

"Us and Them- Seeking the Autoethnographic 'We'"

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, it is suggested that two divergent approaches within Autoethnography may be brought together as a means to create academically and artistically rigorous texts. A discussion of analytics and evocative is provided together with the problems associated with this approach. Furthermore the paper discusses the findings of an initial investigation of auto ethnography in Nottingham which is suggested that autoethnography in process can be used to demonstrate how evocative and analytic methods can be combined to produce alternative scholarly texts.

KEYWORDS

Autoethnography, artistic practice, Nottingham lace

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the application of an 'auto ethnographic' methodology to a field study conducted in Nottingham city centre during December 2010. 'Autoethnography' is introduced as a developing field of ethnographic practice, within which two divergent approaches are identified. The practices of these two, sometimes mutually hostile approaches are discussed in relation to "Lace point", a temporary artist's studio and site of the field study. Field notes from the study are examined using the two autoethnographical methods. Conclusions are then drawn which demonstrate that a connected relationship between the two is a useful means to convey and analyse data.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

According to Gusfield (1995: xxi), auto ethnography emerged from a need to develop ethnography from descriptive reports into "a more artistic, improvised and situated mode of sociology". Since the 1990's auto ethnography has promoted the inclusion of the self in ethnographic study, which has lead to accusations that

autoethnographic approaches are merely mandates for self- absorption and introspection (Van-Mane, 1988). The division of auto ethnography into two camps, one which unwaveringly adheres to academic convention, known as *analytic* autoethnography, and the other which strives to experiment with personal, narrative forms, known as *evocative* auto ethnography.

ANALYTICS AND EVOCATIVES:

Analytics

'Analytic autoethnography has five key features. It is ethnographic work in which the researcher a) is a full member in a research group or setting; b) uses analytic reflexivity; c) has a visible narrative presence in the written text; d) engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self; e) is committed to an analytic research agenda focussed on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (Anderson, 2006:375). Autoethnography as practiced by Anderson (ibid), Coffey (1999), Delamont (2007) and Gannon (2006) insists upon

analytic rigour and believes that although experimental ethnographic writing should be recognised it must still conform to traditional standards of social enquiry (Anderson, *ibid*). Gannon (2006) for example, uses texts by Barthes, Derrida and Cixous to fortify her position as an *analytic* autoethnographer. Duncan (2004) relates that her research as a hypermedia designer requires her to systematically reflect on her life world and internal decision making, but also to deliver a scholarly account. Duncan unequivocally cites auto ethnographic practice as being the only method with which she could undertake this. Atkinson (2004:110) calls for an increase in theoretical sophistication with regard to experimental and experiential texts. He believes that *evocative* personal reflections are often "too narrowly ethnocentric" and that they are in danger of perceiving the social world only in terms of their own life world.

Evocative

Described by Anderson as a group of "interdisciplinary symbolic interactionists with postmodern or poststructuralist sensitivities" (2006:373) Denzin and a core group possessed of such 'sensitivities' including Bochner, Ellis, and Richardson have contributed to the identity of *evocative* autoethnography. These practitioners have sought to evaporate the hegemony of the ethnographer as outsider/observer by observing the self inside society. Rejecting the impersonal and emotionally detached methodologies of social science, Bochner, Ellis et al use autobiographical and narrative form to present their inquiry in literary style (Gannon, 2006).

Ellis's emphasis is on 'heartfelt auto ethnography' (1999:210), a method that requires the researcher to be prepared to include "their vulnerable selves, emotions, body and spirit" and to produce "evocative stories that create the effect of reality" (*ibid*). *Evocative* auto ethnographers seek to represent polyvocality and promote co-participative dialogues (Spry, 2001). Ellis defines auto ethnography as "Research, writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social" (2005:765)

PROBLEMS

The relativist approach of *evocative auto* ethnography sometimes results in the

sanctioning of texts that are clearly not subject to quality control. Take for example Richardson's (2002:12) published auto ethnographic response to the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001

"When I hear of the airplanes and the towers, my first thoughts are – the children...What will the children be told."

Richardson's piece is neither scholarly, nor does it observe the self inside society. What Richardson does is demonstrate the collapse of the social world into her own life world and reveals a withdrawal from the world beyond her front door. (Atkinson, 2004)

Although there are sometimes difficulties with the presentation of Ellis and Bochner's auto ethnographies, they do challenge academic convention with a far greater degree of rigor than Richardson. Their *evocative* text "Ethnographically speaking...." (2001) offers literary narrative as an alternative form of scholarly document. Bochner and Ellis 'set the scene' within their own domestic environment, perhaps to invoke a sense of intimacy and inclusivity, and then embark on a narrative structured around the dialogue between them.

Through the narrative a 'story' emerges of how and why the conference that the book records took place. Etiquette and appreciation is observed by introducing other 'characters' and thanking or acknowledging them within the narrative. Although the storytelling form makes for an engaging read, it does perhaps suffer from limited literary expertise. Personal minutiae and repetitive detail becomes tiresome. As a consequence the reader has to search through apparently meaningless textual litter in order to 'get to the point'.

