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Reading Autoethnography: The Impact of Writing Through the Body

Katarina Tuinamuana

Australian Catholic University, katarina.tuinamuana@acu.edu.au

Joanne Yoo

University of Technology Sydney, joanne_hyun_yoo_@hotmail.com

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore alternative ways in which academic writing can have impact, specifically in how it can move from the clearly measured to the deeply felt. We do this by writing a creative nonfiction narrative of our experimentation with autoethnography, detailing our responses to four published autoethnographic articles. We found that reading and engaging with these papers meant that we also had to listen and reconnect to our bodies in ways that initially seemed foreign to us as academics. But we persevered, and this project strengthened our resolve to create time/space to engage writing/research that deeply moves and transforms us. Within our experience, this writing offers alternatives to the dominant techno-rationalistic certainty of academic discourses that work to artificially separate mind from body.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Creative Nonfiction, Writing as Inquiry, Embodiment, Narrative Writing

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Reading Autoethnography: The Impact of Writing Through the Body

Katarina Tuinamuana

Australian Catholic University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Joanne Yoo

University of Technology Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

In this paper, we explore alternative ways in which academic writing can have impact, specifically in how it can move from the clearly measured to the deeply felt. We do this by writing a creative nonfiction narrative of our experimentation with autoethnography, detailing our responses to four published autoethnographic articles. We found that reading and engaging with these papers meant that we also had to listen and reconnect to our bodies in ways that initially seemed foreign to us as academics. But we persevered, and this project strengthened our resolve to create time/space to engage writing/research that deeply moves and transforms us. Within our experience, this writing offers alternatives to the dominant techno-rationalistic certainty of academic discourses that work to artificially separate mind from body. Keywords: Autoethnography, Creative Nonfiction, Writing as Inquiry, Embodiment, Narrative Writing

Introduction

As university academics, we are under immense pressure to publish, and particularly to publish in “highly esteemed” scholarly journals. In Australia, this pressure to publish has become entwined with higher education funding arrangements, supporting narrow rationalistic forms of accountability and measurement (Ocean & Skourdumbis, 2015) that work to “produce outcomes according to measurable standardised performance criteria, and to change ... normative discourses from social to economic/market benefits” (Brennan & Willis, 2008, p. 299). In such a context, we have found ourselves turning to alternative/creative forms of expression to explore ways to regain a sense of agency, inspiration and relevance. We choose to embrace postmodernism’s “crisis of representation” and its notion of multiple forms of realities (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) to explore alternative writing-forms that might generate more meaningful impact (Yoo, 2017).

These alternatives are also evident in the work of other academic scholars who, for example “do autoethnography less as a way to live and relate the story of research and more as a way *into* researching and storying living” (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 19). These forms of inquiry address questions of impact by “deepening meaning, expanding awareness, and enlarging understanding” (Eisner, 1997, p. 5). Researchers new to qualitative research may also find this discussion useful as a way into exploring alternative forms of knowledge representation.

This paper represents our attempt to engage in this type of meaningful exploration of writing/research that deeply engaged our emotions and bodily senses. We chose to use a form of autoethnography that employed a creative non-fiction style of writing; it depicts our growing realisation that the sense-making process and its impact occur on a powerful, embodied level. We share how this sense-making is a visceral and sensory process as we express and experience

emotions through our bodies. The next section begins with a brief overview of our research positioning, and then in what follows we present a more creative style of writing using our reading of autoethnographic writing.

Autoethnography and Embodiment

Research that advances universal human truths or lived experiences rather than “hard facts” invites creative forms of presentation, stretching “beyond social scientific conventions and discursive practices” (Richardson, 2002, p. 414). Literary forms of representation can make inquiry more meaningful and accessible by allowing readers to relate it to their lives (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography is one such research methodology that embodies the researcher’s personal voice and the possibility of multiple forms of representation and interpretation, as it involves studying (graphy) personal experience (auto) to make sense of one’s cultural experiences (ethno). It integrates autobiography and ethnography to convey the personal research experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and focuses on making a deep personal and emotional impact through thick descriptions and evocative and aesthetic use of language (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Autoethnographic writing is sensory and emotive, connecting to embodied forms of practice. Bodies, in fact, are largely absent as mainstream academic discourses tend to revolve around the life of the mind over the body (Freedman & Holmes, 2012). Instead, representations of the body are mainly functionalist, as bodies are depicted as empty vessels, “. . . [as] a mind attached to an apparatus, the body, whose purpose was simply to transport her ideas and intelligence to the classroom” (Freedman & Holmes 2012, p. 3). This functionalist perspective reduces the body to an instrument that is automated by the mind, and “. . . without self-interest, without desire, without any ‘body’ to teach (with). . . acted upon, rather than being given the freedom and autonomy as the takers of action” (McWilliam, 1995, p. 14), with no power, will, or purpose outside of its function. The tacit and carnal information acquired by our bodily senses is thus devalued for lacking in objectivity; it is considered to be irrational and less superior to the mind’s logical reasoning.

