

Review:

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**Johnny Saldaña (2005). Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre (Crossroads in Qualitative Inquiry Series; Volume 5).** Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 230 pages, ISBN 0-7591-0812-9 (Cloth), \$75.00 ISBN 0-7591-0813-7 (Paperback), \$29.95

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**Abstract:** *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* is an anthology of ethnodramatic and auto-ethnodramatic texts, comprising playscripts, performance work and creative non-fiction. There are nine exemplars illustrating monologues, monologues with dialogue and what the editor calls "ethnodramatic extensions." The editor and compiler of this collection is Johnny SALDAÑA, a Professor of Theatre at Arizona State University and also a qualitative researcher with experience of both traditional re-presentation of data as well as ethnodramatic work. His excellent introduction and the introductions to and commentaries which accompany each section are rich sources of information on the history and theoretical principles underlying ethnodrama and ethnotheatre, as well as the more functional nuts and bolts of transforming narrative data to the stage. There are numerous citations of other examples in the field and notations which provide illuminative material. The book makes a contribution to the wider field of performative social science and ethnographic studies as well as to arts-based and drama-based qualitative research. It is a welcome addition to teaching and research resources in the field. This review describes the book and looks at some of the salient issues. For example, when is ethnodrama considered an appropriate medium for representation; is there a difference between aesthetic and research validity; who "owns" the research; and, can liberties be taken with the original research participant's words when building a drama?

#### **Table of Contents**

- [1. The Performative Mode in Social Inquiry and Dramatizing Data](#)
- [2. Definitions, Descriptions, and Examples](#)
- [3. Aesthetics and Ethics: Values, Cautions and Contraindications](#)
  - [3.1 When to use ethnodrama and ethnotheatre?](#)
  - [3.2 Are there criteria for a "good" ethnodrama?](#)
  - [3.3 Is there a tension between artistic representation and research procedures?](#)
  - [3.4 Contraindications, ethical considerations, and cautions of ethnodrama](#)
- [4. Recommended Resource](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

## 1. The Performative Mode in Social Inquiry and Dramatizing Data

Finally, a solid volume describing drama-based qualitative research makes its appearance. *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* contributes to the wider field of performance studies, arts-based research and creative representation of data. SALDAÑA's edited collection is a compilation of playscripts, performance work, and "creative non-fiction." It is the fifth volume in the series of books illustrating the crossroads in qualitative research edited by Norman K. DENZIN and Yvonna S. LINCOLN. Representation in qualitative research is indeed at a crossroad, as intersections occur between styles and methods (BAGLEY & CANCIENNE, 2004), boundaries between forms become blurred (BARONE, 2002), and research moves into the "borderlands" (CONQUERGOOD, 1991, p.80) and the "edgelands" (RAPPORT, WAINWRIGHT & ELWYN, 2005). SALDAÑA's volume is a perfect example of how methodological roads can meet and blend. At a time when non-conventional paradigms are being used and poetic, creative, and arts-based qualitative research expands (JONES, 2006), this anthology crystallizes the meeting of ethnography and drama in a lucid, valuable, and interesting exposition and contributes to the larger performative social science movement (see the *FQS* Special Issue on Performative Social Science). [1]

DENZIN (1997, p.95) had prophesized that following the narrative and interpretive "turn," the performative turn would be a defining "moment" in the social science of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. He sought a "critical, postmodern, performance aesthetic" for cultural studies (DENZIN, 2001, 2003a, 2003b). No longer should ethnography and social science be voyeuristic, visual activities "gazing" at the presumed outside world; they should be involved with, committed to, and shared with research participants and a wider public. Research texts were not merely to be read in closed privileged hierarchies, but embodied, concretized and made accessible to more than an academic circle of readers. They should show, instead of tell. They should unsettle the status quo and taken for granted assumptions. The performance text makes space for multiple, multi-layered voices, experience and attitudes to be expressed. Performed texts move research into the public arena (McCALL, 2000). They give results back to the research informants or to their role representatives. They re-embody research participants' experience, and by re-telling in action, universalize and disseminate. DENZIN (1997, pp.94-95) saw the performance text as "the single, most powerful way for ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experience." [2]

DENZIN's clarion call for a performative social science was prophetic and answered by a proliferation of ways in which current research is presented and re-presented in artistic, creative and challenging ways. For example, JONES (2007) has extended the possibilities to include film scripts and dissemination through populist outlets such as YouTube and Google Video). Indeed, the turn to the performative has been taken and the road is now heavily trafficked. SALDAÑA's anthology firmly outlines the route and provides a substantial wayside inn for travelers to enter and sample just some of the work which has entered the domain. [3]