J. Gergen and M. Gergen employ forms from performance, live art, and theatre in the delivery of their *evocative* auto ethnographic texts. Audiences are invited to contribute to the dialogue and help decide how the narrative will play out. However, a lack of knowledge and understanding of the disciplines is apparent in reports of the Gergen's work. Documentation of conference papers performed by the Gergens reveals that there has been ill-conceived use of costumes and props, which is jarring and

indicates intellectual slovenliness (Delamont, 2007). Performance and live art are complex forms (Heathfield & Glendinning 2004, Howell & Howell 1999) and it seems that the Gergen's have failed to apply sufficient rigour to this aspect of their practice. The unfortunate result of the Gergen's under researched experimentation with form is that their work is in danger of being perceived as *incredible*. Herbert (2010) argues that performance should "be good because it's good" and that audiences should not be made to suffer under-performing work. Apparent in much literature within the *evocative* camp is an approach that is celebratory and uncritical of itself and its practitioners. As a consequence these auto ethnographers seem to be satisfied with what is perhaps poor practice, which puts at risk any possibility of *evocative* ethnography being taken seriously as scholarly activity.

The 'expressive individualism' of some auto ethnography is described by Bellah (Jensen 1995:71) as "cancerous" for its privileging of 'individual goals, desires and happiness' over social obligation. Bellah asserts that auto ethnographers such as Richardson might be accused of 'soft despotism' characterized by a withdrawing into the self and an "unawareness of the fate of others" (Toqueville in Bellah 2008: ix).

Analytic auto ethnography adheres to existing traditions of social enquiry and its practitioners are not inclined to experiment with artistic or literary style. Where *evocative* auto ethnography aims for "critical democracy" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008:407), *analytic* auto ethnography is concerned with academic standards and conventions. There is a danger that the *analytic* approach, entrenched as it is in scholarly conservatism, may bar the way for exemplary pieces of literary auto ethnography such as Weem's poetic "9/11 reflections" (2002). Unlike Richardson's response to the same subject Weem's piece is truly evocative, powerful and well crafted. Weem's auto ethnography demonstrates the act of using oneself to get to culture (Wall 2006) by looking out beyond the end of her own nose and deep into society.

BALANCING ACT

The opposed positions of *evocative* and *analytic* autoethnography are perhaps not

so difficult to bring together. As an artist I believe that both 'schools' of auto ethnography are used during the process and production of my work, and I am aware of many artists who employ similar methods. The late Jo Spence used her experience as a terminally ill cancer patient in what could be perceived as a literal auto ethnographic method. She wrote and drew on her diseased body to disrupt assumptions that disease is a private matter to be hidden away. Through her work Spence spoke about power and powerlessness, her images resonated not only through the strength of their execution but because they referenced and were relevant to a wider society: they were not about an individual Spence but about the social 'we'. Spence addressed class, gender, disease and social responsibility, and she did it with the skill of an accomplished artist.



Figure: 1 "Property of Jo Spence"

LACEPOINT

Having conducted an initial investigation of auto ethnography and established a position for the time being, I was poised to put it all into practice. A temporary studio at Nottingham's German Christmas market was to be my first official autoethnographic field study. I was there to see if the presence of "Lace point"

might act as a catalyst to raise discussion about Nottingham Lace. A banner spelling out "Lace point" scripted from genuine Nottingham lace was hung across the front of the chalet and a large piece of my own lace related artwork rested on an easel. I brought some lace to look busy with, working on the premise that in my experience of participating in 'Open Studio' events, people are interested in seeing artists at work and will chat.

During the "Lace point" study detailed notes of conversations were made after each encounter and visual information was committed to memory. The field notes were written up a few weeks later as an *evocative* autoethnography, which is currently undergoing theoretical analysis to provide a scholarly balance. Prior to this auto ethnography there was some experimentation with a text written to report a paper given by Louise Govier at the Museums Association Annual Conference 2010? Govier spoke of how she has sought ways to enhance visitor experience at Mottisfont, a National Trust property, with restricted finances and restrictive National Trust bureaucracy. During her presentation Govier launched an incomplete sentence into the room that referred to what she might, given the right circumstances, do with Mottisfont;

"In my wildest dreams....."

Through the caged phrasing of her speech hopes and frustrations were discernable, so the following passage was written in response and woven into the framework of my factual report.

"How wild are your dreams Louise Govier? The way you say "In my wildest dreams....." makes me imagine a fantastic and pitiful (Virillio, P., 2006) chimera, a leopard-elephant-wolf-lion eyeing the sights of a spy's rifle, as it strobes through dappled Attenborough undergrowth. You speak with emotion, but not emotionally, I read this as passion for what you want to be possible at Mottisfont, I think that you speak evocatively, (Anderson, L. 2006, Ellis, C. & Bochner A., 2006, Spry, 2001) and it moves me. I want to know more." Following this passage is another strand of the report that notes "References to museum's display policy and associated literature regarding National Trust budgets, targets, rules, regulations etc. to be inserted here."

