



Autoethnography as a Way of Being (Radiophonic)

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Abstract Autoethnography is ready to tap into the full creative possibilities of radiophonic space, to reach broader audiences, and to enter more public and popular spaces. And “true story” podcasts need more critical and diverse forms of storytelling; huge audiences are eager for experimentation. Can we ask a methodology, a form of knowledge-making such as autoethnography to be a way of living, of being in relationship to self and other? Yes. And radio adds so much pleasure and expansiveness to the mix.

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Introduction

I recently finished teaching a course called “Poetics and Politics of Nonfiction Audio Storytelling.” The final assignment for the class was an audio autoethnography, a duet for the personal and political. Students worked with and shared hidden and alive parts of themselves, and it was so powerful, so intimate, so real, so unusual for an academic space to become a space of care, for going into the unknown and risking being seen and connecting from that.

Yet a few weeks after we had a final broadcast party of their audio autoethnographies, I felt like some opportunity was missed in terms of realizing the *full* political, creative, and spiritual implications of autoethnography, of critical storytelling, of critical ethnography. I wanted to better understand how autoethnography fits into other forms of resistance and how to deepen its impact for creators and witnesses.

Community Economies, Performativity, Utterance

My politics are informed by work I have done for years in community economies research, enacting ethical spaces of exchange and relationship and seeing the narratives we enact through knowledge production as invested with power and world-making

capabilities. The performativity of language co-creates the world again and again through our concepts and the parameters of what we focus on and what we don't. And claiming this performativity is a political act, even if it feels like a leap of faith to be working in the realm of discourse, in the power of ideas, and in recognizing and supporting the still burgeoning possibilities of more ethical narratives.

What I've loved about this kind of performative politics is that my subjectivity and your subjectivity are valid realms to work with and on. Gloria Anzaldúa (1981/2015) puts it this way:

I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world, that traveling El Mundo Zurdo path is the path of a two-way movement—a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society. (p. 208)

Autoethnography and Making Selves

I am intrigued by autoethnography as a form for this kind of reconstruction of self and society, of self in relation to self and to other selves. Autoethnography uses narrative for this kind of reconstruction and reconstitution. One question that is alive for me is when does autoethnography reinscribe a separate self almost like private property and create what playwright Erik Ehn calls a narrow empathy (HowIRound, 2015)? And when and how does a story break open the self into a larger self and an expansive empathy? My community economies mentors J.K. Gibson-Graham (two women who merged their name into one pen name) pose a similar question as they enact and document ethical economies and the ways these economies transform subjectivity. They write: "Could the momentary relinquishing of established identities be prolonged so that new subjects, or 'beings-in-common,' could emerge?" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 138).

Erik Ehn, who speaks beautifully about a theater of witness, says that what enables us to go beyond a narrow empathy, a self that is private property, is strangeness (HowIRound, 2015). (I almost called my manifesto, "Strange Autoethnography.") For Ehn, strangeness comes in the form of a puppet, an other who resists control and in doing so undoes the self. As someone who works in radio and audio and loves sound, I have been asking myself how can sound serve strangeness, and specifically how can sound serve strange autoethnography? I want a whisper, two tongues at once, the articulated and the barely audible at the same time. We often say more than one thing at a time. I am this body, and I am all of us at once. I am living and alive, and I am dying, dead. I am here and there.

Radiophonic Autoethnography

The radio is a perfect vehicle for strange autoethnography. Radio (and for the purposes of this manifesto I am blurring together radio, audio, and other produced sound forms) can further the opening of the self into a larger self, what radio artist Gregory Whitehead (2009) describes as the dispersal of the self.

What I love about radio as a platform and a form for autoethnography is that it is fleeting. There is no text to run one's eyes over again, to go back or hold. This sonic form lends itself so naturally to dispersal. As listeners we step in to participate, to co-create the meaning and the narrative. Hearing voices, layers of sound, musicality, rhythm, pause, we imagine a scene, making radio the most visual of mediums. And this aural experience and creative participation brings us closer to the work than reading does. As Walter Ong, who writes about the difference between orality and literacy, notes, "Sight isolates, sound incorporates" (Ong, 1982, p. 72).

The seductive quality of radio. It gives me pleasure to be an antenna and a transmitter, a sender and receiver. A woman in a body. Radio is a disembodied form, but it is sexy. Absent body is very bodied. Can't tell you how many times I am falling in love with radio makers. Erotics of voice, the manipulation of airwaves, electronics, antibody, ghosts. Women, queer people, people of color, and people with disabilities all making radio, this realm of transmission, these resonant bodies and voices. And let's not forget radiophonic space is a militarized zone, making it especially vital and potent to reclaim.

The time is now for a stranger autoethnography, and radio can help us. Public radio and podcasting are ready for autoethnographic forms of narrative, for critical storytelling. *This American Life*, one of the most popular radio shows in the United States and beyond, has 2.2 million listeners each week, plus another 2 million podcast downloads for each episode. A few universities have launched podcasts, notably the Stanford Storytelling Project. Duke University has a new Story Media Lab. The radio storytelling world is on fire and is exciting.

Yet, these popular airwaves teeming with "true story" podcasts need more critical forms of storytelling, and huge audiences are eager for experimentation. These radio and podcast forums also need a broader spectrum of voices and forms of narrative. Autoethnography is ready to tap into the full creative possibilities of radiophonic space. Autoethnography is ready to reach broader audiences, to enter more public and popular spaces. And to do so in a way that reconstitutes us, with the help of strangeness.

Speaking and Listening

In her book *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*, Jill Stauffer (2015) talks about the double trauma that some experience of having been “abandoned by humanity” (in varying degrees, whether through torture, imprisonment, racism, internalized misogyny, etc.), “compounded by the experience of not being heard” (p. 9). As Stauffer explains, to really listen to someone on their own terms changes us. The act of listening reconstitutes us, as does the act of being listened to.

A radiophonic autoethnography is about voice. When I say the word *voice*, I often touch my body just beneath my left collar bone. Voice is bone, air, and relationship in the sense of resonance. The body is a room that contains a voice.

The future of autoethnography, this tender and generous, bodied and boney form of speaking and listening, is a way to begin repairing ethical loneliness, a method linked with other methods, in the street, in the airwaves, in the body, and with others. Can we ask a methodology, a form of knowledge-making, to be a way of living, of being in relationship to self and other? Yes. And radio adds so much pleasure and expansiveness to the mix.

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About the Author

Karen Werner is a sociologist and radio producer whose radio work is broadcast on the Australian Broadcast Corporation shows *Earshot*, *Radiotonic*, and *Soundproof* and at various sound cinema events. Karen co-produced an audio autoethnography with Leora Gansworth called “First Medicine: Stories of Water and Now” for *Rethinking Marxism’s* special 2016 issue on Marxism and spirituality. Karen teaches at Goddard College in Vermont. Her radio work can be heard at www.karenwerner.net