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You never dance alone: supervising autoethnography

Jonathan Wyatt and/with Inés Bárcenas Taland

Introduction

In Flamenco, you never dance alone, you engage in rhythmic and emotional connection with the guitarist, the singer, the percussionist and the palmeros (those who perform the claps). The dance is not only yours: as in autoethnographic research, you perform in front of an audience while you attempt to connect with them. (Bárcenas Taland 2016, p.8)

Chairs close, ordered, in rows. I am at the front, compressed, facing a compact wooden stage. If I stretch my legs I can rest my heels on the wooden step up to the stage, which the dancer has just mounted. She stands poised. Strong, tall, proud, in red and black. Like a challenge to us, to me; to the world. The guitarist behind her strikes and she moves, a coil of rhythm and power that courses through my feet, back, hands, desire, insisting on the body's attention. *My brown eyes look fierce. They say, "Here I am!"* (BT 34)

This is my first experience of a flamenco performance, my being here a post-Masters gift from Inés. For the first time I am understanding those connections she was working with. I can *feel* flamenco call, how it takes hold of you, how it shifts you: the conflux of dancer-guitarist, feet-floor, strings-fingers, rhythm-look, movement-sound, gathering us all into the stories being told. Stories brought to us like the swell and breaking of the ocean. They lift us; they immerse us. We, the audience are co-

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performers, co-narrators, our skin “a multidimensioned topological surface that folds in, through, and across spacetimes of experience” (Manning 2013, p.12).

Inés writes in her dissertation:

I feel my feet on the ground, steady. I turn my head facing the audience, looking into the horizon, tensing my jaws, proud. I feel the gleam in my dark eyes as they meet the scorching red lights. I can sense the gaze of the audience, nailing from their seats. I feel powerful, I direct this momentum, I am ready to pour out all the pain that the tone of this performance is requiring me to connect with... I just ask you to come closer, to open your mind to this experience, to meet with the shadows of my different selves, and to allow my narrative to interlace with the feelings, thoughts and memories that will arise while you read my stories. Stay open because I am guiding you on a journey backwards through some of my memories, so that you can grasp the influence that these events from my past had in my way of living the present. Loosen up; we are not looking for answers, but for experiential and nuanced ways of understanding. (BT 36)

And it is as if, in the intensity of a late summer evening in a compact Edinburgh hall in August, Inés herself is not back home in Madrid but on stage performing her text. Instead of addressing me, quiet on a sofa in my front room through a screen, her text is stamping and striking right *there*. Those tales I read in empty mid-morning cafés – tales of families and lovers, loving and losing, attachments made and broken, stories of therapy and its painful promise – are playing out in a visceral, sensual, disturbing, inspiring, breathless panoply of movement and sound.

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Where it happens

Here's where supervising autoethnography happens. Writing. Writing by hand in a notebook, short of ideas, taking the risk. Such as it is: "As if anything truly dangerous is ever going to happen in a scholarly [chapter]" (Tamas & Wyatt 2013, p.61).

Late autumn, becoming winter. At home. Early morning darkness. The usual. It's what I do to keep writing alive, to keep myself alive, as the end-of-semester madness presses in. What it demands is not possible but it will be done. Or something will be. And writing must happen.

Supervising autoethnography happens here too, as I walk up the hill from home at the day's dark beginning. Here, through the archway and into the courtyard, up the stone stairs, along the corridor to my office. A journey amongst and into the mess. A joyous, productive, heartfelt, draining, destructive melange of organisational chaos, cranes, boarded-up buildings, and relationships squeezed tight by thwarted expectations and inadequate space.

