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# **AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PEDAGOGY**

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# Introduction

In February 2021, Matt Brim of the College of Staten Island, CUNY ran a workshop on the teaching of Black queer studies in which he had participants read from John Keene's *Counternarratives*. He had us pay attention to our pauses, our stumbling, the moments in which we encountered new words, new names, and new ideas, as these moments of hesitation and error were moments of learning. This deeply affective teaching practice locates us in our bodies, the formations of our mouths, the awareness of being listened to, and listening.

Such autoethnographic teaching does not only surface what we don't know – those places where learning is possible – but also what we do know – those places where the knowledge we've gained from our lives gives us confidence or fluency. Sometimes we dismiss this knowledge as being beyond scholarship, and beyond value in the academy. Many of us have been trained that way.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that re-centers the lived experience of the researcher. It involves reflexive self-observation. As a research approach, autoethnography has been criticized for limitations around rigor in data collection and analysis. We recognize that there are limits to the use of autoethnography, but suggest that using it as an approach to teaching can encourage engagement and a sense of self-worth in the context of alienating college spaces, as well as unlock new information for our classes.

**Much of the literature on autoethnographic pedagogy focuses on how autoethnography can be used by teachers to understand and improve their own teaching. Here, we are interested in autoethnography as a way of doing teaching, where students (and teachers) are doing the self-reflexive work. We therefore define autoethnographic pedagogy as:**

**The use of instructional methods that focus on experiential learning and encourage self-awareness and self-reflection in learners, to achieve knowledge generation and sharing.**

**Because the expertise of the student is different from the expertise of the teacher, the learning outcomes that are achieved may not be those anticipated by the teacher, but this is often generative and educational for all parties. Autoethnographic pedagogy also creates a space where difficult feelings can come to the surface; it can therefore be useful to approach autoethnographic pedagogy within the framework of trauma-informed teaching (see Carello, n.d.). The space created by this kind of teaching can also provide cover for toxic behaviors that need to be managed carefully. Pedagogy that is autoethnographic more commonly creates ease in shared spaces, confidence in learners and positive engagement with resources and information.**

**The following exercises were shared during and following a Transformative Learning in the Humanities CUNY funded workshop on March 17, 2021 called Autoethnographic Pedagogy: Student Expertise and Learning in Community, facilitated by James Lowry, Nerve Macaspac and Cynthia Tobar.**

**We hope they're useful in your teaching.**

# **Autoethnographic Pedagogy**

**Subject area, discipline or topic: Community-based Archiving**

**Learning outcome: Reconsider the principle of provenance in light of unequal power relationships; Actively seek to preserve the records of overlooked communities; Go beyond a purely custodial role to fill gaps in the documentary record (Jimerson, 2009).**

**Community-based archiving acknowledges the reality of the growing disparities in the historical record that leave out the histories and experiences of the everyday struggles of working class communities, immigrants, communities of color, and activists, all of whom have too often been excluded from mainstream representations of American history. We have an unprecedented need for this type of documentation to be widely available and emphasize the importance of looking outside traditional archival practice and recognizing the value of emotional accuracy provided from unwritten accounts of the past. In doing so, we can provide a corrective action in support of justice by documenting underserved communities by co-creating with affected communities, ensuring that there is equal representation of the needs, interests, and perspectives of all.**

**This handbook serves as a step-by-step guide for organizing a Community Archiving Workshop. The goal of these workshops is to help community groups jump-start the preservation of an audiovisual collection—film, video, or audio.**

**References / links: <https://communityarchiving.org/>**

**Contributor: Cynthia Tobar, Bronx Community College, [cynthia.tobar@bcc.cuny.edu](mailto:cynthia.tobar@bcc.cuny.edu)**

**Subject area, discipline or topic: Queer Studies**

**Learning outcome: To trace how queer studies classroom knowledge makes its way into broader communities (family, neighborhood, work environment); to help students understand themselves as teachers of queer studies/queer knowledge. So this is autoethnography in the sense that the students report back on the experience of becoming a queer studies teacher and sharing queer studies expertise with community members who (like the students when they came into the class) are queer studies novices.**

**Students answer the prompt: “Who all / Where all have you taught the queer studies ideas we’ve discussed this semester?”**

**Limitations / dependencies (group size, technology needs, etc): This prompt leads students to talk about bringing queer pedagogies into privatized spaces, and that can be difficult to navigate.**

