What's in a Story?: Using Auto-ethnography to Advance Communication Research

Renata Ferdinand

Although auto-ethnography has been employed by scholars within the communication discipline (Ellis, 1997; Goodall, 1998; Dixon, 1998), it has not been widely accepted or recognized as a legitimate form of scholarship. Hence, this paper focuses on the benefits of using auto-ethnography to advance communication research. It includes a description of auto-ethnography, an explanation of its usage, and auto-ethnographic excerpts written by the author in hopes of increasing understanding of the method and encouraging its use.

Dr. Renata Ferdinand is an Assistant Professor of English and African World Studies at Fort Valley State University. Email: hardenr@fvsu.edu

On June 26, 2005, I "discovered America." Contrary to popular beliefs, it was not while standing in a class with one arm placed over my heart, pledging eternal allegiance to the flag of this country. Nor did I find it by the endless singing of nationalist songs—neither the "Star Spangled Banner" nor "America the Beautiful" spoke much to me. It wasn't while grilling burgers or hotdogs at 4th of July celebrations or while observing President's Day. No—it came about in a rather unusual way, not within the bosoms of American borders or boundaries, but rather halfway around the world while sitting in a plane headed for Paris, France.

I had been in the air for about six hours, having left from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on a Boeing 747. The thought of being in Paris didn't excite me much, which I found a bit troubling since it was my first time outside of the United States. Actually, Paris was a momentary stop, a divider between me and my ultimate destination: Burkina Faso, West Africa. I sat in my seat eagerly awaiting arrival at Charles de Gaulle airport. I can remember thinking, *In just a few more hours, I'll be there—in Africa.* My head spun uncontrollably and my palms were sweaty and sticky. That's why I hurriedly completed the customs form that the flight attendant handed me prior to landing in Paris. *Okay . . .*

Place of Birth: Macon, Georgia.
Address While in France: Connecting.
Phone: Connecting.
Occupation: Student.
Date: June 26, 2005.
Nationality: *What?*

What was meant by *nationality*? I mean, I knew the definition of it, but what was *I* to put? In the U.S., I'd only been allowed to write Black/African descent. Now, suddenly, I was supposed to write American. How could this term refer to me?

I was raised in a country whose constitution denied African Americans as

HUMAN BEINGS;

That considered African Americans as

PROPERTY

for more than a century;

That enacted laws guaranteeing

SECOND-CLASS CITIZENSHIP

for African Americans;

No, I wasn't an American. I was lost, sheltered somewhere between the reality of being Black and the dream of being an American. This moment made me challenge my own identity, for it is true that "to know who you are means knowing where you are (Clifford, 1989, p. 186). And it is with this same sentiment that I realized that my identity was entangled in U.S. racial politics. Toni Morrison (1992) writes, "Deep within the word 'American' is its association with race. . . . American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen" (p. 47).

I wanted to grab the flight attendant and give a good explanation for my confusion. If she had just stopped for one moment to listen, I would have told her

that I didn't feel very comfortable writing American;

That I am not seen as an American in the U.S.

That not once in my American history have I been allowed to consider American as my nationality.

That writing American now would seem out of line,

out of place,

out of default.

But, somehow I was at a loss for words. I couldn't articulate this position to the flight attendant. I couldn't say that I was American and then offer a disclaimer. This experience made me realize the grievances I have with this country.

I Pledge My Grievances

I Pledge My Grievances

To the flag

Of The United States of America

And to the Republic

Which Was Founded

On Slavery

Genocide

Murder

Racism

And Hate

For Which it Still Stands

One Nation

Despising GOD

Despicable

With Liberty and Justice for All

Who Are Not

Poor

Colored

Lesbian

Gay

Or Atheist

Who would have thought that a trip to learn about Burkinabe culture and life would cause me to examine my very own status as an American citizen in the United States? Still, it is not the journey itself that causes so much turmoil; rather, it is the ability to capture the essence of the moments through writing or creative expression. Although there were a range of options I could have used in describing this experience, from a personal memoir to a stage or musical performance, I chose to write an auto-ethnography.

What is Auto-ethnography?

What is auto-ethnography? To begin with, auto-ethnography is a way of writing that "privileges the exploration of self in response to questions that can only be answered that way, through the textual construction of, and thoughtful reflection about, my lived experiences" (Goodall, 1998, p. 3). Basically, lived experiences lie at the heart of auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnographies delve into the personal life of the researcher, thereby, summoning rich and contextualized information about various subjects. The researcher, then, is able to draw connections from his or her personal life to the lives of others or extend understanding about a particular culture or society (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Auto-ethnographies are usually expressed through alternative means of representation such as poems, or performances, and even short stories. They make use of key literary techniques, including dramatic recall, flashback and flash forward, unusual phrasings and colloquialisms, puns, allusions, and interior monologue, just to name a few. Combined, these elements of auto-ethnography help bring vitality and strength to an otherwise obscure experience by creating a plot that asks readers to live the experience with the author. Denzin and Lincoln explain it best:

> Autoethnography is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation . . . and then letting it go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives. (1997, p. 208)

I attempted this strategy in the following excerpt written shortly after my arrival in Burkina Faso, West Africa. This piece features a discussion between me and my host-brother.

