PART 2

Dialogue in Learning Together, and Its Distress

Dynamic Ecologies of Person and Place: Dialogic Ethnographies as Public Engagement

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Abstract

In this chapter I explore the intersectional ecology (both physical and discursive) of dialogic ethnographic research and place. I suggest that agency is not located entirely within individual action, but is generated within an intertwined material/collective relationship within a lived ecology. For my theoretical framework I draw from Bourdieu's notion of habitus and place, Barad's theory of posthumanist performativity, and finally my and Norris's conception of duoethnography. I provide one illustrative example, a duoethnography (more specifically a trioethnography) of place walking around a college campus. Vonzell Agosto, Travis Marn, and Rica Ramirez conducted their trioethnography as they "place walked" around their college campus, encountering a landscape actively imbued with symbolic power. Through conversation and movement, they explored the symbolic codes mediating thought and action within their space. Their study made the invisible, visible and the symbolic, concrete. Furthermore, their study was a meaningful context for their own growth: it facilitated a reflexive change in their stance and engagement on their campus. And finally, I suggest that their study itself became a public pedagogy of resistance.

Keywords

embodied inquiry – duoethnography – multi-cultural inquiry – life history inquiry

1 Introduction

Examining relationships between humans and larger socio/cultural/political/environmental/and historical contexts, life history research has long focused, often implicitly, on ecologies of human living within a complex world. Recent examples about the examination of the interdependence of life (human and otherwise) and ecological justice include studies by Chan (2017) on land and

Indigenous postcolonialism in Canada, Bainbridge and Del Negro (2020) on human transformation in relation to ecological biodiversity, and West and Carlson (2006) on autobiography and the claiming and sustaining of space.

These contexts for life history research expand knowledge systems in relation to language, culture, and power. Being culturally constructed, they may be culturally deconstructed and then reconstructed. While obviously there is a focus on human epistemologies, new forms of life history research are beginning to not just examine the relationship between human life and ecology, but much more: they seek to explore how such inquiry may decenter and replace discourses of eco-injustice with discourses of ecological wellness.

In this chapter I discuss the intersectional ecology (both physical and discursive) of dialogic ethnographic research and place. For my theoretical framework I draw from Bourdieu's notion of habitus and place (1983), Barad's (2003) theory of posthumanist performativity, and finally my and Norris's conception of duoethnography (Norris & Sawyer, 2020; Sawyer & Norris, 2013). As part of this discussion, I provide one illustrative example, a duoethnography (more specifically a trioethnography) of place walking around a college campus.

2 Theoretical Framing

Duoethnography is a collaborative and dialogic form of autoethnography (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). Working with a research partner, duoethnographers critique and question their positionality in relation to critical issues and constructs and reconceptualize their own narrative constructions in the face of the other person. Foucault (1990) and others have theorized how individuals are socialized into discursive genealogies – scripts which direct how people live their lives. It is these scripts and inscribed discourses, running through their lives, that duoethnographers often examine.

For their inquiries, duoethnographers are guided by central tenets. These tenets include an engagement in *currere*, the examination of difference as a heuristic, and the separation of voices within the produced text. I view *currere* (Pinar, 1975, 1994, 2012; Sawyer, 2017) as life-history curriculum with which people (e.g., teachers, students) engage in an embodied deconstruction of the past to reconstruct the future through engagement in the present.

Duoethnography is not focused on concrete research questions, but rather on cultural translations created within a third space (Bhabha, 1994; Sawyer et al., 2016; Wang, 2006). It is focused on the contingent, relational, emic, interdisciplinary, critical, phenomenological, and generative movements within these spaces (Norris & Sawyer, 2015; Sawyer & Norris, 2013). Duoethnographers do

not record what was; rather, they reimagine and transform views of the past, framed by the inquiry topic. Finally, as researchers engage in duoethnography, they use language in an intentional yet playful way. They set up the page as a script from a play, with the different speakers indicated by name. The goal is to not blend the voices together into a monolithic text, but rather to emphasize difference and voice.