Supervising autoethnography happens here, in an office that crushes the life out of me, within the tightness of angled chairs and arced desk, a low light, screen, and shelves of read, half-read and unread books; cards, gifts. One such gift is a thumb-sized music box, whose tiny handle you turn and it plays an uncertain *Here Comes the Sun*. On a good day it's joyful and heartening; on a bad one it's mocking and ironic. Sometimes, writing, there seem to be no new words, no fresh metaphors, no surprising turns of phrase. You think you spy an inviting word on a shelf nearby; you stretch out a hand to collect it but on examination you find it jars. You reach further,

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deeper, higher. You climb onto your chair, wary of its instability, to reach for a metaphor in the far corner you think might work and hoping, as you threaten to lose your balance, that no one will reprimand you for breaching health and safety regulations. You imagine the metaphor you scabble for rare and precious; your fingertips touch the dust gathered atop the rounded vowels and in the sharp clefts of the consonants but you bring it closer and see it for what it is: worn, overused, tired. No wonder the best writers have left it out of reach where it belongs. But you take it anyway because it’s all you’ve got. And you know, despite this, that it’s worth it and, “at a time when education is more about packaging, more about FTEs, more about supplying the economy with a labour force to build the [UK] industrial complex” (Pelias 2003, p. 370) you want your students to join you in the struggle.

Supervising autoethnography happens where words slip off the page, shifted by doubt.

We meet for the first time in my office at the end of one Monday afternoon in late March. I run from another supervision meeting upstairs and I’m late. Inés is waiting. I apologise. Inés is gracious.

It’s been a stuttering start – her work on this began in January and I am stepping in for a colleague who has had to withdraw. Inés and I have had email exchanges about her project, given urgency by the deadlines for both her ethics application and an abstract for the student research conference in May, both of which she has sent me drafts of

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for this meeting. But this is our first time to talk, our first opportunity to breathe into her project, to allow it to fill the room. She is interested in how she has moved, how she has changed, through her experience of being in therapy for 18 months. How ways we relate to others and to ourselves can change.

She says, "I don't know about this, don't know where to begin."

"Just write," I reply. "Just read and write and write some more."

It's the student research conference, early May. We're in a bright classroom with some 25 others seated in a circle, the tables shunted to the sides. Inés reads her story. It's the first time I have heard her read her work; it's the first time I have encountered her autoethnographic writing. I've seen an abstract, I've seen an ethics form, but not this. I am opposite her. She sits to read. I can see she is reading from a handwritten manuscript. The text is about her experience of therapy, childhood, her father and mother. It's about change. It speaks to me of sadness. And hope. We are stilled as we listen; when she finishes people respond with warmth. *In flamenco, you never dance alone.* (BT 8)

When we meet a week later I tell her how profound I found her writing and how listening to her took me to places I'd not imagined. She tells me she had written into the early hours the night before, afraid and excited. This is all so new, she says. "I didn't know I could write like this."

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I sometimes meet students for supervision in my office, sometimes in Checkpoint. I prefer Checkpoint. You get to Checkpoint by crossing the road outside the School and turning right, walking against the traffic. You cross a road with care, turn left and you're there. Two minutes' walk. The floors, tables and chairs are wooden, there's a surprising shipping container along one side and the space stretches back towards two long tables and a courtyard garden beyond. I take one of the long tables when I can. Music plays and the coffee is good. I go to Checkpoint to write and to read, to escape the pressing walls of my office and demands of the School. The Deleuze reading group I'm part of meets there. And I meet Masters students there for supervision.

Inés arrives. Time feels short, she says. It's July. All her other assessment tasks are finished. It's only this dissertation that remains. She has four weeks to get it finished. She is feeling lost and doubtful and a little hopeful. She describes her pattern of writing late into the night and the mornings where she looks from her window across The Meadows and watches clouds gather and disperse.

She talks of the week's encounters – a friend, a lover – and how each is in her dreams and in her writing. Supervising autoethnography comes with vulnerability and risk. She tells me where her writing is taking her and how it's stretching her, troubling her. When she leaves I order more coffee. I am breathing deeper, with a sense of space. Inés is making room for this. She will be fine. I am concerned for her but trusting of her resources to see herself through. *Stretch your back, shoulders down and lift your chin while we walk, gently. Draw demure in your gaze, and observe.* (BT 22)

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When coffee arrives, I stir in milk and wonder about the last time I was disturbed by/in my own writing as Inés is. I notice envy: I would like to feel again the edges Inés is navigating.

Next day, Inés writes:

"I find myself really confused after our meeting today. I feel so immersed in my own stories that I am struggling to make sense of anything. Tomorrow I am going to spend all day reading the autoethnographies you have referred me to and the *Handbook of Autoethnography*. I am sure things might start to fall into place. "

That's a tall order for a day's reading, I think, but she's right. It will be okay.

