

Autoethnographic Verse: Nicky's Boy: A Life in Two Worlds

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This autoethnographic verse is about my childhood experience of two distinct and ethnically representative family cultures. Poetry and qualitative research share in their goals of providing meaning, density, aestheticism, and reflexivity. They are also evocative. I selected verse as a means to express my experience, and to invite the reader's reflections on this experience for themselves and others. Key words: Autoethnography, Culture, Poetry, Verse, Reflexivity, and Inquiry Methods

"One writes out of one thing only - one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art."

(James Baldwin, 1990)

What follows is the product of my writing as a method of inquiry. It was, for me, as much about "discovering" as "telling". However my "discovery" is limited by the discourses available to me. I can discover only insofar as I can interpret my experience. Readers, too, can only discover my experience insofar as they can interpret my writing through their own experiences. Together, or separately, we can create meaning from these words.

Nicky's Boy: Life in Two Worlds

Ron grew up in two different worlds....
Saturday world.
And Sunday world.

On Saturday, he was Ronald,
in a world of straight-backed chairs,
of parlor games,
of patient conversation.

On Sunday, he was Ronnie,
(Pronounced "Rannie").

A world of cousins too numerous to recall without ticking them off in clusters,
by the aunt,
or the uncle,
to whom they belonged.

Of loud games,
 of dizzying,
 overlapping,
 inscrutable chatter. Clatter.

Saturdays were three course meals.....

Garden salad,
 roasted meat,
 or boiled.
 Tea.
 Cookies.
 A citrus cake, perhaps.

Sundays were biscotti, and cold pasta with red gravy, and melon, and pan fried smelt and strong coffee and chicken and nougat and cucuzza.....

in just that order, perhaps.
 Appearing pell-mell,
 Willy-nilly.
 from pantry shadows -
 backstage of the kitchen
 with its aqua linoleum on its floors and its counters.
 “Modrenized”,
 Uncle Tony called it, who’d had it installed it for his aging parents.
 Fruit perhaps.
 A tomato salad sometimes...
 afterwards.

Ronald spent Saturdays at the home of his Grandmother.....

his “Granny”.
 She was of English descent.
 He didn’t know what descent meant.
 But he understood what English was.
 It was something his school thought worth studying.

Ronald spent Sundays on the farm of his father’s parents. They were Italians. They were from Italy. They weren’t from here. Their marriage arranged by cousins, it was said. They raised

vegetables....
 and grapes...
 and children.

From the vegetables came money,
 from the grapes, wine,
 from the children, more children.

Saturdays were easy.
 There was Ronald,

his mother - Granny's only child,
 his father - an Italian which Granny learned to accept, and Admire,
 and Granny. His granny in her gently flowered dress,
 with lace trim,
 and fabric buttons,
 that could only be seen up close.
 Ronald talked with the adults.
 The adults listened.
 What he said was worth hearing, it seemed.
 There was a set time to arrive.
 And to leave.

Sundays were uneasy.
 For Ronnie.
 "You sweat like a pig," an aunt once told him.
 "You're too fat, you don't shit enough. Like me" his Nona said.
 They said what came to mind.
 It was their way.
 It meant caring, he supposed
 Still,
 it was hard to hear.

There were cousins everywhere - everywhere - all of them more favored, it seemed. Some of them could understand Italian. Ronnie could not. Leaving was not on a schedule...it was random, unpredictable... perhaps it came when conversation died...when food ran out. It's doubtful though, as there seemed an endless supply of both.

In any case,
 it was not to be counted on.

Saturday clothes stayed clean and pressed.
 Sitting does little to change that.

Sunday clothes,
 Holy Mass clothes,
 soon gave way to wrinkles,
 and Sweat,
 and pin dot patterns of red pasta gravy.

