

Conference Proceedings

CIVAE 2021

**3rd Interdisciplinary and Virtual
Conference on Arts in Education**

July 14-15, 2021

Edited by

MUSICOGUIA

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Knowing Yourself to educate. Performative autoethnography as a self-reflexive method for research and education

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Abstract

Autoethnography has gained importance as a methodological approach within empirical research, however, self-interrogation and critical self-exploration also plays a key role in our educational practice. In this paper, the performance titled: "Pachamama: Corporealities of an Andean-peasant woman" (Koeltzsch, 2020) is discussed involving creative processes to reveal research results, and emphasizing the body as an interface between the social environment, society and scholarly work. In this case, experimentation beyond textuality is achieved through systematic introspection, which led to a visual-performative result used for a higher-education class of American History in Argentina. I argue that autoethnography makes it possible to locate the researcher's history and culture in relation to others, but it also reflects critically on other analytical categories, such as work and gender, in this case. I conclude that this approach can help to draw new lines for a dialectical self/others comprehension, without dividing roles into observer, participant, or analyzer, but also to understand the bodily performance of ourselves and others as an act of intervention, resistance, a form of criticizing, and a way of revealing agency regarding contents and performers in a subaltern situation.

Keywords: autoethnography, performance, education, body, reflexivity.

Conocerse para enseñar: La autoetnografía performativa como método autorreflexivo para la investigación y educación

Resumen

La autoetnografía ha ganado importancia como enfoque metodológico dentro de la investigación empírica, sin embargo, la autointerrogación y la autoexploración crítica también juegan un papel clave en la práctica educativa. En este trabajo discuto el ejemplo de la performance "Pachamama: Corporalidades de la mujer Andina-campesina" (Koeltzsch, 2020), lo que implicó procesos creativos para revelar los resultados de una investigación, haciendo hincapié en el cuerpo como interfaz entre el entorno social, la sociedad y el trabajo académico. La experimentación más allá de la textualidad se logra a través de la introspección sistemática, que condujo a un resultado visual-performativo utilizado en una clase de Historia de América en el nivel superior en Argentina. Argumento que la autoetnografía permite situar la historia y la cultura del investigador en relación con otros, y también da lugar a inferir y reflexionar críticamente sobre categorías analíticas como en este caso el trabajo y género. Concluyo que este enfoque puede ayudar a trazar nuevas líneas para una comprensión dialéctica self/otros, sin dividir los papeles en observador, participante o analizador, además para entender nuestra actuación corporal y de los demás como un acto de intervención, resistencia, una forma de crítica, y una manera de revelar agencia respecto de contenidos y performer en situación de subalternidad.

Palabras clave: autoetnografía, performance, educación, cuerpo, reflexividad.

Introduction

Dance practice and bodily movements are part of our daily life, which not only make us aware of our body, but are also a tool for communication and expression of our embodied experience –even for research purposes–. Teaching and researching requires understanding of our social environment, this includes comprehension of ourselves within this complex position between academy and social world. It is impossible to locate the self without considering the other, thus, autoethnographic methods are aimed “to explore the double-bind of its particular awareness and engagement with the Other” (Spry, 2016, p. 1094). As educators and researchers, conducting autoethnography means to be aware of the problematization which leads to a critical consciousness or “conscientization” (Freire, 1971), considering a reciprocal teaching and learning project to disrupt our taken-for-granted knowledge (Freire, 2002).

Likewise, and in relation to autoethnography, particular approaches, such as performance (auto) ethnography (Denzin, 2003, 2018a) and heightened performative autoethnography (Sughrua, 2016) were developed, leading to an even more critical and more reflexive view. There are multiple informative performance models. They contribute to a better understanding and an alternative articulation that strongly involve knowledge construction from and with our bodies. Through this paper, I will outline the procedure of doing performative autoethnography, both as pedagogical and artistic tool for investigation and educational purposes. This includes creative processes and the awareness of my own body from an autoethnographic perspective that becomes the interface between the social environment, society and scholarly work. The idea is to blur the lines methodologically to achieve reflexive and self-reflexive research, but also to raise awareness for pedagogical practice in order to understand the self and others.