Supervising autoethnography happens face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh; and it happens writing-to-writing, flesh-to-flesh. It happens in emails exchanged: letters of delight, purpose, worry, excitement, puzzlement, and more, letters sifted from the detritus of myriad communications about institutional systems, deadlines and requirements.

Supervising autoethnography has to be preserved, protected.

Some letters, like this one, soon after our meeting in Checkpoint, speak of struggles fought and won:

"Jonathan,

I send you an extensive word document with the written accounts that I have produced at the moment. Some of them are more polished than others, and

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some of them are not finished yet, but the good thing is that I have overcome the anxiety about writing and now I can flow. The only problem is that today my mental energy is at its lowest level after a week battling.

Nonetheless, the only thing I ask you is to bear the chaos with me, I am aware that what I am sending you is quite disorganized, but in my mind things are beginning to fall into place (only beginning though). But I really feel that I need an outsider's perspective, I am getting a bit bored of myself at the moment."

They are letters that call for presence. They call for witnessing. *You never dance alone.* (BT 8)

And this, three days later:

"Jonathan,

What do you think about this: A story about becoming a woman through the negotiation of my multiple selves on flamenco beats? What does it mean to become a woman (identity, femininity), negotiating internal and external relationships? And produce narratives about: Me and my partners: to convey the idea of the jealousy, the dependency, the lack of sense of self; me, mother, sister: the triangle, attachment, identity; me, father: letting go his internal object; me, therapist, flamenco: my own sense of self as a woman."

Such letters lay out possibilities. They see how each possibility looks, how they sound. Such letters invite a response, which might come like this:

"Inés,

Comments on the attached. I remain feeling positive about this. I get that you're

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feeling lost but this structure seems to me to allow yourself a way to piece

together and develop the trajectory of the dissertation –

A second of silence is interrupted by the clamour of the audience, cheering us up with their claps and their shouting voices, saying ‘Olé’. (BT 51) –

There’s a highly thought-of book by a well-known poststructuralist scholar, Patti Lather, about qualitative research methodology, called *Getting Lost*. She encourages ‘getting lost’ as an important research strategy!

Keep going, keep the faith,

Jonathan”

Responses come with encouragement and reassurance and support. And further reading.

Supervising autoethnography happens in emails and it also happens in the annotated texts of ‘the attached’. It happens in the exposure of offering raw writing and wondering how it will be received. Inés sends me a draft literature review and I return it with comments ‘tracked’. Imagine what follows placed at the right of the page in a pink box that runs from a highlighted word along a slender line:

“Right. This is all good but a) you need to help the reader understand how and why this body of literature is relevant to your study and b) what you make of it (i.e. your *critical* engagement with it).

What you’ve got here is a report on the literature but *you* seem missing from it. Why is the reader being taken through it? What is it about these ways of thinking that you think needs troubling/questioning/extending/deepening/made more visible/embodied/etc.? And which of these ways of framing this set of

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theories do you find more or less convincing? Can you bring them into conversation with each other and with you more than you do?"

I imagine now, months later, Inés reading that comment. I imagine what it might have been like for her, in the shadow of a deadline, the structure, tone, heart and 'hook' of her inquiry still tentative, still uncertain.

Some pages after that first set of comments I write a second:

"Aha! Ok. I see. This helps as a response to my comment above. Place a version of this section at the start of the literature review so the reader knows where you're taking them. And hold this argument that you're proposing in mind as you go through, coming back to it at points so again the reader gets a sense of what you're making of the literature you're offering.

Bring the reader into the work you are wanting this review to do. Give me a sense of what you make of these theories, how you're seeking to bring them into conversation with you and the issue you wish to explore as well as with each other."

I ask myself now: how do we do a 'literature review' for autoethnography? What do we even mean by it? How do you do a literature review when you want it to stamp its feet?