The colours were used to indicate three different positions within the document, the reflexive voice is written in orange, the theoretical, analytical position is written in green, and the factual report is written in black. These colours were selected because of their relationship to lace pattern code sheets held in the lace archive at Nottingham Trent University.

CONNECTIONS

The autoethnographic field notes from "Lace point" trace the day from an early morning 'dodgem' experience with the city centre trams to the extinguishing of the chalets lights by the local council.

It became clear early on in my field study that the "Lace point" chalet was encroaching on a corner of Market Square 'owned' by a large group of teenagers. They nevertheless continued to occupy their reduced territory, which meant that we were very close and constant companions. At first the experience was highly intimidating, I was greeted with "get yer box outa ma corner!" and the balance of power was with them. As the day drew on they became curious about why "Lace point" was there and began to question me about my work as an artist. My work has a gothic aspect, a certain deathliness that links into notions of loss and mourning, which the teenage group were drawn to. It turns out that this particular group of people have been instrumental in influencing the way that my study will move forward.

DISCONNECTIONS

The positive bridge building that took place with the teenage group became a total bridge collapse during some conversation with other visitors, as this passage from the auto ethnographic field notes illustrates.

"1.12 p.m.

Two women, retirement age, gravitate towards 'Siren' (the artwork I have on display)

I refer back to my non-script and ask them if they are interested in Nottingham lace.

They are.

"I used to have loads of it." Says one. the other, nodding and smiling in a conspiratorial, insider way.

The Outsider is confused, the Women don't look as though they would follow the fashion forwardness or antics of Kate Moss, so the Outsider inwardly searches a thin databank of celebrity names and thinks it might be Katie Price.

The Outsider's ignorance gives her away and the Women have to tell her that Kate Middleton, Prince William's fiancée will wear Nottingham lace for The Wedding and that the lace will be manufactured in Nottingham.

Because of this, the Women say, Nottingham lace will become popular again"

Sadly lace will not be produced in Nottingham for this Royal wedding dress. The only remaining manufacturers of Nottingham lace in the UK, Cluny lace have not received an order.

RE-CONNECTING

Aside from my clumsy handling of an invitation to join the women's enjoyment of the coming Royal wedding, this passage reveals a number of subjects that can be discussed and analysed. For example, the two women made reference to the Nottingham lace industry, which has played an immense role in shaping aspects of Nottingham, such as its city landscape and at one time its gender balance (Nottingham had, and may still have the highest ratio of women to men in the UK because women travelled to Nottingham to work in the lace industry.) The identity of Nottingham as a lace making centre was also addressed in this small conversation; traditionally Royal brides have had Nottingham lace incorporated into their wedding gowns but this time Nottingham will lose out. The optimism of the women that "Nottingham lace will become popular again" is probably sadly misplaced, Nottingham lace manufactured in Nottingham is far too expensive to produce for mass market consumption and is sold to couture houses because it is the best quality lace available, not because it is 'Nottingham lace'.

LINKS

What is clear from the conversation with the 'Kate' women and others is that there are concerns about what people described as 'their heritage'. It was also apparent that people believe Nottingham's identity as a centre for lace industry has been dissolved, and that for many reasons, this is wrong.

The application of 'heritage' theory (Samuel, 1994 Lowenthal, 1998) to the 'Kate' excerpt, which there is not space to do here, provides an academic and analytic 'scaffolding' to the evocative auto ethnography. This can be reinforced by a discussion of 'discourses of power' (Baxter, 2003) with regards to the interactions between the 'Kate' women and myself. My point is that this short exchange, with some application can become a web of valuable resources. Although auto ethnography is perhaps contentious as an ethnographic method and has its problems as mentioned earlier, auto ethnographies that are both heartfelt evocative texts and analytic scholarly documents can be produced.

CONCLUSION

Autoethnography was introduced as an ethnographic method which emerged from the development of descriptive, ethnographic reports into sociological practice in which the self is situated within studies (Gusfield, 1999). A division within the field of autoethnography was observed and the divergent systems were identified as *evocative* and *analytic* auto ethnography. Practitioners from both systems were identified and their approaches to auto ethnographic work discussed. It was acknowledged that *Evocative* autoethnography is complicated by its relativist and poststructuralist position, and that this can lead to a lack of rigour. The work of several *evocative* auto ethnographers were identified as under - performing in the forms of their delivery and others were observed to be examples of artistic and scholarly rigour. The insistence of scholarly conservatism by *analytic* auto ethnographers was noted as a risk to exemplary artistic works. Early autoethnography was used to demonstrate my experimentation with text, and to indicate developmental paths in a later field study titled "Lace point". A passage

from auto ethnography in process was used to demonstrate how evocative and analytic methods may be combined to produce alternative scholarly texts

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