Bourdieu (1983) is frequently used as a theoretical frame for duoethnography. A central concept that Bourdieu explored is that of habitus. Habitus is the “socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 76), the codes embedded within situations and places (Lefebvre, 1991). Habitus creates a mutually mediating field, with the setting itself relaying social structures that guide thought and practice, and with individuals interpreting these internalized codes. Seemingly normative, the guided thoughts, motivations, and practices appear taken-for-granted and may even operate at an unconscious level.

One aspect of habitus is its symbolic power, the often taken-for-granted interpretation of codes by people within specific spaces. Within duoethnography, researchers attempt to excavate the codes related to “that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it, or even that they themselves exercise it” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164). Within Bourdieu’s theory, space becomes place by way of this mutual activation of codes and meaning structures. These structures, part of the representational space, are embedded in the history of the place (Lefebvre, 1991). In this way “social life is materially grounded and conditioned, but material conditions affect behavior in large part through the mediation of individuals, dispositions, and experiences” (Brubaker, 1985, p. 750).

Another theorist who examines space, specifically in relation to materiality, is Barad (2003). She ascribes a much greater independence and agency to material spaces. She suggests that agency is not located entirely within individual action, but is generated within the intertwined material/collective relationship. The material space is inhabited by humans, non-humans, and objects. It is not a representation of human culture or language, but rather aspects of matter, of which the human body is part. Material space and the human mind are not separate, but rather entangled in a dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship.

3 Placewalking on Campus: A Trioethnography of Person and Place

In *Biracial Place Walkers on Campus*, Vonzell Agosto, Travis Marn, and Rica Ramirez (2015) conducted a trioethnography in which they “physically and

dialogically revisited locations on the campus (primarily within a college of education) at a large, urban research university to share past and current experiences at the intersection of race, place and power" (Agosto et al., 2015, p. 113). While some of the description and analysis in their study were conducted after the campus exploration during moments of individual and collaborative reflection, much of it took place in "real time" as they walked through different buildings, offices, hallways, and classrooms on their campus. They call their approach in their trioethnography "place walking" (p. 109).

In their study, they used *currere* both in a regressive way in order to consider earlier experiences and in a progress way to reconceptualize those perceptions: Here they discussed their use of *currere*:

Currere guides our walk around the curriculum of our lives (the past, present, imagined future, and integration of all) and how we go about "laying down a path in walking". (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991, p. 236)

... [with] the questions we often confront: What inhibits or inspires our sense of belonging or isolation on campus? What can we learn in the interactions between us and the place (epistemological, social, and physical)? (p. 110)

In the above quote, they first emphasized how they were exploring the integration of self, society, and subject matter together. Their statement suggests that a critical part of this process is the transtemporal process of *currere*, with the analytical and synthetic phases related to their conceptions/movements within the past, present, and future. By using the word "interactions", they acknowledge the agency of place. They added that,

Place walking brings a literal re-visitation to sites where our past, present, and imagined futures converge through dialogue. Through place walking we were able to explore how our biracial identities are expressed in connection and disconnection from the cultural environment and consider how our sense of membership is strengthened or diminished. (p. 113)

Place walking, they immersed themselves into the material environment and described aspects of the physical space that caught their eye. Their descriptions included the thin, brightly colored walls separating small offices, the hospital-like ambience, and the lack of art. Here they described entering a classroom where Marn and Ramirez had taken classes. The classroom is empty "and the only adornment was the American flag" (p. 116). They examined how

the space became animated during class with racial and cultural meanings: "This classroom [with the flag] is significant in Travis and Rica's memory for how the topic of race has come up during courses" (p. 116). Later, they told a story about a class discussion that took place in this room:

