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Tami Spry

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# Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis

Tami Spry  
*St. Cloud State University*

*This article argues the personal/professional/political emancipatory potential of autoethnographic performance as a method of inquiry. Autoethnographic performance is the convergence of the "autobiographic impulse" and the "ethnographic moment" represented through movement and critical self-reflexive discourse in performance, articulating the intersections of peoples and culture through the innersanctions of the always migratory identity. The article offers evaluative standards for the autoethnographic performance methodology, calling on the body as a site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy. Autoethnographic performance makes us acutely conscious of how we "I-witness" our own reality constructions. Interpreting culture through the self-reflections and cultural refractions of identity is a defining feature of autoethnographic performance.*

In autobiographical narrative performances, the performer often speaks about acts of social transgression. In doing so, the telling of the story itself becomes a transgressive act—a revealing of what has been kept hidden, a speaking of what has been silenced—an act of reverse discourse that struggles with the preconceptions borne in the air of dominant politics.

—Linda Park-Fuller (2000, p. 26)

Autoethnography is a form of critique and resistance that can be found in diverse literatures such as ethnic autobiography, fiction, memoir, and texts that identify zones of contact, conquest, and the contested meanings of self and culture that accompanies the exercise of representational authority.

—Mark Neuman (1996, p. 191)

Performance thrills me, theory does not. I would surely lose myself without performance, but I can not live well without theory.

—D. Soyini Madison (1999, p. 109)



as it conferences in the gilded plastic of the luxury hotel;  
 And in spite of myself,  
 my shadow selves  
 can still be seduced  
 by its empty opulence,  
 even when it feels like  
 an unkind, disembodied, scriptocentric, technocratic  
 consumer  
 of knowledge.

bell hooks might call this "eating the Other,"  
 consuming ourselves  
 with monologues about what should be endorsed,  
 authenticated,  
 and marked  
 as scholarship.

### BEING HERE:

This autoethnography was first performed at the National Communication Association Convention just days before I was to leave for Chile and ascend the Andes with a Chilean Shaman trained in the Mapuche traditions, to begin ethnographic research on the efficacy of performance in healing rituals. For me, autoethnographic texts express more fully the interactional textures occurring between self, other, and contexts in ethnographic research.

I have begun creating a self in and out of academe that allows expression of passion and spirit I have long suppressed. However academically heretical this performance of selves may be, I have learned that heresy is greatly maligned and, when put to good use, can begin a robust dance of agency in one's personal/political/professional life. So, in seeking to dis-(re)-cover my body and voice in all parts of my life, I began writing and performing autoethnography, concentrating on the body as the site from which the story is generated, thus beginning the methodological praxis of reintegrating my body and mind into my scholarship.

For me, performing autoethnography has been a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured my identity personally and professionally. Performing autoethnography has encouraged me to dialogically look back upon my self as other, generating critical agency in the stories of my life, as the polyglot facets of self and other engage, interrogate, and embrace. The previous autoethnography, "Threshold," and its following sections, articulates the identity fractures and acute liminality I often experience in the days before ethnographic fieldwork, or while in the threshold of Clifford Geertz's (1988) notion of "Being Here" and "Being There."

In this essay, through a weave of performative autoethnographic poetry and theoretical prose, I articulate the personally/politically emancipatory potential of autoethnographic performance, intervening, as Mary Louise Pratt (1994) notes, “on metropolitan modes of understanding” (p. 28). First, I offer a discussion of autoethnography as a methodology of scholarly praxis, including evaluative criteria for autoethnography. Second, dialogic performance and performativity in autoethnographic performance is discussed. Finally, I explore the emancipatory potential of autoethnographic performance, and its use as a method of inquiry.

This article reflects my continuing process of integrating the “doing” of autoethnography with critical reflection upon autoethnography as a methodological praxis. I believe the “doing” of autoethnography and its explication benefit by this integration. For that reason, I braid some of my autoethnographic work—subheaded “BEING THERE” as a riff off Geertz’s (1988) discussions—and talk about the work of autoethnography—subheaded “BEING HERE”—throughout the article. It is interesting and not surprising that I find the authorial voice in the autoethnographic texts (BEING THERE) far more engaging due to its emotional texturing of theory and its reliance upon poetic structure to suggest a live participative embodied researcher. Though emotion and poetics constitute scholarly treason, it is heresy put to good use. And it is heresy I continue to attempt to commit in the “BEING HERE” of my own scholarly reflection.

## BEING THERE:

### “Threshold”

Marianna Torgovnick (1990) says, “What is clear now is that the West’s fascination with the primitive has to do with its own crisis of identity, with its own need to clearly demarcate subject and object even while flirting with other ways of experiencing the universe” (p. 96).

This flirting  
with the exotic “Other”  
becomes abusive  
in its objectifying  
salacious  
condescension.

A story is *not* just a story, writes Trihn (1989).  
Once the forces have been aroused and set into motion,  
they can’t simply be stopped at someone’s request.

