

Review:

Valerie Malhotra Bentz

Arthur P. Bochner & Carolyn Ellis (Eds.) (2002). *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature and Aesthetics*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 412 Pages, ISBN Cloth, 0-7591-0128-0, ISBN Paper, 0-7591-0129-9

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Abstract: The reviewed book presents papers and commentary from a conference on auto-ethnography, held in St. Petersburg, Florida in 2000 sponsored by the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. It contains twenty-seven chapters by various authors, providing examples of a variety of approaches to connecting personal life experiences with social science ethnographic work. The collection and the conference that it describes propose creative alternatives to discussions in the social sciences.

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1. Introduction and Overview

This book is part of a series edited by BOCHER and ELLIS called "Ethnographic Alternatives," emphasizing experimental forms of qualitative writing that blur the boundaries between social sciences and humanities. *Ethnographically Speaking* consists of a collection of papers presented at the "Millenium Annual Stone Symposium" sponsored by the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. BOCHER and ELLIS both teach at the University of Southern Florida, St. Petersburg Beach. The volume is a follow-up to one published in 1996 called "Composing Ethnography" (see the review essay written by [Alfredo GAITÁN 2000](#)). [1]

The book is divided into eight sections. The first and last sections are called "before" and "after." These present brief dialogues in which the editors discuss how the conference was initiated ("before") and how it will transition into this book ("after"). The "after" section also includes a chapter by GOODALL called "Narrative Heat," in which the writer takes on the persona of a detective in a mystery novel who attended this conference. Detective GOODALL was pleased by what he discovered and felt that all were the better for having participated. [2]

Two more sections frame the book. The opening chapter is section two. The closing section has two chapters, one by Arthur FRANK who uses the metaphor

of "the ride" to describe disenchantment and the image of "story" re-enchantment. RICHARDSON writes an "interlude" chapter (the book's metaphor for critical commentary) on FRANK's metaphors. The interlude chapters in this book illustrate the way the conference affected the participants. [3]

Within this double framing are the four sections, each one containing an interlude which offers a critical summary/commentary on the section. The sections are as follows: "Culture Embodied: Performing Ethnography;" "Wounded Storytellers: Vulnerability, Identity and Narrative;" "Ethnographic Aesthetics: Artful Inquiry;" and "Between Literature and Ethnography." Critical "interludes" follow each section. [4]

2. Highlights

The conference's opening paper by Mary M. GERGEN and Kenneth J. GERGEN is entitled "Ethnographic Representation as Relationship." GERGEN and GERGEN discuss the way autoethnography releases the writer-as-ethnographer of her own life to tell her stories in any way she sees fit. GERGEN and GERGEN give examples of presentations of autoethnographies by a sex offender and his abused step-daughter, each written in a separate column. A subtext of the chapter is the effect of writing in distancing the writer from the present others in her environment. The chapter moves into a performative aspect in which the conference audience was asked to participate. The process seems to be a lot more fun than a typical presentation at an academic conference. It sets an example that should encourage more creative designs for conferences, outside the tradition of reading papers and receiving critical comments. [5]

The next section of the book concerns performing ethnographies as the embodiment of culture. The first paper is an ethnodrama by Ronald PELIAS in which a family both deals with and discusses their son's life as a drug addict. It is a story about the subtle way in which a family came to realize that their son's difficulties were related to drugs. Another chapter in this section, written by RUSHING, is about research-based theater as a way of interrogating lived experience. It reports on the use of this technique with women with metastasized breast cancer and their interactions with their families and health care professionals. The authors, like many of those in this volume, cite Norman DENZIN as one whose work has inspired them. They argue that the form of epistemology that they employ is a constructed truth, not discovered in a realist sense. This piece would have had more power if more "real" facts were presented, such as the what, who, when, where and why of these performances and some observations or data about the effects. LOCKFORD's critical interlude focuses on breaking habits and creating texts which move others to stillness, then to action. [6]

The next section of the book contains four parts and a critical interlude about wounded storytellers. The stories told include one about relationships with parents (KEISINGER) and one about university mentors as erotic relationships (RUSHING). One chapter written by DENT is about a woman who had been a

husband and father and who had recently undergone a sex change operation to become a man. [7]

This part of the book contained some sad tales which needed telling. The critical summary, by Andrew SPARKES, questions whether Autoethnography is self-indulgence. My sense is that it is not self-indulgence, because each of the storytellers speak of deep pain and have both important questions as well as learning to share. Readers are left to connect the stories to theories and contexts of their own and SPARKS suggests that social ethnographers should go farther in this direction. [8]

The last major section of the text features the blurring of ethnography and aesthetics. It consists of two panels and two interludes. The papers play with the edge between fiction and ethnography. The writers discuss issues in the fact/fiction interface. [9]

3. A Forum with Continued Challenges

The book does indeed provide a forum for exposing underlying problems of research participants, which are shared by others in the larger society. In addition to the problems mentioned above, other writers discuss problems such as being denied tenure, exploitative sexual relationships between students and mentors (in both directions), issues of the publish or perish promulgation of pointless research and unread publications, and the death of a professor who was shot by a graduate student who then committed suicide. [10]

All in all, the book opens the doors of many closed closets in academia and is to be applauded for that. Further and deeper work remains to be done to demonstrate the significance of this kind of work in the development of social research, theory and the problems of the society and culture which they address. [11]

References

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Valerie Malhotra BENTZ is Professor of Human and Organization Development at the Fielding Graduate Institute. She is the author, with Jeremy SHAPIRO, of a book which builds groundwork for the researcher in the postmodern era based on phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory and Buddhism (*Mindful Inquiry in Social Research*, Sage, 1998). She is a Certified Clinical Sociologist and is on the board of the Sociological Practice Association and is a member of the American Sociological Association and the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences. She recently received a social justice award from the Fielding Graduate Institute for her work developing action research in Mizoram, India. She is a certified body therapist and certified yoga teacher who offers workshops on deep learning and expressive writing.

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