**Contributor: Matt Brim, College of Staten Island, [matt.brim@csi.cuny.edu](mailto:matt.brim@csi.cuny.edu)**

**Subject area, discipline or topic: Communications**

**Learning outcome: Use of virtual reality technologies to document lived experiences of social movements and conditions.**

**Augmented reality tutorials teaching students and everyone how to use Adobe Aero and Photopea (free version of Photoshop) to make their own virtual reality images for a forthcoming exhibition called From Pandemic to Protest: We Remember (expected to be available on the BMCC OpenLab in June 2021). Some include sound. The tutorials and a toolkit will be published on the BMCC OpenLab and CUNY Academic Commons at the end of the summer 2021.**

**Limitations / dependencies (group size, technology needs, etc): You need an iPhone 8 or iPad to do AR. Having students work on group projects ensures that there is at least one person in each group who has the necessary technology.**

**References / links: Content will be made available here when it's ready  
<https://openlab.bmcc.cuny.edu/>**

**Contributor: Jill Strauss [jstrauss@bmcc.cuny.edu](mailto:jstrauss@bmcc.cuny.edu) Borough of Manhattan Community College**

**Subject area, discipline or topic: Cultural studies / heritage studies**

**Learning outcome: 1) To understand everyday practices as shaped by culture (family, community, ethnic, national, etc) and participating in the transmission and (re)creation of culture. 2) To challenge the Western notion that memory practices that leave a written trace or artifact are superior to other memory practices, and particularly lived practices / intangible cultural heritage.**

**Foodways. Cuisine is shaped by and helps to shape cultures, from the macro level to the culture of the household, however constituted. This exercise asks students to identify a family recipe, or if one is not available, to choose a favorite recipe that they might hand down to younger family or friends. Students should ask about (or examine their own) memories associated with the preparation and consumption of the meal and try to understand the significance of the dish in the life of the household, community, group, region or nation. Does it vary from place to place? Has it changed following migration? When and why is it eaten? Students should purchase the ingredients for the dish (are ingredients hard to find? Did they have to visit speciality stores or markets?) and cook the meal (on site in class if an industrial kitchen is available, at home during virtual class, or ahead of class). Whether in person or virtually, the class could involve cooking and/or eating together. During the cooking or eating, the instructor should ask students to reflect on their participation in this cultural / memory practice. What have they learned about their own culture? Which aspects of the experience are important to them? What would they wish to communicate to others by sharing this meal or recipe? This discussion can then turn to concepts of intangible cultural heritage and the reification of written sources and artifacts in Western culture and scholarship.**

**Limitations / dependencies (group size, technology needs, etc): If money is available, it can be beneficial to provide students with a small budget for buying ingredients. In person, the class requires cooking facilities, which may have insurance implications. If the class is conducted online, some students may not have access to cooking facilities at home, especially while connected to their phone or computer. Most effective with smaller groups. If the exercise results in a communal meal, participants should be mindful of medical and cultural dietary restrictions.**

**References / links: This exercise works without preparatory reading, but there is a large literature on foodways. You could encourage students to read about the culinary traditions of their culture(s), starting here: <https://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets>. I ask my students to listen to Jessica B. Harris' podcast My Welcome Table, episode 26 on Jamaica, Queens (April 18, 2014). <https://heritageradionetwork.org/podcast/my-welcome-table-episode-26-queens/> and if they have time, to explore the podcast for episodes about places connected to them.**

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## **Subject area, discipline or topic: Spatial Ethnography**

**Learning outcome: By the end of the activity, participants will be able to a) define and demonstrate spatial ethnography as a research method in studying the city; b) plan and implement spatial ethnographic activities during fieldwork, c) prepare a digital and printed booklet with multimedia materials drawn from spatial ethnography, and d) present their spatial ethnographic findings through the form of the digital and printed booklet.**

**Spatial ethnography allows us to capture and examine the ways in which space (material, built, embodied, represented, or symbolic) and our interactions with space shape a variety of social, cultural, political and economic relationships, meanings and expressions. As a research method, spatial ethnography is grounded upon an understanding of space as constituted and constitutive of power and relations of power. Through spatial ethnography participants have the opportunity to individually and collectively examine the role of space and their interactions with space framed within the broader themes of spatial politics, spatial agency, and spatial justice.**