## BEING HERE:

### Autoethnography

Autoethnography can be defined as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts. Autoethnography is both a method and a text of diverse interdisciplinary praxes (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Its roots trace the postmodern "crisis of representation" in anthropological writing (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Clifford, 1988; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Conquergood 1985, 1991, 1998; Geertz 1973, 1988; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Myerhoff, 1979, 1982; Trihn, 1989, 1991; Turner, 1982, 1987) where autoethnography is a radical reaction to realist agendas in ethnography and sociology "which privilege," writes Norman K. Denzin (1992), "the researcher over the subject, method over subject matter, and maintain commitments to outmoded conceptions of validity, truth, and generalizability" (p. 20). Autoethnographic writing resists Grand Theorizing and the facade of objective research that decontextualizes subjects and searches for singular truth (Crawford, 1996; Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Goodall, 1991a, 1991b, 1998; Neuman, 1996; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Secklin, 1997). "Autoethnography synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography," writes Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997), "and a postmodern autobiography. [It] opens up new ways of writing about social life" (pp. 2-3).

Autoethnography is further informed by research on oral and personal narratives in performance and communication studies, situating the socio-politically inscribed body as a central site of meaning making (Alexander, 2000; Bauman, 1986; Dailey, 1998; Fine, 1984; Gingrich-Philbrook, 1998; Langellier, 1989, 1998, 1999; Langellier & Peterson, 1992; Madison, 1993; Minister, 1991; Park-Fuller, 2000; Pelias, 1999)<sup>2</sup>. Performance studies scholar Kristin Langellier's work has been foundational in the knowledge construction of personal narratives providing theoretically fecund grounding for autoethnographic performance. "Personal narrative performance gives shape to social relations, but because such relations are multiple, polysemic, complexly interconnected, and contradictory, it can do so only in unstable and destabilizing ways for narrator *and* audience . . . a story of the body told through the body which makes cultural conflict concrete" (Langellier, 1999, p. 208).

More than a decade of cultural and autobiographical studies has extensively problematized narrative representation of hegemonized voices (Anzuldua, 1990; James & Busia, 1993; Jerome & Satin, 1999; Jones, 1997; Morago & Anzuldua, 1983; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Simpson, 1996; Smith, 1993). Mary Louis Pratt (1986) argues that autoethnography originates as a discourse from the margins of dominant culture—at which academe is

central—identifying the material, political, and transformational dimensions of representational politics. Informed by recent work in autobiography, autoethnographic methods recognize the reflections and refractions of multiple selves in contexts that arguably transform the authorial “I” to an existential “we.”

The dynamic and dialectical relation of the text and body emerge as a major theme in autoethnographic praxes. In the fieldwork, writing, and performing of autoethnography, text and body are redefined, their boundaries blurring dialectically (Conquergood, 1991). The living body/subjective self of the researcher is recognized as a salient part of the research process, and sociohistorical implications of the researcher are reflected upon “to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual” (Denzin, 1997, p. xv). Ethnographer Ruth Behar (1997), working from the writings of George Devereux asserts, “*What happens within the observer* must be made known, Devereux insisted, if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood” (p. 6). The researcher, in context, interacting with others becomes the subject of research, blurring distinctions of personal and social, self and other (Conquergood, 1991; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Richardson, 1992), and reevaluating the “dialectics of self and culture” (Neuman, 1996, p. 193). “Experience, discourse, and self-understanding,” writes Trihn Mihn-ha (1991), “collide against larger cultural assumptions concerning race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, and age” (p. 157).

The autoethnographic text emerges from the researcher’s bodily standpoint as she is continually recognizing and interpreting the residue traces of culture inscribed upon her hide from interacting with others in contexts. This corporeally textual orientation rejects the notion that “lived experience can only be represented indirectly, through quotations from field notes, observations or interviews” (Denzin, 1992, p. 20). In autoethnographic methods, the researcher is the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns.

Autoethnographers argue that self-reflexive critique upon one’s positionality as researcher inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Goodall, 1998). This has certainly been the case for me in making critical, political, and personal sense of my experiences with sexual assault, grief, mental illness, and White privilege (Spry, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001). Performing autoethnography has allowed me to position myself as active agent with narrative authority over many hegemonizing dominant cultural myths that restricted my social freedom and personal development, also causing me to realize how my Whiteness and class membership can restrict the social freedom and personal development of others.

## BEING THERE:

### “Threshold”

Performing artist Carlos Nakai believes that White people have forgotten their stories.

I would say,  
it's not that we have forgotten our stories,  
but rather,  
we don't want to hear them.  
We do not believe them.  
They do not constitute . . . knowledge.  
They do not compute.

The kinds of stories Nakai refers to,  
no matter how well written, argued, and performed,  
do not  
stratify,

ratify,  
and phallosize  
the study of human experience.  
Rather, these “unbelievable” stories  
stand in multivocal contrast  
to the work of  
academic colonizers  
who still purport a realist agenda  
for direct access to Reality.

## BEING HERE:

Autoethnographic texts reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience. In interpreting the autoethnographic text, readers feel/sense the fractures in their own communicative lives, and like Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual, create efficacy and healing in their own communal lives. Thirteen years after I was sexually assaulted, profound healing began when I started to rewrite that experience as a woman with strength and agency rather than accepting the victimage discourse of sexual assault embedded in our phallogocentric language—and, thus, value—systems (Spry, 1995). This kind of transformative and efficacious potential for researcher, researched, and reader/audience is a primary goal of effective autoethnography in print and performance.