SALDAÑA has the perfect credentials to contribute to this field, coming as he does from both a theatre and qualitative research background. His expertise in both fields brings a voice of authority to this anthology. [4]

## 2. Definitions, Descriptions, and Examples

Useful to both researchers and those from the field of theatre is SALDAÑA's definition of ethnodrama and how it differs from ethnotheatre. *Ethnodrama* is the written script which consists of "*dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interviews, participant observation, field notes, journal entries, and/or print and media artifacts such as diaries, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and court proceedings*" (p.2). *Ethnotheatre* is the staged script, which uses "*the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre production to mount for an audience a live performance event of research participants' experiences and/or the researcher's interpretations of data*" (p.1). [5]

In the anthology are nine examples of ethnodramatic scripts or excerpts from scripts; three examples of monologues; three examples of monologues with dialogue; and three selections of what SALDAÑA refers to as "ethnodramatic extensions." [6]

SALDAÑA has 15 contributing collaborators including a data poem on theatre by PRENDERGAST (2001) which serves as the opening prologue to the anthology. SALDAÑA himself appears as co-adaptor-director-writer-researcher of two of the performance pieces and provides examples of dramatizing data within these (*The Brad Trilogy*, SALDAÑA & WOLCOTT, 2002; and *Maybe Someday if I'm Famous*, SALDAÑA, 1998). The exemplars range from work with prison inmates and their families, topics such as Mexican migrant workers and the exigencies of border-crossings, musings of a novice schoolteacher, marital storms, decisions facing student teachers, experiences of being a "nonheterosexual" physical education teacher, sexual assault, homeless youth, and the universal experience of being "hidden"—hiding feelings and secrets inside. [7]

SALDAÑA is a generous guide as he leads the reader through the exemplars of ethnodrama by introducing and commenting on each. He illumines with numerous research and dramatic insights. He also gives additional citations for examples of research-derived ethnodramatic work in such diverse fields as education, vocation and occupation, health, ethnic/racial identity, and racism, gender and sexual identity, homelessness, interpersonal reflections and relationships, anthropology, justice studies, and 9/11. An appendix is added which suggests models for ethnodrama drawn from drama literature and published plays. SALDAÑA devotes seven pages to tracing the historical lineage of ethnodrama. He places it in its current context from ancient Greek theatre to nonfiction documentaries, modern reality TV and theatre. He reminds the reader that theatre has been telling stories for over 2,500 years, and representing social life and the "human condition" in artistic terms (pp.4-10). [8]

The jewel in the anthology's crown is SALDAÑA's introductory text. It is here that he gives the definitions of *ethnodrama* and *ethnotheatre*; describes salient terms; points out the pitfalls and dilemmas in the field; underscores cautions, values and advantages over other forms of presentation; and firmly roots the *genre* in its historical perspective and current context. In this introduction and throughout the book, there are practice tips on how to condense dialogue from transcribed narrative texts and illustrations of how theatre art and dramatic techniques can infuse a performed text with energy, vigor, and the immediacy of the here-and-now. For the heretofore uninformed, a valuable explanation of what dramatic terms such as plot, acts, scenes, units, storyline, structure, character, and scenography mean. There are also indicators of how to use *in-vivo coding* on stage, creating composite characters fused from verbatim quotes from several informants of fieldwork, how underlying themes, intersecting attitudes and values can be highlighted and brought to life in the action medium. [9]

### **3. Aesthetics and Ethics: Values, Cautions and Contraindications**

In reading the book, I was struck by how methodological procedures and strategies in transforming data for the stage can brush up against ethical issues and accepted practices of representing data in conventional textual forms. Many questions are raised and SALDAÑA answers most of them, some more fully than others. In this section, I sketch SALDAÑA's own "take" on several of these dilemmas and questions. For example, can and should all research be translated into action modes? What research is appropriate for transposition to performance? Is there a conflict between dramatic fidelity and research validity? Does an ethnodrama have to fulfill the criteria of "good" theatre? Can one take liberties with the transcribed interview notes? Should colloquial, idiosyncratic speech and paralinguistic utterances be edited out in the text? Can one introduce a character who did not exist in the original narrative account? Are there any conflicts of interests between the various parties to dramatization of data? Whose reality, "truth," or construction is presented onstage, and for what purpose? Who "owns" the research and the dramatized ethnodrama? What are the downsides, ethical considerations and pitfalls of ethnodrama? Are there any contraindications, or does it only have advantages? [10]