In contrast, embodied practice acknowledges that we exist through bodies. This view is inherent to phenomenology, which depicts the body as an active entity that makes sense of the world by reaching out from its physical existence through our bodily senses (Grosz, 1994). In this view, the body becomes a vibrant site of communication, of being and of knowing, arguing that we cannot “know” apart from our bodies because we gain information through our senses. Grosz (1994) subsequently argues that, “bodies are not inert, they function interactively and productively. They act and react” (p. xi). Knowing, consequently, comes from living out an actual experience; it is therefore an “enfleshed epistemology and ontology” as we sense these “knowings” intuitively through our bodies (Sinclair, 2005, p. 89). Longhurst, Johnson and Ho (2009) also define this process of “thinking through the body,” as a way of accessing and conveying what is difficult to articulate (p. 334).

Within these understandings of embodiment, we had both become interested in writing as a form of inquiry and were keen to explore what powers autoethnographic forms of research/writing might offer. We also desired to unpack the strong visceral responses that we had towards such writing, which often appeared difficult to convey through words. To begin we decided on four papers to read, and then set up a meeting to discuss the papers as a portal into alternative forms of scholarship:

1. Laurel Richardson’s *Hospice 101* (2012).
2. Arthur Bochner’s *It’s about time: Narrative and the divided self* (1997).
3. *Struggling for visibility in higher education* by Simon Warren (2016).

4. *Body and bulimia revisited: Reflections on “a secret life”* by Lisa M. Tillman (2009).

What follows is a creative nonfiction representation of our initial engagement with autoethnographic writing. This paper relates embodiment to autoethnographic writing by illustrating how evocative forms of research and writing deeply impacted us on a sensory level. We therefore examine, “What it mean[s] to live the research process” (Guyotte & Sochacka, 2016, p. 4) through interweaving our lived experiences with a discussion of how these papers have impacted us on a bodily level.

Our Story: The Beginning of a Conversation on Inquiry

We meet in the staff kitchen. We close the door, seeking to separate ourselves from the daily hubbub. Settling our thoughts is rather more difficult. This is a slow process and begins with a ritual of unpacking books and papers, symbolising the emptying of noise that preoccupies us. At the table, Kat shuffles through the articles they had chosen to discuss. *Where to start*, she wonders?

We discuss the difficulties of prioritising writing and research amongst our teaching and administrative responsibilities. We are present yet we struggle for a while to immerse ourselves in the moment, separating ourselves from the outside world. Only then can we begin to speak about the stories that had set our imaginations alight.

Hospice 101: Finding One’s Narrative Tribe

“So here are the four papers,” Jo says. “But which one was your favourite?” Kat spreads the papers out on the table. “I particularly liked Laurel Richardson’s *Hospice 101*,” she says quietly. “I cried when I read her story of her sister’s death, a story that triggered memories of my father’s death.” There is silence, and Jo takes a slow sip of the hot coffee in front of her. She is surprised by Kat’s confession of this emotional response to an academic paper, not expecting the conversation to take this turn so quickly in their meeting. Kat continues:

There was something about reading *Hospice 101* that felt therapeutic. It appealed to me, connecting to my own experiences. I became strangely sad when reading about Richardson being prevented from saying goodbye to her sister by her brother-in-law. My breathing grew shallow as memories materialised from a time long gone. My body responded, I sobbed quietly in my tiny office, forgetting that the world lived on just outside my door.

Jo waits. There is nothing like a good story to trigger another. The atmosphere in the room changes as the norm of tightly controlled structures of academic talk collapses. There is no room for academic analysis in the face of sorrow; instead they enact and breathe their emotions. Kat’s eyes cloud over with grief as she speaks about her father’s death in another country, and her despair at her inability to be with him as he took his last breath, arriving only minutes late after a frantic international flight.

Jo sits back and listens. She will remember the despair and the regret in the tone of voice rather than the words spoken. She will recall the untold story that emerged within the telling of another story. She knows that it will be told in due course, but wonders: “How will it be told?” She hopes that it will be with compassion and that the narrator will finally find peace in the telling.