So, what is effective autoethnography? What constitutes a good autoethnography? First, as in any evaluation of any literary genre, the writing must be well crafted and, “capable of being respected by critics of literature as well as by social scientists” (Denzin, 1997, p. 200). Mediocre writing in any venue lacks the ability to transform readers and transport them into a place where they are motivated to look back upon their own personally political identity construction. Second, good autoethnography must be emotionally engaging (Behar, 1997; Ellis, 1997; Ronai, 1992), *as well as* critically self-reflexive of one’s sociopolitical interactivity. Goodall (1998) argues that “good autoethnography strives to use *relational* language and styles to create purposeful *dialogue* between the reader and the author. This dialogue proceeds through close, personal identification—and recognition of difference—of the reader’s experiences, thoughts, and emotions with those of the author” (p. 7).

Reflecting on the subjective self in context with others is the scholarly sagaciousness offered by autoethnography. Good autoethnography is not simply a confessional tale of self-renewal; it is a provocative weave of story and theory. “The tale being told,” writes Denzin (1992), “should reflect back on, be entangled in, and critique this current historical moment and its discontents” (p. 25). The researcher and text must make a persuasive argument, tell a good story, be a convincing “I-witness.” Geertz (1988) is clear on this point:

This issue, negotiating the passage from what one has been through “out there” to what one says “back here,” is not psychological in character. It is literary. It arises for anyone who adopts what one may call, in a serious pun, the I-witnessing approach to the construction of cultural descriptions. . . . [It] is to pose for yourself a distinctive sort of text-building problem: rendering your account credible through rendering your person so. . . . To become a convincing “I-witness,” one must, so it seems, first become a convincing “I.” (pp. 78-79)

Being a “convincing I” is not simply about literary self-exposure. And here I address those who rest upon the tired relativist argument that auto-anything in scholarship is about a nonevaluative, anything-goes, self-therapizing, sans theory, reason, or logic. In her book *The Vulnerable Observer* Ruth Behar (1997) addresses this posture:

Efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has been used, but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinized the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed.

Vulnerability doesn’t mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake. (pp. 13-14)



**BEING HERE:****Dialogical Performance and Performativity**

As any shaman will tell you, shapeshifting is a risky business, takes a lot of energy, and is enormously affected by the surroundings. When I performed "Threshold" at an academic conference, I felt I was shifting forms from scholar to primitive. The sometimes poetic voice of performed autoethnography can surely be heard by academics as an irrational story spoken in a misbegotten tongue. But my truth is, that I am more alive with the sagacity of knowledge, and my ability to communicate it, when I shift into these shapes and speak in these tongues. "Performance helps me see," writes Madison (1999), "It illuminates like good theory. It orders the world and lets the world loose" (p. 109).

In the next section, BEING THERE constitutes "An Eating Outing: Spectacle, Desire, and Consumption," an autoethnography focusing upon my experience with anorexia. I first performed this at a communication ethnography preconference<sup>3</sup> near Chicago in 1999.

**BEING THERE:****An Eating Outing**

In much of my early life I often felt like I was calling to myself. Speaking from subject "I" to a disembodied "you-self." Caught in the middle between Richard Schechner's (1988) not-me and not-not-me. As if I were outside my body trying to get in, homeless outside my skin.

I have often felt like I was speaking from outside of my body in my professional and personal lives. In fact, for me, academe has always been about speaking from a disembodied head. And because I often felt like I was calling out to my othered self, I never questioned the implications of a disembodiment discourse. The body in academe is rather like the headless horseman galloping wildly and uncontrollably to somewhere, driven by profane and unruly emotion, while the head—holder of the Mind—is enshrined under glass in the halls of academe.

In calling to myself through the performance of autoethnography, someone, someone from inside my body, finally, gingerly, began to call back. Embodying theory about anorexia nervosa through performance allows me to enter the uninhabitable corporeal terrain of my 16-year-old body, and to problematize the context in which the anorexia thrived. Theory helps me name the experiences interred in the body, whereas performance helps me to

reinhabit my body, immersing myself into those scary spaces—introducing me to myself—so that the semantic expression of autoethnographic practice reflects the somatic experience of the sociocultured body.

I want to enter the terrain of consumption, desire, and the denial of those carnivorous experiences within my own body. And I want to do it here with you in performance. Because it is here, “in performance,” Ann Cooper Albright (1997) writes, that “the audience is forced to deal directly with the history of that body in conjunction with the history of their own bodies” (p. 121).

### BEING HERE:

In the process of performance, the performer engages the text of another—oral or written by self or other—dialogically, meaning the performer approaches the text/other with a *commitment* to be challenged, changed, embraced, and interrogated in the performance process (Conquergood, 1985). The purpose of dialogical performance is to embody an intimate understanding of self’s engagement with another within a specific sociocultural context. In autoethnographic performance self *is* other. Dialogical engagement in performance encourages the performer to interrogate the political and ideological contexts and power relations between self and other, and self *as* other. Ronald J. Pelias (1991) writes, “The dialogic process allows performers to present to the community others for consideration. In doing so, performers do not take the place of others. Instead they are engaged in a shared conversation in which they speak, not for, but with, the community” (p. 151). The performer asks herself, “As I seek to embody this text, how does my own cultural situatedness (i.e., standpoint theory) motivate my performance choices?” Socioculturally reflexive critique is at the heart of ethical intimate dialogical performance.