#### **3.1 When to use ethnodrama and ethnotheatre?**

Early on in the book SALDAÑA poses the question of what makes ethnotheatre the "appropriate presentational mode for ethnographic research?" (p.2). He answers with another question, which is through which mode the research participant's story will be "credibly, vividly, and persuasively told for an audience?" If the answer in turn is ethnodrama, then transforming the data into drama would be recommended. There are times when the need to document research in theatrical terms "simply feels right." SALDAÑA points out that ethnotheatre is not intended as a "clever" presentational mode to replace the traditional scholarly report presented behind a podium; nor is it intended as a novel didactic device. It is one of several forms available to "present and represent a study of people and

their culture-ethnography" (p.2). Ethnodrama is as legitimate as any other form—not a "lesser-than" mode of data representation. [11]

### **3.2 Are there criteria for a "good" ethnodrama?**

SALDAÑA is adamant when he declares that ethnodrama should be aesthetically pleasing and sound. He advocates for "artistic quality" in all arts-based research. He exhorts social scientists who are transferring their data to the stage to think like artists. Better still, he recommends collaboration with a theatre professional for writing ethnodrama, and staging ethnotheatre. He is polite in referring to ethnodramas he has seen at conferences which are less than impelling: "Just as no one wants to read mediocre research, no one wants to sit through mediocre theatre" (p.31). The theatre professional in him combines with the researcher when he states his belief that the goal of theatre is to entertain ideas as well as an audience. Ethnotheatre might be entertaining, but it has also a responsibility to be informative: "aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative" (p.14). A theatre play, he reminds the reader, is life with all the boring parts taken out. As PRENDERGAST (p.xiv) in her poem on theatre which prologues the book writes:

The theatre  
Must never  
Be boring [12]

The judgment of an ethnodrama's success, both as an art form and as ethnography, rests ultimately on the reader, or, if in performed ethnotheatre, the individual audience member (SALDAÑA, p.33). [13]

### **3.3 Is there a tension between artistic representation and research procedures?**

Dramatization of issues can reveal themes in a three-dimensional way that a reading on the page cannot. Live performance also reaches audience members with an impact and immediacy that SALDAÑA states is not possible through conventional qualitative research data analysis, writing and presentation; "... the live performance (if well-produced) with live actors (if well-rehearsed) before a live audience (if well-engaged) intensifies the representation." However, does this engagement come at a cost? Might the criteria for what makes a "good" ethnodrama conflict with what makes for "good" research? Artistic quality and the procedures used to achieve this might conflict with commonly accepted procedures of validity. The assumption is that the material on which the ethnotheatre is based will have been collected with due regard to rigor and trustworthiness. SALDAÑA indicates that there is indeed a debate between what he calls "the ethnodramatist's ethical obligation to re-create an authentic representation of reality" and artistic license in interpreting reality (p.32). He introduces the concept of an *ethnodramatic validity* which is based on, "at its best," a truthful text and believable acting. [14]

In his introduction, SALDAÑA points to some of the examples in the anthology where variations of artistic license have been taken in the theatrical representations. Thus, monologues and dialogues can be pruned and compacted for dramatic impact; characters, for example, in *Scenes from 14* speak with "uhmms, breaks in speech, and extended pauses" as in the transcriptions, but the "organizational flow" of their stories were changed and tightened for dramatic unity; other examples introduce fictitious characters which were not in the original data; or use a variety of dramatic styles, genres, impressionist, or symbolic action metaphors to emphasize a theme and to portray content. SALDAÑA acknowledges that these are more "impressionist portraits," "collages," or "mobiles" than they are photographs of real life, and that one can ask whether they "work" or are simply "art for ethnography's sake?" He feels that a lot depends upon the goals of the playwright and the research participants' "affirmation" of the way in which they are represented, both on the page and the stage. This again is ethnodramatic validity. [15]

