Autoethnography: Revealing your self from the inside and outside

Description and Goals:

Auto = self + ethno = culture + graphy = scientific study of

Sarah Wall in “An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography” helps compile some definitions of Autoethnography to explain this genre to her reader:

Autoethnographies ‘are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding’ (Sparkes, 2000, p.21). An autoethnography ‘lets you use yourself to get to culture’ (Pelias, 2003, p. 372).

In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt defines an autoethnographic text as a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts. (Bartholomae 585)

We will unpack the implications of these definition in class, but for the purposes of this assignment it is important to note that the audience for your autoethnography is not only members of the culture which you describe, but also individuals outside that culture who may or may not have a positive or accurate understanding of said culture. Your job is to teach your reader about a particular culture through both personal and empirical research.

To write an auto-ethnography is to engage in a scientific study of your self and your culture. Culture here does not have to mean ethnicity or socio-economic status or degree of knowledge of the high arts (although it could mean those things if you so choose). In our studies we will define a particular aspect, or core component, of our selves, the culture that it represents, how this core component is perceived by those in and outside of this culture, and how our identities adhere to or diverge from the perceived conventions of this culture.

The essay you write will explore what it’s like to be you – a particular aspect of you. The essay will examine through an insider’s perspective what it’s like to be “x” -- a first generation college student or a multi-racial teen in Munith, MI, or a female softball player, or an aspiring jazz musician, or a survivor of a terrible car accident, or ??? . Think about a specific, distinctive aspect of yourself and examine how this has shaped you. Not only will you look at this component and its impact on you, but you will try to draw larger conclusions through research and analysis about the culture of, for example, car accident survivors, in general. Then you can take the analysis to the next level and see how your experience may be typical or atypical or how it may vary from other people’s understandings of what it is like to be “x.”

To concretize the essay, you will frame the analysis around a specific memory/experience you had that reveals great insight into the culture to which you belong and which you are examining in your autoethnography.

The writing, research and critical thinking goals of this assignment are:

- Become aware of expectations of different audiences
- Consider and express the relationship of your own ideas to the ideas of others
- Focus on a purpose for writing that balances audience expectations with the desires of the writer
- Use writing and discussion to work through and interpret complex ideas from readings and other texts (e.g., visual, musical, verbal)
- Use writing to support interpretations of text, and understand that there are multiple interpretations of text
- Use written, visual, and/or experience-based texts as tools to develop ideas for writing
- Develop successful, flexible strategies for writing through the processes of invention, revision, and editing
- Engage in multiple modes of inquiry using text (e.g., field research, library-based inquiry, web searching)
- Locate and critically assess sources available on-line
- Incorporate significant research (as above) into writing that engages a question and/or topic and uses it as a central theme for a substantive, research-based essay
- Practice using MLA citations for documenting work
Step One: Generate & Develop Ideas

After reading the excerpt from Beverly Daniel Tatum’s “The Complexity of Identity ‘Who am I?’” Think about your own self definition. Define/state/claim your core components.

Core Components can be loosely categorized into the following:

- things you have (e.g., I am a mom – because of things I have – kids)
- things you do (e.g., I am an athlete – because I play sports often and possibly on a competitive level)
- things you believe (e.g., I am a Baptist.)
- places you’ve been/lived/spent a lot of time (e.g., I am a New Yorker.)
- physical construct (e.g., I am petite.)
- heritage/ethnicity (e.g., I am African-American.)
- social and/or cultural construct (e.g., I am a widow.)
- attitudinal (e.g., I am meticulous.)

SE1
1. List as many descriptions and definitions of your self as you can. (e.g., I am x, y, z …)
2. Go back to the ones that intrigue you and develop them a little further. Describe specific memories you have where this core component or culture was challenged, exposed, etc.
3. Freewrite a response to the following questions: What defines you? How do you describe yourself? Of the many wonderful and not-so-wonderful qualities you have, which are significant? Think broadly as well as idiosyncratically.

Step Two: Research

Assigned Readings and Discussion Quotes and Questions

- Beverly Daniel Tatum’s “The Complexity of Identity ‘Who am I?’”
- Carolyn Ellis’ “Shattered Lives: Making Sense of September 11th and its Aftermath”
- Toi Derricotte’s “At an Artists Colony”
- Lesley Paulette’s “A Choice for K’aila”

Choose three of the assigned texts to read and write questions and quotes on the form provided to help spark our class discussion. Think about these texts as examples of autoethnographies. How can these texts serve as models that you will or will not imitate for your own autoethnography?