In his article, “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions in the Ethnography of Performance,” Dwight Conquergood (1985) maps the moral and ethical pitfalls possible in ethnographic performance. He articulates dialogical performance as an ethical performance approach that “struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. Dialogical performance is a way of understanding the intersections of self, other, and context passionately and reflexively. It offers a critical methodology that emphasizes knowledge in the body, offering the researcher an enfolded epistemology and ontology.

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) writes, “Through the performance process, what is normally sealed up inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of social life, is drawn forth” (p. 13).

## BEING THERE:

### An Eating Outing

So, felt-sensing the corporeal terrains of anorexia.

I removed my virginity when I was 15. It was planned. I wanted to get rid of it. It wasn't a particularly pleasant experience. He was 16 and neither of us were very sure about how what went where. For me, it was an attempt to enter the body I was calling out to. I wanted her to know that this entering was evidence of her desirability. I wanted her to know that because she had denied her desire for food, that this boy-man's consumption of her was proof that she was a spectacle worthy of consumption and desire.

My mom was a strikingly beautiful woman. Rather a cross between Lucille Ball and Marilyn Monroe. She was crystal clear about the specticality of femininity. She talked of face-lifts, worked hard to maintain her tiny waist, and her sense of fashion was cultivated and impeccable. Her frustration with my pre-15-year-old chubby body came from the knowledge that personally controlling the social gaze upon one's body meant having control over the inevitable specticalization of one's body. A model of Gramsci's "organic intellectual," my mother spent much of her life intricately observing class and gender pastiche. She grew up poor in a family of 11. Her insistence on my thinness wasn't the result of some debutante-induced sensibility of maintaining social standing through my appearance. Her concern came from critical self-reflection upon her own experience of rising out of poverty, moving amongst, and becoming a member of the upper-middle class.

For my mother, being thin and attractive was not about vanity, it was about achievement, it was about looking well bred, it was about maintaining one's control over cultural surveillance. Like Carol Spitzack (1993) in her article "The Spectacle of Anorexia Nervosa," my mother could have told you that "the inhabitants of poorly presented bodies were expected to take corrective action, realigning bodily aesthetics and motility with cultural images of beauty" (p. 2). She knew that "the presentation of femininity demands evidence of surveillance, beginning around the time of puberty and extending past middle age" (p. 2). She knew and wanted me to know that judgments of my attractiveness would be based, at least in part, on my "finesse in giving pleasure to those who are placed in the position of observer," Spitzack continues, "a woman embodies the positions of spectator and spectacle simultaneously" (p. 2).

Eliminating my virginity was a way for me to gain some control over my body.

I wanted there to be a tangible reason for my pleasing others by refusing food.

Upon turning 15, I began a regimented regulation of food intake. In the morning I would have a half a piece of toast, at lunch I would eat a half a twinkie, and at dinner I would eat the vegetable, some meat, and a bite of the potatoes with nothing on them. Mom always said that it's not the potatoes, but what you put on them that are fattening. After dinner I would walk to the country club and work out hard for at least an hour. Depending on how much I had eaten that day, I would then sit in the sauna. I remember feeling the heat of the sauna burning the inside of my nose, and knowing that if I could stand that, I would probably lose another "good pound."

This workout occurred everyday along with dance classes and, yes, cheer-leading practice, another hotbed of voluntary starvation. Kathy Davis (1997) argues that "embodied theory" must engage the relationships between the "symbolic and the material, between representations of the body and embodiment as experience or social practice in concrete social, cultural and historical contexts" (p. 15). Theory and the body are always and already integrated. Voluntary starvation is a terribly concrete social practice.

### BEING HERE:

The performance of autoethnography corporeally manifests the dialogical praxis of critical theory and the performing body. Langellier's notion of performativity plaits the theoretical grounding, ethical implications, and disciplinary rigor needed for quality autoethnographic performance. Langellier (1999) argues that the performative turn in contemporary society and scholarship "responds to twin conditions of bodiless voices, for example, in ethnographic writing; and voiceless bodies who desire to resist the colonizing powers of discourse" (p. 126). Langellier draws a distinction between *performance*, "a term used to describe a certain type of particularly involved and dramatized oral narrative" (p. 127), which "implies the transgressive desire of agency and action" (p. 129), and *performativity*, which requires the performer of personal narrative to identify and critique the power relations rooted in the sociohistorical contexts of discourse that are occurring *in the act of performing* personal stories.

The social context within which the autoethnographic performance is presented adds a further critical layer to the doing and witnessing of the performance. In "Dancing Bodies and the Stories They Tell," Ann Cooper Albright (1997) argues that the face-to-face interaction of performance "is an infinitely more intense and uncomfortable experience that demands that the audience engage with their own cultural autobiographies" (p. 121). Whether performing autoethnography at an academic conference, a community gathering on social issues, or a paid theatrical gig, audience engagement and response to these performances are intensely personal, diverse, and substantial.