Our professor ... always tries to get us to think about different things, and race is included. But it was so interesting because there are a couple of Hispanic students in the class and the professor is Hispanic so I don't feel like there have been a lot of racist things that have been said about them. But there is not one Black person in there. And we were talking about African American English or Black English Vernacular and they were doing a presentation that was based upon how they talked, they would say it out loud and make fun of it – sort of. They would laugh after every example like, "Ain't got no job". And they would all laugh. I looked back and said to a friend, "I wonder if we would be speaking like this and laughing after every single example about how they talk if there was a Black person in here?" She said, "Oh no, we wouldn't be". (p. 117)

As can be seen, their situated analyses were sometimes expressed as reactions to practices found in the different locations. In this classroom, with the American flag perhaps visually underscoring the classroom banter, they described how one student actually admitted to feeling safe enough in class to take a racist stance. Marn and Ramirez's comments suggest a question of the level of congruence between the discourses within the classroom and discussion and their classmates' personal narratives.

Their descriptions of enclosed spaces contrast with more open spaces as they walked around the campus. In one of these walks they encountered both an explicit and implicit (null) ecology of space. In the following passage, Agostino described a liminal awareness of how space both foreclosed some aspects of identity, while opening up others:

This sentiment surfaced as I walked with Rica and Travis through stairwells in the College of Education that I did not know existed. They showed me routes that left me asking: Where are we? I grew painfully aware there were places I had not traveled because there were few invitations for me to know the landscape more thoroughly and therefore few opportunities to develop a deep sense of belonging. In conversation, Rica reminded me of the adage in Spanish, *mi casa es su casa*. Although I knew this phrase well from childhood it seemed to be archaic when it came up in our conversation. It helped me to pin down the hidden curriculum,

the cultural norms of the institution that conflicted with what I believe learning environments should provide: a welcoming climate characterized by invitations, tours, and hospitality. (p. 124)

As seen in the above quotes, space communicated diverse cultural messages to the researchers. These messages were communicated on institutional, classroom, group, and individual levels. At times these levels appear to reinforce and possibly even to amplify each other; at other times the discursive intersections clashed, as counter narratives hit more institutional and dominate ones.

Part of the actual (material) structure of the paper itself presented a dialogue of contrasting spaces. As part of this spatial dialogue, they entered and discussed their own offices (and included photos):

3.1 *Agosto's Office*

Of all the places to which they walked, her office was the place they spent the least amount of time and spoke in the quietest of voices.

Scene Direction: As they exited the office, the door nicked the lavender wind chime hanging from the ceiling. The chimes remind Dr. Agosto to seek evenness of temperament, or equanimity. They also work as an alarm to alert her/others that someone has entered or exited the office.

Agosto: So I worried about doing even this walk today because I feel like even talking with my door open now with people around they can hear. I don't know why I feel kind of protective. And maybe I don't feel really trustful of my colleagues.

Rica: Would you like to close the door?

Agosto: No we can walk out of here.

3.2 *Marn's Office*

Scene Description: A newspaper clipping is taped to the wall in Travis' office between two bookcases. It reads, "What they didn't tell you in graduate school".

Agosto: [It is] hidden out of the way.

Travis: So no one sees it. To that's the extent of my decorating. I have students coming in and most of them are white female. The students don't usually

- spend longer than two minutes in here. I don't have any personal relationships or connections with them. It's a functional relationship. The walls are for the most part undecorated. [...]
- My office has two pieces of academic art. I share an office and worry about [how] others might react. What would I say?
- Agosto:** You would say: What is it that about this that bothers you – [what do] you want to talk about? [Laughter]
- Travis:** [Laughter]. Yes, but I depend on these people. I only exist here with the support of as many people as possible.
- Agosto:** I think that is true for many of us. We [faculty] have a contract but we serve at their leisure, until we get tenure. But even then there are other ways to push us out – withholding support. (p. 122)

3.3 *Ramirez's Office*

Interestingly, they provided little verbal description of Ramirez's office but did include a photo. Examining this photo I found it compelling that they shifted (perhaps unintentionally) from verbal to visual representation, allowing me to give my own analysis. The photo shows a cluttered space. No windows appear on the three visible walls and the office furniture displays a stylistic hodge-podge. Full boxes are stacked around the space, suggesting a storeroom office. No decorations appear on the walls. The room is devoid of individual personality, communicating a message of institutional, secondhand space.