It reads:

> Djibril is wearing a red Phat Farm shirt and denim jeans while I wear a plain white t-shirt and jean Capri pants.
>
> "You like Phat Farm?" I asked.
>
> "Yeah, you don't?" He inquired.
>
> "Yeah, I do. But I didn't know Phat Farm was here, in Burkina Faso," I stated.
>
> "No, it's not. I got it from Nigeria. It's not real. But it looks like it, doesn't it?" He asks.

I hesitantly replied, "Oh yeah, just like the real thing."

I felt funny saying *the real thing*. It put me in the position where I had to be an authority on Black culture. I was in the same situation that Johnson (2003) found himself in while conducting research on an all-White, atheist, gospel choir in Australia, where he was asked to determine the authenticity of gospel music. Like Johnson, my Blackness acted as cultural capital, therefore, allowing me to be an expert on Black cultural production. But, the shirt was real because he was wearing it. Plus, I didn't want to get into the business of dictating what was real or fake. Besides, I had more pressing issues on my mind, like the new family I was living with, the food, the language barrier, and the whole new culture. I had very mixed feelings about being in Burkina Faso, even about being in Africa. I didn't know this place, even though I often dreamed of being here. Everything was different. The streets were busy with people: people selling things on the side of the roads, people sitting at tables eating, people riding through on mopeds following no apparent speed limit. Mopeds! Mopeds! Mopeds everywhere! Donkeys, goats, and chickens aligned most of the un-paved streets.

This was all very surprising to me, but what was I expecting? Was I expecting the streets to be aligned with fancy boutiques and stores instead of local vendors operating from stands? Was I expecting people to be eating casually in restaurants instead of outside at tables? Was I expecting the streets to be filled with expensive cars instead of mopeds and domestic animals? I was looking at this country and judging it by Western sensibilities. Richard Wright (1954) warns me that "a Westerner must make an effort to banish the feeling that what he [sic] is observing in Africa is irrational, and, unless he [sic] is able to understand the underlying assumptions of the African's beliefs, the African will always seem a 'savage'" (p. 117). But, in this culture of difference, I was lost. This wasn't the Africa that Countee Cullen (1977) praised. This wasn't the Africa that Langston Hughes (1998) dreamed of. This wasn't the Africa that Maya Angelou (1986) wrote passionately about. This wasn't the Africa that DuBois described as:

> A beautiful land; not merely comely and pleasant, but haunted with swamp and jungle, sternly beautiful in its loveliness of terror, its depth of gloom, and fullness of color; its heaven tearing peaks, its sliver of endless sand, the might, width and breadth of its rivers, depth of its lakes, and height of its hot, blue heaven. There are myriads of living things, the voice of storm, the kiss of pestilence and pain, the old and ever new, new and incredibly ancient. (1965, p. 85)

Was this *the real thing*?

The above is a seemingly representation of my initial encounter with Burkina Faso, West Africa. It is based off the blueprint Denzin and Lincoln (1997) provided for constructing auto-ethnographic accounts. But there are some other components of auto-ethnography displayed here. It helps readers understand the culture I encountered. "It is a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Denahay, 1997, p. 9). It obscures aspects of subjectivity and cultural experience; "It interrogates the realities it represents" (Trinh, 1991, p. 188). And it is a narrative and reflective writing in my own voice. Like Ellis' in *Heartful Autoethnography* (1999), my auto-ethnography features characters and dialogue.

But let's not forget that auto-ethnographies are much more than stories, for they should also spark an emotional chord with readers, causing them to think and feel. Readers should not only read a text, they should experience it, allowing it to peruse their bodies and minds by stirring their innermost thoughts and revelations. It should bring them to a fevered pitch, an emotional climax from words put to paper. The reader should leave the text with an intimate understanding of the author's experience and the ways in which it may relate to their own lives. Devault (1997) states, "A personal account works well when it reads easily and gives the impression of direct assess to an individual reality. The author disarms (and thus wins the reader) by telling it "like it is" (p. 221). While researching for this topic, I was mesmerized by the many auto-ethnographic texts I read. I mean, I couldn't stop reading Ellis and Bochner's (1992) gripping story of their abortion experience or Ronai's (1992) episodic story of the day in the life of an erotic dancer who is simultaneously engaging in participant observation research. These stories constitute a good auto-ethnography, as Spry (2001) describes as writing that is "well crafted and capable of being respected by critics of literature as well as by social scientists and . . . emotionally engaging as well as critically self-reflexive of one's sociopolitical interactivity" (p. 713).