### BEING THERE:

In no other context is the requirement for “evidence of surveillance” and embodying cultural determinants made so manifest as in the world of dance. I began ballet at 7 years old but became serious about it around the age of 15, which is when my anorexia was peaking. Ballet and anorexia, a volatile, yet common combination. In fact, I don’t think you can have one without the other and be successful in dance. I was in the dance program at Michigan State University during my first year of college and was a member of one of their traveling repertory companies. Our ballet teacher was this tall, thin, stern and stately dancer out of New York City. She was tall and gaunt and took no crap. She was the overlord of our bodies. It was her gaze that we needed to satisfy. Maintaining the bone-jutting, taut-muscled dancer’s body was right in tune with the anorexic’s agenda. Spitzack (1993) writes, “A willingness to place oneself onstage voluntarily and to invite assessment are necessary elements in the preservation of [anorexia]” (p. 6). And who better to police our gendered performances than a thin, stark, professional dance drill sergeant—the body of the anorexic’s dream: thin, controlled, legitimate.

See, here’s how the drill went. One day—and this was typical for a company dance class—we were at the bar doing a regular ballet warm up. Absolute concentration on controlling the body is the goal. Our teacher, who I will call Ms. Frank, walks up and down the row of black leotarded and pink-legged bodies. In one hand she holds kind of a pointing staff that she would use to tap on our bodies to indicate the need for correction in alignment, turn out, or position. In her other hand she has the pad of pink slips, better known by their grisly name: “fat slips.” Our pulses would all but stop when she would bring out the fat slips.

She stopped, standing about 6 feet from the line, scribbled something on the pad, and gave it to a woman about seven bodies down the row from me. See, after you received three fat slips, you were asked to leave the class and the company. You were kicked out. Your body was analyzed and found wanting, weak, undisciplined. In ballet, one works to achieve lightness, the illusion of weightlessness, which is why I would pop at least one dexatrim every morning after dance class and no breakfast.

### BEING HERE:

This work has literally saved my life by providing me the means to claim reflexive agency in my interactions with others in contexts. In autoethnographic performance, the body is like a cultural billboard for people to read and interpret in the context of their own experience. Performing autoethnography provides a space for the emancipation of the voice and body in academic dis-

course through breaking the boundaries of stylistic form, and by reintroducing the body to the mind in the process of living research. For me, this emancipation is manifested in two ways. First, performing autoethnography can emancipate the scholarly voice from the monostylistic confines of academic discourse. The opening up of stylistic form in academic writing provides the opportunity for a diversity of content. Second, performing autoethnography provides space for the living, experiencing, and researching body to be seen and felt. It is not that our bodies haven't been in our work, rather, they have been shrouded in our research by dualistic separations of Mind and Body. We have been expected to accept the myth of the researcher as a detached head—the object of Thought, Rationality, and Reason—floating from research site to research site thinking and speaking, while its profane counterpart, the Body, lurks unseen, unruly, and uncontrollable in the shadows of the Great Halls of the Academy. The Body has become the hysterical and embarrassing relative, a “shut in” in the academy's ivory tower.

### **Emancipating the Scholarly Voice**

As a woman's feet are bound in the unnatural form of the high heel, so are her voices and the voices of “othereds” bound by the monoform of academesse. Langellier (1998) writes, “The voice needs a body which personal narrative furnishes. From social life, a complementary movement applies: the body needs a voice to resist the colonizing powers of discourse. . . . Personal narrative responds to both the wreckage and the reflexivity of postmodern times when master narratives disintegrate” (p. 207). Autoethnographic performance creates a space for the detached voice and the “profane” body to dialogue reintegrating the head and the heart into academic writing, and challenging the construction of master narratives.

### **BEING THERE:**

Dancers are experts in the theatre of gender. We learn early on, as does any great female gender actor, to be acutely sensitive to the wishes of others, that our body, and its worthiness is contingent upon external judgment. Ms. Frank, like my mom, was simply informing us of our gender performance acumen. For any lapses in training, there must be clear and swift reprimand. If one did not take corrective action of one's body after the second “slip,” then clearly, there was a flaw in her internal surveillance system.

She was lax in suppressing her desire for consumption.

She was lax in her performance of desire for other's consumption.

She was lax in meeting the challenge of femininity: to regulate her body performances according to cultural dictates.



## BEING HERE:

When doing autoethnography, my voice often comes on to the page in poetic (“nonscholarly”) form. Autoethnographic performance in print is often governed by how the words manifest themselves through voice and movement in performance. Movement, spatial shifts, and vocal and physical breaths somatically transmute the semantics of the performed word. The autoethnographic performance process turns the internally *somatic* into the externally *semantic*. My reading of embodied sociotextual pelts becomes the written semantic interpretation of my own somatic experience “at once asserting the somatic reality of experience while also foregrounding its discursive nature” (Albright, 1997, p. 120). Denzin (1997) adds, “Poetry, and the personal narrative, become tools for reflexive knowledge” (p. 212).