When Inés sends me the final draft of her dissertation, I read the revised 'literature review' (Title: *Falseta: the research's call to an autoethnographic performance*) and I smile. It begins:

Darkness. The show is about to start, the audience awaits expectant on their

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seats, I can hear their mutters from the back, my heart beats hastily. A faint red light begins to illuminate the stage, drawing the silhouettes of the guitarist, the singer, the drummer and the palmeros, sitting still in their chairs, inviting the solemnity of the performance that we are about to create. Silence. The guitar starts playing, a Falseta, an instrumental piece that in Flamenco is used to introduce the performance and to call the dancer on the stage; an intimate melody that invites lament, and that introduces the first part of this research, where I present the calls of existing research and theories that are greeting me into this research performance. (BT 22)

Supervising autoethnography happens in the beat of the dance, words breaking their shackles, strutting, singing, animating all they encounter.

Where it happens: Echoes

Autoethnography is always about others, and supervising autoethnography is always about being supervised. This inquiry into supervising autoethnography not only concerns the stories of Inés and me but also those stories I bring to Inés-and-me. The echoes.

How during my Masters research in Oxford I sent writing to my supervisor, writing I had toiled over, *loved* over. I sent it to him a week ahead of meeting. We met, exchanged pleasantries and began, sitting in one of the consulting rooms where I sometimes saw clients. He told me he hadn't read the writing I had sent. *When you dance, all your self is exposed in front of an audience; you are the centre, and you feel naked, you uncover your body, but also your mind. (BT 36)*

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How later, feeling alone, I asked for help from another tutor. She agreed and she didn't need to do. When we met she had written notes all over my pages. She gave me encouragement ("this is profound") and advice ("cut down the quotes").

How, early in my doctorate at Bristol, I sent a draft autoethnographic text to my supervisor, Jane Speedy. It was my first autoethnography, about my father, about loss. I sent it and I didn't hear back. After a week I sent an email nudge, apologizing. Nothing. A few days later another, more urgent. Nothing. One more time: still respectful, if despairing.

The next morning brought a flood of email text: fulsome, overflowing with joy and hope and pleasure. "This has knocked my socks off," were her first words; and she signed off with: "I'm going for a walk to buy more tissues. Then I'm going to come back to my desk and read again." I printed the email and took it to show my mother. She was proud.

How, when Ken Gale and I were working on our collaborative thesis, the three of us would meet in our favourite café in Bristol and Jane would lay our script across the table, the sheets smothered in pink ink. She would be direct – "why are all your philosophers men?" – and generous. After, Ken and I would walk across Bristol to the station, encouraged and heartened, catch our trains, Ken to Plymouth, me to Oxford, and keep writing.

How, once, Ken and I travelled again to Bristol to meet Jane. We walked up the

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steepness of Park Street to the Graduate School of Education, climbed the stairs to her office and knocked. No answer. We waited. We got coffee, returned, knocked again. We wrote a note, sent a text, got lunch. Returned. Nothing. The day was warm and bright so we sat in Berkeley Square garden: and there was Jane amongst a crowd. She saw us, surprised, and came over. She had forgotten. It didn't matter: Ken and I had done the supervision work we needed to do, as if Jane had been there.

Jane conveyed to me her sense that she believed. In a paper, written by the three of us, I expressed it like this:

“[I]t’s her edginess ... that I love, that I’ve been drawn to all this time, that sense of wildness, her passion, her willingness to live dangerously (as I see it). I trust these experiences of her, and trust her. I find that she cares, for me, for us, for the work.” (Gale, Speedy & Wyatt 2010, p.25)

Supervising autoethnography happens there, in vivid, engaged presence and in the twists and turns of the unexpected encounter of a summer’s afternoon. It happens in gratitude. It happens in our commitments. *I take a deep breath and I pull up my skirt, leaving my naked legs uncovered to the audience’s eyes. My lips draw a cheeky smile. I give my first stamp with audacity, as I am followed by the echoes of the guitar.* (BT 51)

One more echo. Playing it forward. With thanks to Inés:

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Lately I have begun to dance. I have always enjoyed dancing but I have never been a dancer. I have limited rhythm and less style. At our son's wedding in September a drunken but coordinated man encouraged me to "feel the dance in your feet". He knelt to place his hands on my lower legs as I moved. I laughed too much to take in his coaching and my feet remained unresponsive.

