-ha, T. T. (1989). *Women, Native, Other: Writing postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Moraga, Cherie` (1993). *The last generation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Narayan, K. (1993). How native is the 'native' anthropologist? *American Anthropologist* 95, 671-686.
- Pollock, D. (1998). Performing writing. In P. Phelan & J. Jane (Eds.), *the ends of performance*, (pp. 73-103). New York: New York University Press.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N.K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., pp. 923-948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2004). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed., pp. 959-978). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
- Stacey, J. (1991). Can there be a feminist ethnography? In S. B. Gluck and D. Patai (Eds.), *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history*. London: Routledge.
- West, C. (1991). The dilemma of the black intellectual. In b. hooks and C. West, *Breaking bread: Insurgent black intellectual life*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press,