Translating the lived intersections of self, other, time, and space into autoethnographic performance has allowed me to integrate my personal, professional, and political voice. For me, the integration of selves in my life/work has resulted in what I can only term an *open agency*. Though I have always felt a good measure of agency in the world, it was a voice constrained by a power-over orientation, motivated by competitive ambition, fear, and insecurity. Success meant grafting the skins of patriarchy on my body by feeling powerful—“on top” and “in control”—in comparison to those I perceived as powerless. But the high heels pinched. The panty hose compressed. The power suits made dancing impossible.

Critically reflecting upon my place in time with others through autoethnographic performance research has made me feel power *with* rather than power *over* my self and others. I began to hear my own scholarly voice, where truth and reality are not fixed categories, where self-reflexive critique is sanctioned, and where heresy is viewed as liberatory. Trihn (1991) argues that a responsible, reflexive autoethnographic text “announces its own politics and evidences a political consciousness. It interrogates the realities it represents. It invokes the teller’s story in the history that is told” (p. 188). My voice feels powerful when it is engendering power with others. I am better able to engage the lived experience of myself with others. I am more comfortable in the often conflictual and unfamiliar spaces one inhabits in ethnographic research. I am more comfortable with my self as other.

The following autoethnography stems from the same project as “Threshold”—the continuing research project with Machi (Mapuche shaman in the Chilean Andes) focusing on the efficacious performative dimensions of Mapuche healing rituals. This passage generated from field notes illustrates my struggle to remain an open agent practicing power with my coresearchers. It also illustrates the necessity of critical reflection on power structures within any ethnographic research context. This text was first performed at the Petit jean Performance Festival in Arkansas in 1999.

## BEING THERE:

### "The Camera"

I requested  
and was given  
a handheld videocam from the Dean's Office  
specifically for this trip.  
I am finding the camera very invasive generally.  
It invades my participation in ritual.  
It invades my relationship with the women traveling.

Yet,  
Machi Luzclara<sup>4</sup> and Machi Quinturay  
welcome its presence  
as providing a record of the Mapuche people in a time of intense transition.

The camera is operating for me as a barrier.  
It is a "Master's Tool."  
It is a third eye with a patriarchal gaze  
that looks outward instead of in,  
seeking to observe rather than immerse.

And yet, am I not sounding like the petulant privileged professor putting her own  
personal and vocational process before the Machi who invited her here? This film is  
what will get us the half mil' PBS grant Machi Luzclara wants,  
which will get thousands of dollars to the Machi  
who live,  
most of them,  
in abject poverty,  
not giving a damn  
where they are placed on the hyphen  
by the "cultural elite."  
But still, I long to pitch this techno eye ball over the side of the mountain and SEE  
with *my* third eye how it becomes one with the gravel!

Clearly, I have yet to use the camera with the self-reflexive forte of Trihn.

## BEING HERE:

An autoethnographic voice can interrogate the politics that structure the personal, yet it must still struggle within the language that represents dominant politics. "Fears of reprisal and the lack of an experimental language" Park-Fuller (2000) writes, "can work to inhibit the sharing of transgressive experience" (p. 24). Speaking and embodying the politically transgressive through experimental linguistic forms (i.e. autoethnography, sociopoetics, performance scripts) can result in a lack of publications. Goodall (1998) con-

tinues to advocate for the multivocality of form and content in academic journals when he writes about the transgressive composition of autoethnography, "One of the most 'disturbing' characteristics of autoethnography is that its prose style or poetic is at odds with the clear scholarly preference for an impersonal, nonemotional, unrhetorically charming, idiom of representation" (p. 6). The impersonal, nonemotional, and unrhetorically charming representation of self in academia—and beyond—was something I was glad to be rid of. The ontological and epistemological knowledge that my body claimed would not be articulated in the rigid linguistic constructs and stylistic forms of the academic journal. My experience of "Being There" would simply not jibe with the scholarly writing methods of "Being Here." "Ethnography . . . involve[s] owning up to the fact that, like quantum mechanics or the Italian opera, it is a work of the imagination" (Geertz, 1988, p. 140).

Ironically, although anthropological heretics such as Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, George Marcus, and others had boldly articulated the "crisis of representation" in pre-Malinowskian ethnography, there had been little recognition of the equally hegemonizing crisis of representation in the White male proctored academic writing and publishing structures. "Like other cultural groups," writes Laurel Richardson (1992), "academics fail to recognize their practices as cultural/political choices, much less see how they are personally affected by those choices" (p. 126). These linguistic structures and publishing gatekeepers promote an erasure of the body from the process and product of research.

## BEING THERE:

Segments from "From Goldilocks to Dreadlocks: Racializing Bodies," first performed at the Performance Studies International Conference in Tempe, AZ, 2000.

### "Dreadful Beginnings"

In February of last year, my mammogram came back with some spots, some stains, some irregularities. Two of my mom's sisters died of breast cancer, and my mom died of ovarian. After 3 weeks of more and varied mammograms, Tom, Dick, and Harry decided that "my breasts were *clean*."

I trace my desire for dreadlocks to the year after my 10-year-old son was born. I had always told myself that 50, 50 years old would be the right time for dreads, an age of wisdom and sagacity, the dreads would be an earned crown of cronedom.