As soon as was possible, Ronnie stopped going to the farm.
 "Take me home first" he'd say to his parents...as they drove away from The Church. There were arguments at first. But not for long. Fifteen plus years went by without a visit to the farm. Ronnie occasionally saw his cousins and his aunts and his uncles at weddings. He always said hello. His grandparents didn't go to weddings. They couldn't get around like that. But Ronnie did see his Nona again. He saw her at her funeral. It was loud. There was rum cake, and "homemades"...their word for ravioli. There was red wine in soda bottles. The grown-ups hid to smoke their cigarettes, where their father couldn't see, behind the little house- where the farmhands who really lived in Puerto Rico with their wives and their babies, but who were here

all year it seemed, stayed. Ronnie approached his Grandfather. Who was surrounded by his grown daughters? Ronnie had never seen his grandfather cry before. "I'm sorry about Nona" he said. "Who are you?" Was what he heard back? "Pop, that's Nicky's boy" said Aunt Cinderella.

Nicky was her older brother. Nicky was Ronnie's father. "Why the hell you never come around?" His grandfather said.

His face was sun-dried,
leather brown,
wet with tears.

His daughters hugged him from all sides.

Discussion

Regardless of what else we do during our time on this planet we do one thing fully and uniquely: we live our life. And we live it in context. This, ethnographers might say, makes us subjects, participants, and worthy of studying. This, autoethnographers might say, makes us researchers, scientists, and worthy of reporting. Ethnography, by its simplest definition, is the practice of attempting to discover the culture of others (Patton, 2002). Autoethnography, then, must be the practice of attempting to discover the culture of self, or of others through self. Goodall (2000) calls this the "new ethnography"...that which is "shaped out of a writer's personal experience within a culture..." (p. 9). It is the use of self and self's experiences to "garner insights into the larger culture or subculture of which you are a part" (p. 86).

Although expanding to consider a hermeneutic paradigm in an effort to accommodate the idiographic nature of the social sciences, ethnography traditionally relied on the dominant tenants of realism, perhaps in an effort to afford itself a respected place among empirical research (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Autoethnography can, and often does, challenge the epistemological position of traditional (read positivist) research. It relies, instead, on the postmodern ontological position that the nature of reality is local, co-constructed, and that truth cannot be known with any certainty. It holds no pretense of objectivity, of omniscience, – nor does it claim the apprehension of reality or truth. Autoethnographic researchers place self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997) in their effort to explore interactions between self and other. As a result, autoethnographic writing takes an overt stance against silent authorship and its implication of objectivity. The *graphic* research is isomorphic to the researcher who is as self-consciously present in his work as he is in social, historical and cultural context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Its purpose is evident in its roots: *auto* meaning directed from within; *ethno* meaning race, people, culture, and *graphy* as the written or pictorial representation of the research.

But what distinguishes this as research as something other than poetry based on one's experience? DeShazer (1986) speaks of poetry as a unique and sensuous means of laying claim to our ultimate relationship with the universe. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1981) defines poetry as "a composition designed to convey a vivid and imaginative sense of experience..." (p. 1011). This definition aligns in part to that of autoethnography. It also aligns, and perhaps more easily, with that of auto-phenomenology when one thinks of its search for the meaning of experience, or local reality. But note that both ethnography and phenomenology are recognized forms of qualitative inquiry. The boundary between art and science would seem less blurred, I would imagine, had this verse been about other (Angrosino, 1998), as opposed to being about self. Or perhaps had it been prose about self in relation to other (Fine, 1992). Yet all of these,

ethnography, autoethnography, and poetry, reveal for the reader one version of experience within a culture. All three contribute to the knowledge both on intellectual and evocative levels. All three, then, are research.

Autoethnography allows the reader (and the writer) to experience something new - to feel, to learn, to discover, to co-create. According to Richardson (2000b) "...mere novelty does not suffice" (p. 937). It is a revealing narrative from the self-of-the-writer, from a lived experience. It is an attempt to relive the experience with the reader as each provides his or her own interpretation, understanding, and lens. It makes a substantive contribution, uses self-exposure, and moves the reader to question, to research, to write (Richardson, 2000a). I attempt this through verse (Miles & Huberman, 1994), that which Robert Frost calls the "shortest emotional distance between two points". Still, I cannot be certain that my offering will accomplish all of this for all readers. I can only know that it has made these contributions for me.