**This activity will focus on utilizing spatial ethnography in understanding what a post-pandemic city might look like. Specifically, participants will be given the prompt: "How might a post-pandemic city look like?" One of the aims of this activity is for the participants to examine the challenges and opportunities we face as the city prepares toward a post-pandemic future: What lessons did we learn with regard to the ways in which the city can be a safer 'home' for all, but most importantly to the most vulnerable, at-risk or underestimated communities, at a time of severe global health and economic crisis? How does a post-pandemic city look like that is different if not better than 'what used to be,' the 'normal,' 'taken-for-granted' or 'ordinary' within peoples' lives? What might a post-pandemic city look like that is also grounded upon spatial justice?**

**There will be five parts for this activity that will be completed within 4-6 weeks. The final deliverable and collective output of the participants will be a digital and print booklet titled "A New Yorker's Guide to A Post-Pandemic City". The booklet will draw its inspiration from the popular "Lonely Planet" travel guides and the radical "A People's Guide to LA" (Pulido, Barraclough, Cheng 2012).**

To accomplish this, first, participants will be provided reading and multimedia materials to introduce and discuss the topics of spatial ethnography, speculative geography, and the uneven geography of the global COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to class, race, gender and other vectors of identities, exclusions and inclusions. Second, participants will be assigned to choose a site within the city (i.e., public space, subway lines, neighborhood, bodega, etc.) for their ethnographic observation. The site may be a place they often inhabit or interact with, or a place they rarely visit. Given that the city is still under a set of restrictions for social distancing and precautions related to the global COVID-19 pandemic, participants will be provided guidelines and opportunities for individual consultations on choosing sites where they will be able to carry out the activity while feeling safe and protected. Third, after choosing a site, each participant will carry out participant (or non-participant) observation, with the overall prompt as a guide in the observation. Participants are encouraged to customize the prompt based on their chosen sites, as well as enrich the prompt through a more detailed set of follow-up questions (e.g., What might the subway rider experience look like post-pandemic?, etc.) During the ethnographic observation, each participant will capture and document their observations through a variety of photos, sounds, videos, text, sketches, or other ways. Fourth, after the ethnographic observation, each participant will draw from their respective autoethnographic reflections and prepare an entry using a first person narrative for the digital and printed booklet. Fifth, each entry will be curated and organized by the instructor based on themes of spatial justice drawn directly from the entries. The instructor will also prepare short introductions for each theme as it relates to a post-pandemic city and issues of spatial justice. Sixth, participants will work together to prepare the digital and printed booklet. Finally, participants will carry out a public-facing presentation to share their spatial ethnographic project and launch the booklet for dissemination.

**Limitations / dependencies (group size, technology needs, etc):** Funding will be helpful to offset cost of the preparation and production of the digital and printed booklet, offer participants who may need the required technology, and organize and hold the public-facing presentation.

**References / links:** I will curate a set of reading and multimedia materials on spatial ethnography, and have the participants review the "Lonely Planet" travel guide and "A People's Guide to LA".

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# Conclusion

Our students bring expertise gained from their lived experiences, cultural and class backgrounds and systems of knowledge that we are perhaps unfamiliar with. We believe this to be valuable. Yet while many disciplinary spaces in the humanities and social sciences have still to contemplate an autoethnographic turn, we are all being called to push further into a pedagogy of liberation.

We have heard la paperson, in *A Third University is Possible*, and we invite you to consider their provocation, which we are also thinking about.

*One of the tautological traps of the second world university is mistaking its personalized pedagogy of self-actualization for decolonial transformation. When people say “another university is possible,” they are more precisely saying that “a second university is possible,” and they are often imagining second world utopias, where the professor ceases to profess, where hierarchies disappear, where all personal knowledges are special, and, in other words, none are. Their assumption is that people will “naturally” produce freedom, and freedom’s doppelganger is critical consciousness. They are rarely talking about a university that rematriates land, that disciplines scholar-warriors rather than “liberating” its students, that repurposes the industrial machinery, that supports insurrectionary nationalisms as problematic antidotes to imperialist nationalism, that acts upon financial systems rather than just critiquing them, that helps in the accumulation of third world power rather than simply disavowing first world power, that is a school-to-community pipeline, not a community-to-school pipeline (2017, p.42).*

## References

Janice Carello, Trauma Informed Teaching and Learning <https://traumainformedteaching.blog/>

Jimerson, Randall C., Archives power: memory, accountability, and social justice. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009.

la paperson, *A Third University is Possible*, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p.42.



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