But the mammogram shifted something. The x-ray exposed them just below the surface of my skins.  
 Seeing that the jig was up,  
 Having been revealed by modern radiation,  
 these ancient roots,  
 these radical risomes  
 began sprouting snakish saplings  
 these shrieking snakes of Medusa  
 these killing and kissing coils of Kali  
 these wild roots of Baba Yaga  
 just began growing out out out  
 of my head  
 one day.

Their time had come.  
 And as they emerged, they evoked many comments from any peoples.  
 A most interesting theme of comments emerged from White women:  
 "Tami, aren't you afraid of offending Black people  
 by wearing dreads?" "I mean, what will they think?"  
 "Aren't you 'taking something away' from Black people  
 by growing my dreads?"  
 As if I could  
 As if I were                      in racial drag.  
 As if I were                      drag racing                      to the finished line  
 of an essentialized,              homogenized                      *Blackness.*

But what began to emerge for me  
 where essentialized, homogenized images of  
*Whiteness.*  
 And I began to see the ways  
 that I had been living much of my life  
 In White                      racial                      drag.

## BEING HERE:

### Emancipating the Body from the Shadows

When the body is erased in the process(ing) of scholarship, knowledge situated within the body is unavailable. Enfleshed knowledge is restricted by linguistic patterns of positivist dualism—mind/body, objective/subjective—that fix the body as an entity incapable of literacy. This has particular implications for women as they have been historically and culturally connected to conceptualizations of the body as an emotionally unruly and profane entity. Yet, despite decades of cogently radical critiques of positivist dualism, we still sever the body from academic scholarship. In problematizing the cultural

and historical concepts and practices of the body and literacy, Carolyn Marvin (1994) writes, "A mark of literate competence is skill in disguising or erasing the contribution of one's own body to the process of textual production and practice. A mark of literate power is the freedom to command other bodies for textual display or concealment, as the occasion warrants" (p. 129).

The shadowed body common in academic discourse is of great significance to the performative ethnographic researcher. Conquergood (1991) notes, "Ethnography's distinctive research method . . . privileges the body as a site of knowing. . . . Ethnography is an *embodied practice*; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing" (p. 180). The sociopolitics of body representation are widely articulated across disciplines. The female and/or non-White body is erased from public and political areas, thus reducing women's and/or non-White's experiences to "special interests," meaning their bodies are of marginal concern in the body politic. Moira Gatens (1997) essay, "Corporeal Representation in/and the Body Politic" cogently articulates this argument in relation to language. Gatens writes, "Women who step outside their allotted place in the body politic are frequently abused with terms like: harpy, virago, vixen, bitch, shrew; terms that make it clear that if she attempts to speak from the political body about the political body, her speech is not recognized as *human speech*" (p. 84). It is cause for hope that work like Gatens' has and continues to be published. However, when will academic discourse *reflect* the integration of the body in research rather than publishing rhetoric *about* it?

Coaxing the body from the shadows of academe and consciously integrating it into the process and production of knowledge requires that we view knowledge in the context of the body from which it is generated. I must be ready to walk the talk of my scholarship by putting my politically marked body on the lines of the printed text. This kind of embodied methodology is—and should feel—risky. Goodall's (1998) take on autoethnographic scholarship reflects this vulnerable conviction:

It should be dangerous. It should mess with your mind. It should open locks, provide pathways, offer a language capable of inspiring personal, social, and institutional liberation. I think it should help people think and behave differently, if they choose to. Writing that doesn't do that isn't very good writing.

Which is why I have such a difficult time finishing most of the essays I read in most so-called scholarly journals. (p. 5)

Whenever my work messes with my mind, I suppose that I am on to some thing, some truth among many, that others may also find useful. When my body vibrates with the gravitational pull of another body's version of reality, I know that I need to release my own gravitational hold on reality and dialogically engage this other time and space. That is not narcissism or engagement in "wannabe" participant-observation with "natives"; it is about embodying and critically evaluating the complex impulses of communica-

tion. "It is not a question of going native," states Geertz (1988), "It is a question of living a multiplex life; sailing at once in several seas" (p. 77).

The autoethnographic performance seeks to embody the polyphonic intertextuality of people in contexts. Performing autoethnography gives us what Madison (1993, 1999) might refer to as "performing theory/embodied writing." Ideologies and experiences are made manifest through performance by replacing the rigor mortis of the written with fully embodied social critique. Such flesh to flesh scholarship motivates the labor of critical self-reflexivity and invigorates the concept and process(ing) of knowledge. With all of our theorizing about the body, we seldom theorize body to body, a flesh to flesh theorizing. Madison (1999) argues for the "felt-sensing meeting between theory, writing, and performing" (p. 107). Felt-sensing is not part of the Mind over Body rational world paradigm upon which academe was founded. Felt-sensing requires vulnerability, allowing one's self to be pushed and pulled in the dialectic whirl of discursive bodies.