She watches Kat's body. Kat speaks quietly and looks distant as she draws on past memories of events that feel like they happened yesterday. She has taken the impact of her emotions through her body; she shrinks as her gestures become less animated. Her thoughts begin to slow, her emotions encompassing her.

Jo observes her own body. A mirror. Sitting still, composed, waiting. There is more to tell, and more to the grief that is being carried around in the everyday practice of living. But Kat has exhausted her ability to tell it; it can wait for another day. Jo reflects on the impact on Kat's body of her retelling of her father's death, and thinks of research that makes an "impact" by bringing the body into the foreground through tears, a racing heart, and shivers up one's spine. She recalls a line from Richardson's (2011) article that depicts feelings of horror, physical discomfort, and compassion as Richardson witnesses the active dying of her sister: "For the next eight-and-a-half-hours, James and I sit by her bedside as she twists, moans, and claws into the air, eyes glazed. Her throat rattles and her breath stops and starts. It smells acrid, necrotic" (p. 162).

Jo knows Kat has been transported back to the time of her father's death. She waits for her to emerge from this recollection and to bring her body back to the present. Watching Kat, she begins to wonder whether "impact" can be "read" through the effects on the body. She recalls Tillman's (2009) article on how her body speaks loudly through her struggles with bulimia; she thinks back to how Tillman documents her frightening weight loss as her world crumbles and her body "clos[ing] in towards its core, shedding weight and defences" (p. 103). She remembers how the author relates the physical impact of finding out about another woman in her ex-husband's life:

My eyes—my brown eyes—instantly fill with tears. The wound at my core cracks through its scab. I clutch the edge of the vanity, steadying myself for a deep, heaving sob. Liquid pours from my eyes and nose, into my mouth, and down my throat. I try to swallow but choke and cough. My stomach flips. As I spit into the sink, I realise how familiar this feels: the setting, the position of my body, the grief. The Grief. How very little effort it would take to vomit. (p. 106)

Jo wonders how she would experience such a realisation through her body. She is lost in the sensory world of the unimaginable. Silence, untimed, and then the conversation continues.

I sent *Hospice 101* to a colleague who had completed a Masters in Creative Writing, Jo says. I thought that she would have liked it because of her background, but she said it was not "academic" enough for a journal article. I was surprised, as I had enjoyed Richardson's paper immensely because of its emotional impact.

Kat nods as she listens then adds:

I loved the section where she reflects on an inane conversation about the weather as she is conversing with someone else. Holding a dual/parallel conversation, one with Shirley about the weather, and one with herself about the conversation with Shirley. I "get" that . . . that self-talk always going on in the background, dancing across the spoken conversation, peering in and pointing out the absurd, and then retreating when absurdity threatens to overwhelm the double talk. There is a vulnerability about her writing that draws me in, seeking more, seeking connection.

This reminds Jo of something she had recently read about readers who care: Ruth Behar (2009) talks about how vulnerable writing attracts vulnerable readers. Perhaps this is why we are drawn to Richardson's paper, as we traverse pathways that open up to vulnerability, and to a more deeply felt understanding of our experiences.

Pushing the Boundaries of First-Person Narrative

Kat brings the conversation back to the autoethnographies in front of them.

If we line up these articles in terms of style—from mainstream academic articles on one end to more fluid narratives at the other, I would say that Richardson's *Hospice 101* lies at the far end, where the full narratives sit.

Kat begins moving her papers across the table. She positions *Hospice 101* on the edge of the table. She shuffles the papers around some more, this time positioning Bochner's *On First-Person Narrative Scholarship* in the middle.

Bochner's article is a sophisticated exposition on the relationship between the academic self and the "ordinary" self, and the multiple—and maybe at times contradictory—worlds that we all inhabit. I really enjoyed how he was able to effortlessly merge theoretical ideas within the narrative, without detracting from his narrative. He speaks directly to us, which creates that strong connection between reader and writer. I was once told by my PhD supervisor that she had never before met someone who wrote with such clarity. And yet now I think about writing with a different type of clarity, one that is not so academically bound. Bochner's article brought some of my concerns to light. I guess I have become fearful about going outside accepted structures.

Jo acknowledges Kat's disclosure. The relentless self-questioning—no one is free from it. "Yes," she says,

I have a similar fear that my writing will not be considered legitimate if I do not conform to an academic or scholarly style. But I have consciously started to rebel. I see myself as an outsider in the academy. I mean, even my physical appearance as a young Asian woman sets me apart in an establishment dominated by older white males. When I first started out in academia, I hated how my body separated me from the majority.