Performative autoethnography as embodied methodological strategy

When I was invited to participate in a higher-education class of American History in Argentina to talk about *Pachamama* (mother earth) from an anthropological perspective, I decided to approach in a non-textual way as presentation of the topic. I had already done some autoethnographic research related to the analytical categories of body, gender, and work, and with the *Pachamama* performance I wanted actively relate that to the local context. I consider performance autoethnography as a tool of critical pedagogy and as a form of inquiry. In accordance with Denzin (2018b, p. 1461): “It views performance as a form of activism, as critique, as critical citizenship. It seeks a form of performative praxis that inspires and empowers persons to act their utopian impulses”. In the presented case, body and dance are the medium of expression that is also an audience-engaging means of representation (Denzin, 2003) and allows reaching a broad audience for dissemination of our scholarly work.

Regarding myself, I am a migrant; I was born in 1973 into an Eastern European peasant-proletarian family with a very early contact to agriculture in my childhood. Learning how to cultivate and touching the earth are important sensory experiences, which are human and go beyond ethnic adscriptions. Reflecting on my migration process, I migrated to Argentina 18 years ago. I always felt that my peasant heritage was a key fact to adapt quickly to a new environment, to integrate into this Argentine Andean context, and to connect with people despite the different cultural background and geographic distance. The chosen visual-performative approach allowed me to combine historical data, autoethnographic narratives, corporeal and sensorial experiences in order to reflect and make aware of female power, corporeality and femininity.

In this context, the idea is to focus on the figure of *Pachamama* in relation to bodily articulation, corporealities of peasant women and their relationship with the work of the land. The aim is to understand women starting from their power and strength, their knowledge and participation in festive environments. Thus, considering the performance as a strategy of visual articulation as well as a research and epistemological tool. In this case, the purpose is not a folkloric representation, but a corporal reflection resulting from the negotiation of time and space. I recognize the sensory capacity of social actors and researchers –considering myself as both–, focusing on the body as a methodological strategy (Conquergood, 2002). Therefore, my body is actor and agent at the same time, and it produces text and meaning through movement.

Embodying Pachamama – a powerful female figure

In order to prepare my work, first, I situated the *Pachamama* in a historical context, as she is an American divinity that has been worshipped and celebrated even before America existed, i.e., before the Spanish conquest. The *Pachamama* cult spreads across various southern Andean highland areas, promoted by the Inca conquest of the region around the 15th century, which developed the state policy of unifying cults around monotheistic figures such as that of *Pachamama* (Cruz, 2021, pp. 56-57). After the colonial period, the cult especially spread to the cities, towns and villages surrounding the southern highland that means also to the northwest of Argentina, to northern Chile and the Bolivian highland. Furthermore, I also collected historical data on peasant women in colonial times, considering their participation in feasts. In this context, women enjoyed more freedom, with an active role and positions, for example, in religious festivities, singing and getting drunk along with men (Cruz, 2013; 2020).

Additionally, I considered present-day observations, as my social environment is rural; some of my neighbors are peasants from Bolivia, and I actively participate in festivities in the villages of the Lerma Valley, Salta, Argentina, both as resident and ethnographer (Koeltzsch, 2021). People believe that *Pachamama* protects material goods, but she also rules over the spiritual universe, respecting her, that means wealth. The mother earth is provided with food, and from every bottle of wine, the first splash is for her, expecting prosperity in return. Therefore, an important basis is a balanced and reciprocal relationship with *Pachamama*.

Secondly, I organized my autoethnographical data, memories of my childhood working the land in the garden of my parents and grandparents, my corporal memory, perceptions, observations, pictures, but also memories of my maternal grandmother, a peasant woman. All the before-mentioned data and considerations supported my autoethnographic narrative.

