The challenges of autoethnography are in front of us. The field has come of age, all the signifiers are there, a handbook, a journal, a special interest group, annual meetings. This handbook can be read as a manifesto, it opens doors, it is about bringing performance into the equation, about rethinking key terms: autoethnography, ethnography, performance, about the formation of a critical performative cultural politics, about what happens when everything is already performative, when the dividing line between performativity and performance disappears. And autoethnography (there are at least ten different versions of the word; see Denzin, 2018, p. 8). It is about using autoethnography to perform work that leads to social justice, it is about critical discourse that addresses central issues confronting democracy and racism in post-postmodern, post-truth. It is about global life, narrative, and melodrama under the auspices of late neoliberal capitalism.

The performance turn has been taken in the human disciplines and it must be taken seriously. There are multiple performance/autoethnographic models that we can learn from: Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgy, Turner’s performance anthropology (1982), A. D. Smith’s (2003) and Johnny Saldaña’s (2011) racialized ethnodramas, Conquergood’s (2013) and Madison’s (2012) performance ethnography, Norris’s playacting (2017), Boal’s theatre of the oppressed with its jokers and spec-actors (2006), Freire’s pedagogies of the oppressed (2000), Schechner’s social theatre and performance autoethnography for healing, for action, for community, for transforming experience into utopian performatives (2015).

These models represent different ways of staging and hence performing autoethnography as resistance as critical pedagogy. They represent different ways of “imagining, and inventing and hence performing alternative imaginaries, alternative counter-performances to war, violence, and the globalized corporate empire” (Schechner, 2015, p. 15, paraphrased).

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I use the performance text as a vehicle for taking up the hard questions about reading, writing, performing, and doing critical work that makes a difference.

Performance autoethnography is a blurred genre. It is many things at the same time. It bends and twists the meanings of ethnography, ethnographer, and performance. There is no separation between the writer, the ethnographer, the performer, and the world. Performance autoethnography makes the writer’s self visible through performance, through performance writing, through the writer’s presence in the world. Performance autoethnographers are committed to changing the world one word, one performance at a time. The community is global.

Autoethnography is easily confused with other terms. It is not: ethnography, autobiography, biography, personal narrative, personal history, life history, life story, or personal experience story. It is not deeply theoretical. It is more than personal writing or cultural critique. It is more than performance. But it is performative. It is transgressive. It is resistance. It is dialogical. It is ethical. It is political, personal, embodied, collaborative, imaginative, artistic, creative, a form of intervention, a plea for social justice. Clearly, this discourse is not standing still. Writing selves are performing new writing practices, blurring fact and fiction, challenging the dividing line between performer and performed, observer and observed.

Performance autoethnography is at a crossroad. While the performance turn in ethnography is well established in communication studies, this is less the case in educational research. Despite the fact that...
anthropologists of education make the case for treating ethnography, on a global stage, as performance. But moving into a thorough-going performance space remains a challenge for mainstream anthropological, communication, educational, health-care, and sociological ethnographers.

And the method has not been without its critics. Many remain committed to traditional, post-positivist values of objectivity, evidence, and truth. They find little value in the performance approach. The criticisms, as Bochner and Ellis (2016, pp. 35–38) observe, fall into three overlapping categories. Autoethnography is (1) too aesthetic and not sufficiently realistic; that is, it does not provide hard data; (2) too realistic and not mindful of post-structural criticisms concerning the “real” self and its place in the text; (3) insufficiently aesthetic, or literary, that is, autoethnographers are second-rate writers and poets.

Hammersley and Traianou (2012, pp. 134–136, 144) extend the traditional critique, finding little value in the work of ethnographic postmodernists and literary ethnographers. This new tradition, they assert, legitimates speculative theorizing, celebrates obscurity, and abandons the primary task of inquiry, which is to produce truthful knowledge about the world (2012, p. 144). Whose truth, though? There seems to be no space for the literary performance turn in this school of ethnography, a school which seems to stand outside time, in a strange timeless space.

Ignored in the criticisms of Hammersley and others is the basic point that all forms of knowledge involve a politics of representation, that is nothing stands outside representation. Further, as Madison and Hamera (2006, p. xx) argue, performance and globality are intertwined, that is, performances have become the enactment of stories that literally bleed across national borders. Being a U.S. citizen is to be “enmeshed in the facts of U.S. foreign policy, world trade, civil society and war” (p. xx).

More deeply, in a globalized, post-postmodern world, race and the staging and performance of racialized and gendered identities remains “the problem of the twenty-first century” (Du Bois, 2008 [1901], pp. 281, 288). (Witness the crises surrounding the Trump Administration’s immigration ban against persons from predominantly Muslim countries.) Modern democracies cannot succeed “unless peoples of different races and religions are also integrated into the democratic whole” (Du Bois, 2008 [1901], pp. 281, 288). Multiracial democracy cannot succeed unless critical qualitative scholars are able to adopt methodologies, such as autoethnography, that transcend the limitations and constraints of a lingering, politically and racially conservative post-positivism. This framework attaches itself to state-organized auditing systems. These links and these historical educational connections must be broken. Never before has there been a greater need for a militant utopianism which will help us imagine a world free of conflict, terror, and death, a world that is caring, loving, truly compassionate, a world that honors healing and difference.

To these ends, I locate performance ethnography within a racialized, spectacle pedagogy. The most important events in the United States in the last two decades include the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the global war on terror, the global spread of a radical right-wing racist, neo-fascist political ideology, the great recession of 2007–2008, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, new immigration bans, the institutionalization of a new surveillance regime that effects every traveling body entering or leaving the United States. A critical performance autoethnography must locate itself in these historical spaces, which now include surveillance regimes in virtually every institutional setting in the United States (and the world) today.

NOTES

1. Cultural critique, collaborative, dance, dialogical, ethnodrama, evocative, experimental, feminist, queer, indigenous, as interruption, as interpretation, as method, as pedagogy, performance, as political social justice, poststructural, as resistance, utopian performative.


REFERENCES