Looking to other sources referring to these issues of artistic representation and validity, one can cite MIENCZAKOWSKI and MORGAN (2001, p.221) who discourage introduction of fictional characters, dialogue or scenarios into ethnodramatic scripts which cannot be validated by informants and researchers as reasonable representations of behavior and expected outcomes for the contexts. They look to research representatives and the people who are involved in the topics dealt with in the dramas for validation of the scripts, whether composite or fictional characters are used or not. LIEBLICH (2003, 2006, p.67) wondered whether changing a real-life detail in a research-based dramatization, or adding a character to a plot, challenges ownership and truthfulness of the original story (p.67). In describing the "vicissitudes" her own research underwent in its transformation from a narrative study to a book, and then to a play, she writes that the characters in the play achieved a life of their own; they were the women she had come to know so well as a researcher and yet, *not* them at the same time. The dramatization was "artistic and real", even though the characters were replicas of their real selves (p.72). The dramatization of her research blended research with art and showed the "drama of life, rather than the story of it" (p.74). [16]

Relating to the issue of whether the editing of transcripts into scripts changes "truth," SALDAÑA claims that theatre can be even more authentic than so-called "reality" film and TV, which might consciously use distortion in its representations. Ethnodramas achieve "verisimilitude and universality" through the reconstruction of reality into monologues and dialogues (p.3). SALDANA refers to one of the pioneers of ethnodrama, MIENCZAKOWSKI (2003, p.421) who says that the ethnographic construction of texts can achieve "*vraisemblance* [old French term denoting the appearance of reality] and cultural ingress" possibly more effectively than can some traditional means of reporting research. [17]

### **3.4 Contraindications, ethical considerations, and cautions of ethnodrama**

In teaching, I also turn to MIENCZAKOWSKI and his colleagues for material on contraindications, cautions and limitations of ethnodrama, especially concerning the effect on audience members. Like many others in the field, for example, GRAY and SINDING (2002), MIENCZAKOWSKI and his health research team use informants, audience members and people involved in the topic of the ethnodrama in post-performance discussions and feedback sessions for a form of "consensual validation" of the ethnodramas and for feedback and integration (MIENCZAKOWSKI, 1996, 2001). [18]

Most times, audience response is positive and the ethnodrama experience has an informative, liberating and empowering effect (MIENCZAKOWSKI, 1995, 1996; SINDING, GRAY, GRASSAU, DAMIANAKIS, & HAMPSON, 2005). However, based on his experience, MIENCZAKOWSKI warns of the dangers of dramatizing certain topics to vulnerable audiences and gives examples of the negative effects which contradicted empowerment, including a worst-case scenario following an ethnodrama on depression which depicted a scene of suicide by hanging and was reproduced in actuality by a member of the cast. Whether this was an effect of the drama cannot be concluded, but he does suggest that suicide might be one of the topics *not* to choose for performance (MIENCZAKOWSKI, 2001; MIENCZAKOWSKI, SMITH & MORGAN, 2002). [19]

SALDAÑA himself is no stranger to the controversies which performed ethnodrama can produce (pp.35-36). His dramatic adaptation of WOLCOTT's writings as *Finding My Place: The Brad Trilogy*, from which examples in the anthology are given for scenography, raised a storm of contradictory reactions from the audience when performed at the 2001 *Advances in Qualitative Methods Conference* in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (SALDAÑA & WOLCOTT, 2002). Questions were raised, mainly about the ethics of intimacy with an informant and of power inequalities. (For a range of the opinions expressed around this controversy, see for example OCKLANDER & ÖSTLUND, 2001; SCHREIBER, RODNEY, BROWN & VARCOE, 2001; BARONE, 2002; ROTH, 2003, and STROBEL, 2005.) [20]

## **4. Recommended Resource**

I think that SALDAÑA's Anthology confirms that ethnodrama and ethnotheatre have, as SALDAÑA refers to it, a legitimate place in the field of the social sciences. It is to be recommended both to students and professionals in the field of theatre and social sciences. I found it valuable as a teaching resource when I taught my first semester in ethnodrama to graduate social work students. It broadened the insights given in the article I had hitherto relied on written by SALDAÑA (2003). I felt that it completed the circle of the set of resource material I could give to students together with the journal articles that I had found available in our library on the subject and with the vivid, descriptive progression of the development of an ethnodrama from research to performance described by GRAY and SINDING (2002), accompanied by a video of the resultant

ethnotheatre performance. GERGEN (2003) has given a lively review of this book. Some of the works within SALDAÑA's anthology are not available elsewhere in printed form. In addition, the range and variety of ethnodramatic forms given in the volume are useful. The exemplars are certainly multi-cultural; however, the claims for being an international collection are based on the fact that all but two of the cases are drawn from the United States. One of the two is from Canada, the other Australian. I look forward to seeing future collections which hold examples from work in Africa, South America, Europe and elsewhere. I should also have welcomed a subject and author index to the volume. [21]

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