The following step was to draft the idea of the final performance (<https://vimeo.com/521995872>) and its different components. As location, I used my home garden in Villa Lola, province of Salta, Argentina. I adapted the choreographic composition to the whole space, and started a creative process regarding dance, choreography, aesthetics, music and materiality. Once I decided the music, I adapted the scenario, which means creating dance movements, figuring out the use of space and materials as symbolic representation. For example, as accessories, I included typical ceramic objects, corn cobs, corn grains, potatoes, aromatic herbs, confetti and wine (see figure 1), until today, typical products at Andean folk festivals in the region. I would like to emphasize that my dogs spontaneously participated as 'supporting actors'.



Figure 1. Performance accessories (Koeltzsch, 2020)

Two other elements took a central role, on the one hand, the traditional incense of natural herbs, part of the ritual every year on August 1 (the *Pachamama* day) in order to cure the home and eliminate evil spirits. On the other hand, water a key element of human history, the basis of the great river cultures on the Nile, Euphrates and Yangtze rivers. In many cultures, water plays a key role in the worship of higher beings for fertility and long life. Consequently, in the performance, I not only used it to water the plants, but also to play with it. In this way capturing the combination of tranquility and movement, but also profundity, secrets, emotionality and sensuality.

Furthermore, there was the question of my corporal appearance and clothing, which I designed myself inspired by some images of Guaman Poma's "New Chronicle and Good Government" ([1615] 1993), among other ideas and materials I related to the topic. I intentionally performed barefoot in order to connect myself strongly with the earth, and to make the sensory experience for further reflections and processing of the sensorial aspects. I would like to emphasize this, as the performance is not a finished piece, it is meant to open up new questions for further research and to make students think about a variety of elements. I argue that these are important aspects of performative autoethnography, thus expanding epistemic boundaries is not a one-way process, and it includes others and the self.

Finally, and to sum up the process, introspection, historical and personal data constituted my autoethnographic narrative, which then led to the performance. The performative result itself was used as collective teaching tool provoking reactions and reflexivity. In turn, these aspects took me to new insights for further research and exploration; it motivated students reflecting on gender topics, considering the strength and power of women, but also generated their own bodily awareness.

Conclusions

The combination of ethnographic research, self-exploration and bodily awareness led to reflections on analytical categories for further research and teaching. With this approach, I recognize the memory and expressiveness of the body, but it also allows to access history in a different way. I refer to 'silent histories', which are concealed by colonial discourses, on the one hand, in the Latin American context, and on the other, in Eastern Europe where subalternity was latent during and after Cold War, but also reaches the present. I see my subaltern body as prerequisite for comprehension, at the same time; it represents a physical and symbolic document. The performance helped me to express female knowledge and power, and to understand my body and its passions, which also includes the replacement of reasoning. My body knows and reveals agency. Bodily memory and experience is valid knowledge

even if it is difficult to make understand. Perhaps this explains why I sometimes feel uncomfortable in the academic environment, and so do others with similar backgrounds. Bodily articulation is not recognized in most of the careers, because written texts or verbal discourse are still the mandatory academic outcome. However, I made good experiences in my classes asking students for diverse formats as academic production.

I would like to point out, and in accordance with the concept of Montessori education, which is well-known for its sensory focus, one aspect is sensorial learning (Montessori, 2004) as a teaching approach that stimulates the five senses; taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing in order to explore and understand the world around. Therefore, I actively encourage students to use the senses and the body to approach a topic, and then, articulate results through performative types of expression. Furthermore, the body is our first-hand means of articulation, especially in cases when people “cannot” or will not use verbal language. From a phenomenological point of view, the body is our connection to the world; for most of the social actors, it is the means for a simpler, more unprejudiced and more open language. Ultimately, with the performance I tried to generate embodied knowledge evoking sensory mood and dynamics. The creative process of conducting performative autoethnography was enriching, increased my self-confidence, and it was a motivation to search for different creative teaching methods.

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