But now I dance every week and it's neither steps nor form that matters but learning to allow the body to lead. I am beginning to feel it in my feet.

Since supervising Inés I have been dancing. Not because of, not causally, and it is not within the striations and codes of a recognized form, but it is dancing. Dancing and writing. Dancing and writing and the body. *Remember what you have learned: Open your arms, fill your lungs, pull your shoulders back, tense your core, and push your pelvis forward.* ((BT 37)

When I walk home from dancing I *feel* more. And I feel *more*.

Where it happens: Reprise

Supervising ('over-seeing') suggests a view from above; or, Daredevil™-like, 'seeing' with extraordinary powers. But it's neither. It's an immersion, a flood, a trawl. It happens beyond sight, as you listen to the words she sends, hear her as she speaks her doubts and her passion, the shift she's made in the writing about her father, the story she tells of his voice, his presence. Reading a draft in my office or with coffee in Checkpoint I feel him berating her. I don't just see it. I get a picture, yes, but

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I hear it too. I hear his tone and I feel the jolt, the shock, the plummet of heart and spirits, the violence of his imposition. I can trace the rough texture of the moment, my fingers over the ragged stones in the garden where they stand, Inés and her father and her young cousins. I cannot be there if I am distant, surveying the territory from above. Her writing brings me close, demands my involvement, there in the reading.

My eyes meet with yours, I feel your presence, but I cannot see your face; your silhouette is blurred in the darkness. (BT 16)

Supervising autoethnography is intimate, private. And it is also institutional, collective. Inés and I are not alone, or not only alone. Other students, other colleagues, are in other rooms at other times, talking, writing, working out how this can be done.

Supervising autoethnography happens as our staff community meets on the top floor in a room with a panoramic view over the spires, chimneys and clock towers of south Edinburgh, where we don't know quite what to do with autoethnography. Like a troubled, unruly sibling, autoethnography is both welcomed and blamed, cherished and doubted, a regular focus of our agonisings: however we teach it, we can't make it *behave*. We meet at the end of the assessment process to moderate the grading and to discuss issues that have emerged across all our Masters students' projects. This year, as last year, as every year, autoethnography is present. Valued, spiky, appreciated, mistrusted. A presence we embrace but find difficult to accommodate: what can we expect? What is possible? How do we judge? Where is the 'critical' voice? What is a 'critical voice' in autoethnography? Is a student 'too close' to their material? But how 'close' or 'distant' do you need to be to do this? We are never able to settle the

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answers to these questions. When we leave and close the doors behind us, autoethnography, restless and uncertain, unwilling to be caged, opens a window, spreads her wings and flies north. *I gasp, I can feel my knees and ankles trembling, stirred by the intensity of the momentum ... A sense of fear crosses my mind: am I going to do this right? Perhaps not all the theories fit with my experiences, with my uneven stamps.* (BT 51)

Supervising autoethnography happens amidst necessary doubt. I doubt autoethnography. I am troubled by it. I write against the assumptions it makes about the subject, about 'experience', about inquiry (e.g. Wyatt & Gale, 2013). I worry about this now, in an autoethnographic inquiry into supervising autoethnographic projects. I worry that in supervising autoethnography I am colluding with theoretical positions I challenge. How can I do this when I doubt? How can I supervise others and apparently disown the critiques I and others offer?

Yet. It is not about me. Supervising autoethnography is about others; and it is about the other in me. I may have doubts but autoethnography is precious and important and political. Autoethnography is a vanguard perhaps, a nod to what lies beyond, to what is possible.

Ending

The stamps, the claps and the guitar become one, they follow the pace of my steps, increasingly speeding up, as I feel drops of sweat sliding through my

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tights, my neck and my tense back. So raise your arms, tighten your core muscles, and hold on to your internal rhythm, to the singular meanings that are to guide you to the end of this dance, because after this exhausting stamping, our experiences will part. (BT 60)

The performers exit to joyous, arrested, applause. As the audience disperses I stop to sit for a moment on the edge of the stage: to be where the dancers were, to trace with my fingers the marks, the energy, they have left on the stage. The hall empties around me. I'm not ready to leave. Not yet.

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