Their discussion of their offices suggested that the larger campus discourses frame meanings within their own spaces. The drab institutional nature of the offices became a dominant narrative, filtering their own individual and collective narratives. The dominant narrative, perhaps acting as a form of institutional bullying, engendered reactions of apprehension and powerlessness (the institutional power expressed in processes related to faculty tenure, student funding, and student assistantships/teaching positions) within the trioethnographers.

The structure of contrasting spaces within their paper also promoted a form of praxis within the study. This approach may be found in their exploration of the progressive stage of currere. They encountered one of these spaces serendipitously. Walking through their campus they found themselves looking into the open door of an inviting and culturally inclusive office. The occupant

of the office, Professor X, invited them into his office. They see a postcard of Gloria Anzaldúa on the door and decorative wall hangings covering blandly colored walls. They tell Professor X about the study and he introduces himself and mentions that he teaches courses about race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. He then makes a subtle parallel between discourses and meanings within his classes and the appearance of his office:

Professor X: I came to this career knowing that I wanted to create this kind of environment for my students and for my teaching. So it's not just for my pleasure but it also has a pedagogical point too.

Agosto: I get it. It carries over into what you do and how you teach. It's not just for show. (pp. 119–120)

This particular conversation mirrors a pedagogy of hope embodied within Professor X's office. Within this study of a dehumanizing environment, even as they identified a sense of oppression, they did so in a way that showed and even built solidarity, a reimagined narrative of hope. They stated in their conclusion: "We came to this trioethnography talking from a victim's stance but have learned from one another's stories how to talk back from a survivor's stance" (p. 125). They concluded their study on a hopeful, artful (and witty) note, using a metaphor that referenced an American television show, *The Walking Dead*, about zombies trying to survive:

... we act as place walkers searching for feeding grounds to share and nourish our cultural selves through a relationship to the campus that is symbiotic rather than parasitic. Rather than be deadened into walkers by an institutional culture and climate that breeds alienation, intolerance, and neglect of cultural difference we seek places and people that imbibe the campus with social, epistemological, and physical hybridity, intersectionality, and eclecticism. We are place walkers eating (away/our way out of) cultural starvation. (p. 125)

Remarkably, as they suggested possibilities for a more inclusive and culturally equitable future – replacing normative with inclusive discourses – they constructed these possibilities partly from places they visited during their study. Later, when they reflected on the situation, their thoughts moved them to an ideological analysis and a greater sense of hope and connectedness outside the actual space. Laying down a path in walking and research itself shows agency, altering the material world.

4 Discussion

Agosto, Marn, and Ramirez's (2015) study suggests that agency is not located entirely within individual action, but is generated within an intertwined material/collective relationship. Conducting a trioethnography as they "placed walked" around their college campus, they encountered a landscape actively imbued with symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1983). Through conversation and movement, they explored the codes mediating thought and action within their space. They observed "traditional" discourses related, for example, to patriotism, acceptable knowledge, entitlement, voice, and art. However, this symbolic and lived ecology was not closed and defined. Instead, they destabilized narrow, normative meanings related to identity through their discussions of intersectionality, subversive art, and tolerance and acceptance of difference. When Agosto used the expression "*mi casa es su casa*" as a metaphor for a new way to think about and experience their campus, they reimagined the space.

Their research illustrates the words of Barad (2003), who stated that "particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Barad, 2003, p. 827). These possibilities for acting are entangled in and partly generated by multiple tensions. The authors revealed tensions between their agency in their local, specific place and their unwilling reproduction of regulatory ideology and discourses related to race and privilege that actively stretch across time and place.