Richardson (1994) talks of writing as a method of inquiry. She expands the purpose of writing from that of a mode of "telling," to one of "knowing," of discovering, of analyzing. She writes, she says, because she wants to find something out - something she didn't know before she wrote it. This painterly approach to writing flies in the face of the linear mechanisms of writing in which I was schooled - organize what it is you want to say, and then say it. Craft before art. Yet the process of writing this autoethnographic poem has revealed to me Richardson's (1994) meaning: writing can be inquiry and telling can lead to knowing. I did not *know*, for example, until it was *told* by me, that I thought of myself as "Nicky's boy." Nicky was my father. He was a man of small stature yet large presence. I am middle-aged. My father has been dead for many years. "Nicky's boy" was my identity to the Italian side of my family, and in my neighborhood, and in the circles of the many, many adults who shadowed my childhood. It is, apparently, how I think of myself still. It is a standard by which I measure all that I do, and am. It is a standard to live up to. It is at least some of my context. Another discovery was to come to know how much my cutoff from this large and happy Italian family of my childhood has left a sad longing in me today. I would do it differently now. I would be with them. I would accept them. I would admire them, much as my English Granny came to admire my Italian father. This information emerged from the data, inductively, as it is with alternative methods of research inquiry.

Limitations

This piece is not without its limitations. It shares with all research, for example, the fundamental limitation, and, at the same time, strength, of viewpoint. That is, I give only my viewpoint. My mother might tell a completely different story. My cousin's another. My Granny yet another. My effort is to offer the reader insight into my "culture", "situation", "way of life" (Patton, 2002, p. 84). The work is subject to the politics of interpretation, as it should be. Yet hermeneutics notwithstanding, it is limitless insofar as readers bring their own lenses through which to share in at least some part of its meaning. At least this is my hope.

The style may seem odd to some readers. Patton (2002) speaks of a sociologist/friend who angrily told him that "those who want to write creative nonfiction or poetry should find their way to the English Department of the university and leave sociology to sociologists" (p. 86). Yet, some of my most exciting learning has come from that which blurs the boundary between science and art. Does much of what we believe about the life experience of early humans come from cave drawings? Can hieroglyphics be placed with certainty in the category of science or art? Is the contemporary practice of fact-based fiction any less informative or valid than the

storied representations we accept in our textbooks? Richardson (1994) raises the questions of how to create texts which are vital, that are attended to, that make a difference. She offers writing as a legitimate method of inquiry.

One reviewer of this piece suggested that Ronnie's struggle did not reveal itself in the verse. I accept this criticism. I revisited the piece several times with that in mind. Ultimately, however, it remained largely in its original form. Perhaps self-revelation, then, is a piece of Ronnie's struggle, or maybe fear.

The use of self as a sole source of data has been questioned (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 2000). One could argue my design lacks rigor. To that I would reply that were a researcher to spend as much time collecting data from his subject as I did with "Ronnie", I daresay his or her rigor would not be in question. My verse can be criticized for lacking validity (see Lincoln & Denzin, 1994 for their review on the crises of representation and legitimization). Yet if we accept the poststructural interpretation of validity as the text's call to authority and truth, I would hold that its verisimilitude is intact.

Surely there is room for alternative methods of inquiry. While not the traditional form of research to which we are accustomed, autoethnography makes available the bridge linking the personal with the cultural. We cannot write about "other" without revealing something about "self." Poststructuralism (Weedon, 1987) suggests that language is not able to reflect social reality, but rather helps to create it. This method of inquiry makes overt the voice of self as it achieves the goal of contributing to the knowledge base of sociological phenomena. Autoethnography does not negate the dominant views of inquiry. It merely adds yet another voice. Congruent with its postmodern origins, it suggests a both/and, not an either/or. It creates a tension in the research community between the critical, interpretive, and postmodern sensibilities and those of the positivist, post-positivist, and naturalistic conceptualizations of analyses. However, Perkins and Rouanzoin (2002) remind us that acceptance of ideas which challenge tradition are often met with resistance, and that the resulting tension is an important component of carrying the "process of scientific investigation forward" (p. 93). I welcome the tension as I continue to explore the possibilities. I hope that others will as well.

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