Research

Research one of your core components: Find information from the past and present analyzing/trying to understand/describe this component. One should be a broad component and one idiosyncratic.

Gather Information from Secondary Sources

- Numbers – statistics, graphs, charts from academically reliable sources – minimum two charts or quotations using statistics
- Images – “real” or constructed images – minimum two images
- Ideas – opinions from prominent individuals (popular or academic culture) – minimum five quotations
- Prepare a Works Cited list using MLA Citations

Design Research Questions

After carefully reading and analyzing your research and after thoughtfully contemplating who you are and why you are that way, write down a minimum of 25 questions that intrigue you about these core/defining components and your research findings. These questions can be used in the interviews to gather data from your primary sources, as well as to further refine and define your lines of inquiry for writing your essay.

Primary sources

- Ideas – Interview and quote a minimum of two people who share the core component with you
- Ideas – Interview and quote a minimum of two people who do not share the core component with you
- Ideas -- Your perspective as the narrator of this story of you is the ultimate primary source

Step Three: Analyze, Synthesize & Organize

Annotated Outline

Write an annotated outline for LE1 on the template provided.
Step Four: Write

Complete Draft
In 5-7 pages, research and reveal one core component of your self. Choose a specific incident from your personal history that serves as a foundation for your story/study/analysis. When choosing your narrative voice, be sure to think carefully about the language of your culture and how it may or may not clash with the language of an oppressor or a dominant culture. Try to incorporate apt diction to reveal your insider nature, while at the same time be sure to “translate” your descriptions to the dominant culture whether willingly or begrudgingly – that will depend on the tone you choose to take on.

Because this is an autoethnography, your readers are interested not only in the personal implications of your analysis (what your research and investigations reveal about you) but also the larger societal implications of your analysis (what your research and investigations reveal about the culture you define and other people’s perceptions of said culture).

Weave throughout the essay and hit home in the conclusion responses to the following questions:
Why is that component so crucial to the definition of you? What have you learned from this internal and external exploration of your self? What was challenging about this autobiographical exploration?

Step Five: Revise

After reviewing the feedback from your peers, the feedback from me, and after thinking carefully and critically about your agendas for this essay, go back to your draft and refine it. Review the rubric provided, this assignment sheet and class notes to make sure that you are meeting the requirements of this essay. If you would like to meet with me to discuss your essay before it is due, come by during office hours or email me to set up an appointment.

Step Six: Reflect

SE2
In class, the day you turn in your LE1 packet, you will write responses to the following questions.
- What difficulties did you have when planning and writing LE1? Why?
- Describe your experience with peer review. Was it helpful? Did you get and give good feedback? Was this comparable to your previous experiences with peer review? Explain.
- Cite a beautiful, well-crafted sentence from your essay (written by you). Explain why this sentence is important and compelling.
- Do you believe that your essay achieved its purpose?
- If you had more time (or energy), how would you expand/change/enhance this essay?
- What did you learn about yourself as a writer through writing the essays and this reflection?
- Any other thoughts/comments/questions regarding this essay that you want to share?

Requirements

Final LE1 Project
The requirements of the essay are as follows:

1. 5-7 pages double-spaced, 10 or 11 point font
2. The autoethnography will be a
   - non-fiction essay,
   - creatively written,
   - about a specific incident in your personal history that serves as a platform to describe one of your core components.
3. You will define, describe and question
   - what it is to be a member of the culture you have defined,
   - how you are accurately or inaccurately perceived as a member of this culture and
   - what you think about the implications of your membership in this culture.
4. In this essay, you will include research from primary and secondary sources of the following ilk:
   - quotations and/or images from scholarly research
   - insights, quotations and/or images from personal and/or pop culture research
   - quotations from personal interviews
5. MLA citations are required throughout the essay and Works Cited page
6. Project includes in this order: Project Checklist, Grading Rubric, Peer Review Draft, Peer Review Rubrics, Final Draft, SE2 (reflection)

Good luck! Have fun! Write Well! ☺ Clare