Representing the discursive *performing* body on the page requires an en fleshed methodology, and surely, an expansion of form in academic writing. Embodied writing must be able to reflect the corporeal and material presence of the body that generated the text in performance. Emancipating the body from its erasure in academic scholarship would, necessarily, affect stylistic form. When I performed "Ode to the Absent Phallus," dealing with being sexually assaulted, my purpose was to relocate my body as a powerful agent rather than an assaulted object. Much of that narrative agency is located in the presence of my body in performance. A print form that does not represent this materiality potentially suffocates this mode of agency. Consequently, the published version of this text is in poetic form, which seeks to reflect the critical agency of the corporeal agent, the living body in performance (Spry, 1998).

In performed autoethnography, the research artist is the existential nexus upon which the research rotates, deviates, and gyrates presenting through performance critical self-reflexive analysis of her own experiences of dissonance and discovery with others. This perspective on scholarship *requires* the researcher to access her complexity of passion and desire for living, and to articulate these *embodied* critical passions in any number of scholarly discursive forms. The embodied autoethnographic text is a story reflecting the research artist's collaboration with people, culture, and time. It is generated in the liminal spaces between experience and language, between the known and the unknown, between the somatic and semantic. The text and the body that generates it cannot be separated. Surely, they never have been. Postcolonial writing has not brought the body back, it has exposed and politicized its presence.

Like Turner's (1982, 1987) concept of flow, the polyphonic voice/body processes of cultural/identity representation activated in performance are mobile, playful, and dynamic; "Identity is more like a performance in process

than a postulate, premise, or originary principle" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 185). Flesh to flesh methodologies stand in multifigured contrast to fixed Truthseeking methods.

### **Dancing Bodies/Poetic Voices of Academic Renewal**

Enacting the embodied method of autoethnography, I have learned to believe in myself when a story moves into my body and grows stronger with critical self-reflection, even if—and especially when—it causes my body to transgress into the dance of an academic heretic. Critical analysis is a tool I learned in academe; and when turning this tool back upon it, the academy can be a space filled with passionate revelation and critical polyphonic dialogue.

Human experience is chaotic and messy, requiring a pluralism of discursive and interpretive methods that critically turn texts back upon themselves in the constant emancipation of meanings. "These texts, however, are not just subjective accounts of experience," writes Denzin (1997), "they attempt to reflexively map multiple discourses that occur in a given social space" (p. xvii). Autoethnographic performance is the convergence of the "autobiographic impulse" and the "ethnographic moment" represented through movement and language in performance. A compelling performance—like a copious ethnography—does not purport to reveal the essential representation of a text, nor should it, as Wallace Bacon (1979) reminds, reveal only the performer's agenda or skill. A fine autoethnographic performance reveals a substantive sophisticated weave of a performer's textual analysis, her contextual analysis, and her somatic acumen, thereby presenting critical self-reflexive analysis of her own experiences of dissonance and discovery with others. Autoethnographic performance can provide a space for the emancipation of the voice and body from homogenizing knowledge production and academic discourse structures, thereby articulating the intersections of peoples and culture through the inner sanctions of the always migratory identity. Reality is always and already a social construction. Autobiographical performance makes us acutely conscious of how we I-witness our own reality constructions. Interpreting culture through the self-reflections and cultural refractions of identity is a defining feature of autoethnographic performance.

Autoethnography contributes to the burgeoning methodological possibilities of representing human action. It is one tool among many designed to work in the fields, unseating the privileged scholar from the desk in the Master's House, and de-exoticizing the non-White-male-objective scholar from the realms of the academically othered. And it is a method that calls upon the body as a site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy.

I end with a passage from field notes in Chile. Though I am describing embodied liminality (Turner, 1982) experienced in the Andes working with

Chilean and Mapuche shaman, the passage has a haunting resonance with the researching body in academe:

## BEING THERE:

### December 4, 1997

We are here . . . in San Hose', Chile—50 miles south of Santiago. I am in the cabin that we will stay in the night before ascending the mountain . . . on horseback . . . 17,000 feet up . . . into the Andean mountain wilderness. I have showered, done Tai Chi, tried to ground . . .

I am literally upside down on this side of the earth  
from where I have been all of my life.

I am spinning and vibrating inside.

I am shimmering inside  
as if light is trying to break through.

I am shaking and shifting inside

as if

my shape

is about to change.

Trihn (1991) helps. "A reality is not a mere crossing from one border to another. . . . Reality involves the crossing of an indeterminate number of borderlines, one that remains multiple in its hyphenation" (p. 107).

Indeed.

My shaking  
is the liminal shifting  
betwixt and between  
hyphens,  
Shaping  
that I am  
and am not in control of.

Shifting  
into something  
that is not me  
and is not-not me.

Shaking  
at the "checkpoint."

Wondering  
and worrying  
if here—

I will  
pass  
customs.



## NOTES

1. NCA stands for the National Communication Association. It is a primary academic conference for presenting research in Communication Studies.
2. See also the special issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 20 (2000) edited by Craig Gingrich-Philbrook devoted to "The Personal and Political in Solo Performance."
3. This was a preconference to the National Communication Association Convention in Chicago, Illinois, in November of 1999.
4. Luzclara's story of emergence into shamanic work can be found in her autobiographical essay in 1984's *Ancient Patterns in Contemporary Women's Lives*, Freedom, CA: Snakepower.

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*Tami Spry is an associate professor in the Department of Speech Communication at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota. She is a performing theorist, teacher, and director in performance studies.*