Kat understands this. She is a Pacific Islander by birth, but has increasingly felt stateless, travelling and living in foreign lands for many years. Deeply interested in sociocultural practices of education, she has become increasingly curious about people and social organisations. Recently, however, her questions have become more inwardly directed, questioning her own role and positioning in the academy. She thinks of Grosz's (1994) notion of the "inscribed body," and how the body communicates power through physical markers of culture and social standing. She has a heightened consciousness of bodily markers, but is only now developing a stronger awareness of the body as a text that can be "read"; she is interested in how these "readings" can transfer across multiple settings, a reflection of the multiple worlds that she herself inhabits.

Being similarly from a minority culture, Jo understands Kat's positioning, and says:

I remember a comment that you once made about your decision to read narratives as being an important moment in your career. Are you . . . are we . . . rebelling against conventions that seek to constrain who we are and who we want to become? Perhaps this is why we are drawn to autoethnography. It breaks rules and conventions, and doesn't quite fit in—much like you and me on occasion.

Kat tosses this rather startling statement around in her head. Then she speaks from a place of deep reflection:

I've always seen myself as a writer, even when I wasn't writing. The act of reading for me is the symmetry of the act of writing. When I read, and when the words speak to me in the reading, it's like devouring the words and the impact that these words have. It's a hunger for the act of reading and the act of writing, and feeding that hunger gives me pleasure.

Silence, and then Kat speaks again.

Recently I've been feeling overwhelmed. Even though I may be skilled at scholarly writing, I've begun to feel . . . [another long pause here while she struggles to find representative words] . . . stifled and invisible. I wonder, though, whether in phrasing it in that way, it suggests that I have actually given this a lot of scholarly thought. When in fact I haven't, really. I just have twinges of doubt, and then occasional moments of despair, and attacks of sheer physical exhaustion when I ask myself how much longer I can keep up this performance. My eyes glaze over in the middle of meetings. Measure, audit, standardise, comply. My fingers stiffen on the keyboard as I write something, anything. I keep my back straight and OHS compliant as possible, but my true desire is to lounge back, feet up on the table, to read, to write, and . . . to snack on chocolate all day.

A moment of laughter, and then Kat continues: “To be silent and to be open to the terror that comes from vulnerability. Have we lost the ability to connect with ourselves? Have we lost touch with our emotions and our bodies?”

As they reflect on these articles they have begun with the body, and they take note of Lakoff and Johnson's (1999) claim that “our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially on our bodies” (p. 19). They reflect on how the body speaks and what it communicates to them. What does the urge to jump for joy or to collapse and curl into a ball reveal and speak about their academic work?

Measure, Audit, Standardise, Comply

The question of vulnerability and loss lingers as they explore autoethnography's power to impact, move, and transform. They consider Simon Warren's 2017 paper, an autoethnographic account of neoliberalism's constraining impact on academic life. Kat smiles as she remembers Warren's paper.

It was impressive. I particularly liked the way that he married autoethnography with an incisive analysis of the human cost of neoliberal effects in higher education. I am in awe of the way that he writes. Not purely narrative, and

different to the various styles of Laurel Richardson, Carolyn Ellis, or Arthur Bochner. But it still had a significant impact on me.

She is silent for a while, wondering what it was about Warren's paper that meant so much to her.

There are so many words to talk about her current work and exactly how Warren's writing has spoken to her—impacted her—but she is unsure about letting them spill from her mouth. “What,” she wonders, “is holding me back?” She reads Warren's words out loud: “The struggle for personal visibility can make us up in ways that are inimical to one's ethical sense of self, and which can contribute powerfully to an unravelling of a sense of oneself as somebody at all.”

And there it is: She is fearful, scared. She fears that if she starts to spill her thoughts, the spillage, the leakage, may never stop. And how does one mop it all back inside the body, how does one reassess identity and self and connection to the larger world? Her body visibly struggles with the thoughts racing against other thoughts—her hands find their own way to her forehead, pressing against temples, slowly massaging the unruly thoughts that carry feelings this way and that, the grinding of teeth inside a mouth that remains tightly shut.

Jo watches in silence, aware that something is happening, but not quite sure what, she herself drawing in breath, and holding her body coiled tight in anticipation of what direction the conversation might now take. She recalls the advice of Ellis to her PhD student:

Honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts—and emotional pain. . . . Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore, well, that's when the real work has only begun. (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p. 738)

Kat breathes out and rolls her shoulders back, trying to regain some control of her thoughts and words and recollecting the existential crisis that Warren writes about as he places the author persona in Kafka's character Josef K. Again, she reads aloud from Warren:

But, as with every day last week, I get up. I wash and dress. I put on the mask and perform the competent academic and adult. Inside though, I am dissolving. Each moment it is harder to maintain this fiction of calmness; of “togetherness” . . . I want to disappear (p. 130).