Ironically, they generated their possibilities for greater liberation within a relatively hegemonic space. A number of years ago, Massey (1984), exploring feminist geographies, suggested that the experience of oppression within settings that constrict and marginalize might ultimately produce a reimagination of those settings. Rose (1993) called this tension and conflict paradoxical, acting both to regulate but also to highlight problems. This latter action may thus provide a context for critique and imagination, releasing an awareness of new possibilities. For example, Professor X's office, holding a more inclusive message of equity for all, became an embodiment of new possibilities and ways of being in time, space, and place. Valorizing difference, Bondi and Davidson (2005) wrote,

The challenge we all face entails using the tension of our contradictory positionings to critique and undermine hegemonic space, and to reveal what lies beyond it, elsewhere. By speaking out about the complex and multiple spaces in which we live, and about the ways in which we experience space differently from each other, all of us can seek to disrupt,

rupture, and perhaps partially transform the masculinist and heterosexist status quo. (p. 25)

As they explored spaces containing normative discourses of privilege and possibility, their physical presence problematized these spaces.

In terms of the material space's agency, Agosto, Marn, and Ramirez acknowledged the active messages of place by contrasting spaces with both positive and negative meanings. They focused on the meanings and codes within Professor X's office, for example, scaffolding their newer views of self and environment. Part of this process was consistent with Bourdieu's (1983) notion of habitus in that their mediation animated and activated codes and meanings embedded within the places they explored. At the same time, consistent with Barad (2003), their inquiry and dialogue were shaped by the agency of the material places they visited.

Critically, Agosto, Marn, and Ramirez deconstructed their place-based dynamics of inequity with a goal of restorying their and the location's narratives in a more inclusive and equitable way. They decentered deeply engrained normative views that they encountered. They also surfaced and began to delineate counter-narratives – tracing and contrasting their positionality in relation to these normative structures and discourses. As Barad (2003) mentioned, "Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said" (p. 819). In this sense, their trioethnography was an exploration and reconfiguring of the discursive web they experienced in different locations. They also traced the convergences and connections of these discourses across different places on their campus (Webb et al., 2002).

In their study, they surfaced discourses that were important to the researchers but missing from the places they visited. These discourses centered on culture, ethnicity, power, and even educational equity. The null curriculum they described was, on one level, about inclusion – discourses that were evident due to their absence. On another level, it was about how place can operate in a larger and more beneficial pedagogical way. Unfortunately, as they show, in this case it did not. They were aware that the different places they visited created a larger interlocking system that failed as the pedagogical space it could have been.

The researchers' use of space also created a context for their engagement of the regressive stage of *currere* – their examination of past memories in the light of present meanings and associations. The layers of ideology they encountered on their walk told a meta-story about how they should act and see themselves. However, as they told each other their stories about their lives and experiences and as they in turn heard new stories from each other, they developed a new collective story that reframed the narrative chauvinism of their campus. In this

process they did not so much construct “counter-narratives”, as engage in a reimagining of the present – based on healthy memories that contrasted with their “real time” experiences with their physical campus.

In many ways, theirs was a ground-breaking study. Their descriptions made the invisible, visible and the symbolic, concrete. They used a methodology that helped them to surface the mediating codes in their lived environment. Second, their study was a meaningful context for their own growth: it facilitated a reflexive change in their stance and engagement on their campus. And finally, their study itself became a public pedagogy of resistance.

5 Conclusion

In the face of ecological disaster, research that claims to be neutral and value free will no longer suffice. New questions and approaches to life history inquiry are taking up the challenge of examining intertwined relationships within diverse ecological contexts. In this chapter I have tried to raise both possibilities and questions about how to examine the ecology of person and place.

As we engage in ecological life history research, we attempt to intertwine and create synergy among a number of academic fields, including environmental education, place based education, curriculum theory, and popular culture. We attempt to create a praxis-based ecological/life history research, changing its boundaries as its boundaries change us. This research has a goal of praxis, operating, in a complex way, as a form of pedagogy. Agosto, Marn, and Ramirez’s work suggests that inquiry may be situated within and interact with place: as place may hold discursive symbolic power, so too may inquiry. As their study suggests, a dialogic engagement of inquiry and place may engender a sense of praxis, a transformative pedagogy of hope.

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