As she speaks, the large empty spaces of the kitchen seem to engulf their two bodies. The broader spaces of the buildings, the classrooms, the lecture halls, rise up, massive floodwaters around them. Their conversation falters as they begin to feel increasingly lost in these physical structures.

Jo observes Kat's struggle to articulate her bodily sensations. She thinks about the *body* and how phenomenologists consider the body as being the most accurate basis for knowing, arguing that we come to know and participate in the world through our bodily senses (Freedman & Holmes, 2012). She ponders the agility of bodily *knowing* and compares it to the rigidity of the logical mind, which filters, processes, and discards what it cannot make sense of. And she remembers reading somewhere that the mind can erase memories but that the body never forgets.

Reading With and Through the Body: What Now?

As the time passes, both Kat and Jo have become aware of their bodies within the spaces of the kitchen. Bodies warmed that day, building connections through autoethnographic

writing. Moods changing to something close to contentment as they find a strange peace in the acknowledgement of grief. Bodies relaxing in surrounds where such emotions are normally forbidden, and have now been expelled from their bodies, even if only temporarily. The grief over the constant busyness and the lack of spaces to write. And the connections with personal tragedies, bringing a deeper dimension to bodily effects, a dimension that could not be ignored. They understand how they come to think “with and through the body” and marvel at how perceived *bodily knowing* might become a “primary mode of being and becoming” (Green & Hopwood, 2015, p. 18).

Kat looks at her phone. More than three hours have passed since they first began talking about the four autoethnographic papers. “So what now?” she asks.

They grapple with how to add the colour of the relational/experiential to their writing, to carve out new spaces, enriching their experience of “impact” in the measured and measuring university. Why shouldn’t academic writing be pleasurable? Their bodies had experienced something outside the grey of mainstream academia, and they allowed it to happen by listening and intuiting the body’s voice. In reflecting on the morning’s work, they realise they are becoming more attuned to how their bodies might overtake the cerebral.

They chat about the ways that being present on a deeply sensory level can be an aesthetic, affective and rhizomatic process (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), so that the knowledge making process becomes, “iterative, replete with multiple openings and potential lines of flight” (Guyotte & Sochacka, 2016, p. 8). They lose their self-consciousness and get “caught up” in physical and emotional responses to the autoethnographies. They are bodies in motion as they feel, interact and become within the spaces of their reading, interpretation and meaning-making. Through their bodies they come into their emotions; they desire acuteness and wakefulness even though it opens up old wounds. They are gradually re-defining the impact of academic work by placing their emotions and bodies in the driver’s seat.

Kat is reminded of the night before, sitting at her dining table writing in fluid tones about another paper, forgetting the passing of time as words tumbled out, and then rewarding herself with a drink of hot chocolate. She thinks of how the body understands the meaningful work of the soul and celebrates it through richly rewarding the senses. She returns to the present, as she and Jo leave the kitchen and head out to lunch, their bodies once again desiring to nourish themselves and their yearning for writing that matters. Through the process of sharing embodied encounters, they have experienced a relational nature of knowing, in which the “doing of identity and difference is reciprocally performed in relation to others” (Brady, 2011, p. 323). Over mugs of hot chocolate, as they look for “other” ways and “other” voices that narrate matters of the heart, Kat reads aloud the words of Tongan Pacific Indigenous writer, Konai Helu Thaman (2003):

you say that you think
therefore you are
but thinking belongs
in the depths of the earth
we simply borrow
what we need to know

these islands the sky
the surrounding sea
the trees the birds
and all that are free
the misty rain
the surging river

pools by the blowholes
 a hidden flower
 have their own thinking

they are different frames
 of mind that cannot fit
 in a small selfish world

(Konai Helu Thaman, "Thinking")

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Author Note

Katarina Tuinamuana, PhD, is Senior Lecturer in Education Studies at the Australian Catholic University, Sydney where she teaches and researches socio-cultural practices of education, analysing the changing social and political contexts that govern educational practice. Correspondence can be addressed directly to: katarina.tuinamuana@acu.edu.au.

Joanne Yoo is Senior Lecturer at the University of Technology Sydney in Australia She has worked extensively across a wide range of subjects in the primary and secondary teacher education programs. Joanne’s research interests include developing collaborative teaching partnerships, teaching as an embodied practice, action research and arts-based research methodologies, such as narrative inquiry and autoethnography. Correspondence can also be addressed directly to: joanne_hyun_yoo@hotmail.com.

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