So far, I've explained the components of auto-ethnography. My purpose now is not to debate the authenticity of auto-ethnography, for I am a performative writer that Pelias describes as:

> not believing that argument is an opportunity to win, to impose their logic on others, to colonize. They do not believe that there should be only one house on the hill. They do not believe that they can speak without speaking themselves, without carrying their own

vested interests, their own personal histories, their own philosophical and theoretical assumptions forward. (2005, p. 419)

Yet, I would be remiss if I didn't mention some of the criticisms lodged at this method. Some question the academic integrity of auto-ethnography. They doubt the validity of auto-ethnographic accounts. They claim the texts to be filled with mere stories featuring the exploitation of the researcher involved in uninteresting social dynamics, producing documents that butcher the English language with a play on words unsuitable for any true academician. I find it interesting that even my own English textbook, *The Blair Handbook* by Fulwiler and Hayakawa , included a statement regarding personal writings. It bluntly states:

Write from a **third-person point of view**. (First person experience is considered inappropriate for conveying empirical data because, in calling attention to the writer, it distracts from the information). (2007, p. 421)

The critics persists, calling auto-ethnography obtrusive, narcissistic, self-indulgent, idiosyncratic, and the list goes on and on. And from the controversy and chaos that Corey and Nakayama's (1997) sexually explosive article produced—resulting in a panel discussion at the 1997 NCA conference—many communication scholars are hesitant to embrace this method. Goodall (1998) writes, "One of the most 'disturbing' characteristics of autoethnography is that its prose style or poetic is at odds with the clear scholarly preference for an impersonal, nonemotional, unrhetorically charming, idiom of representation" (as cited in Spry, 2001, p. 723). It is clear that auto-ethnographic texts are not based on distance, objectivity, silent authorship, or generalizable findings—the traditional criteria used in most social scientific research. But for auto-ethnography, we should take Ellis' (1997b) advice to "judge a story's validity by whether it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is authentic and lifelike, believable and possible" (p. 133).

Auto-ethnographic texts are much more than dramatic episodes, more than lines formatted to fit a particular paper size or to fit snuggly on a computer screen. They present stories coupled with theory, an individual locked in a social context, and a limited engagement with people, time, culture, and space. I agree with Ellis' (1997a) response to auto-ethnography as counting as real scholarship. She says, "What counts? My goodness, why do we talk that way"?

Why Use Auto-ethnography?

So, why use auto-ethnography? Well, I chose this method for several reasons, but ultimately, because it was the best way to investigate my research topic. I began with one single important question: *Which methodological procedure would allow me to gain a depth of knowledge about African American women while simultaneously acknowledging my own experiences?* Since I was exploring the subjective reality of African American women, then auto-ethnography was the ideal method of choice, particularly because it allowed me to focus on the intimate and personal lived experiences of a truly under-represented population, a population that is often voiceless. Through auto-ethnography, I was able to highlight voices that are sometimes rendered speechless. Devault (1997) writes, "The personal account makes excluded voices "hearable" within a dominant discourse—it is compelling in part because it reveals in vivid detail those whose presence might not be noticed if they spoke abstractly" (p. 226).

Truly, auto-ethnography is an unconventional approach, especially for an African American woman communication scholar. It has been very rare for an African American woman to use auto-ethnography to expose her hidden and truer self by means of narrative and performative writing. But "since the academy is a workplace that has historically favored white males, stories behind the statistical reality today are particularly telling" (Washington, 1997, p. 272). I also chose auto-ethnography because I felt I had a responsibility to the readers. I wanted readers to understand my position while questioning their own. I wanted readers to become a part of the research process. I wanted to "tell a story that readers could enter and feel a part of . . . . to evoke readers to feel and think about [their] life and their lives in relation to [mine] . . . to experience the experience [I am] writing about (Ellis, 1999, p. 674). I felt the need and the urgency to discuss my own experiences and take agency in knowledge production of African American communication. Communication scholar Ronald L. Jackson II (2002) expresses the importance of including African American experience in communication research, writing,

> African American intellectualism remains subordinated within the communication discipline, which institutionally refuses to acknowledge the importance of non-White ways of knowing. With that refusal comes a dismissal of African American identities, which are enveloped in African American communication research (p. 44).

Through auto-ethnography I was able to advance understanding of African American identity and communication in general while simultaneously discussing critical concepts from a

Black woman's perspective. My writing offered my viewpoints on race, gender, class, and nationality to the world. In essence, it is a bold statement of my reality, a statement only auto-ethnography would allow me to make. Spry (2001) states, "[Auto-ethnography] is one tool among many designed to work in the fields, unseating the privileged scholar from the desk in the Master's House, and de-exoticizing the non-White male objective scholar from the realms of the academically othered" (p. 727). For me, the benefit of auto-ethnography vastly out weight any disadvantages it may have.

My advocacy for auto-ethnography is not to say that other methods are not desirable. Realistically, there were other approaches I could have taken. A look at communication scholarship even shows that much of the research on or by African American women communication scholars employs the use of in-depth interviews, questionnaires, or participant observations, often culminating in statistical data (Houston, 2004; Parker, 2004; Scott, 2004; Spellers, 2003). I could have also easily engaged in an ethnography. But, ethnography wouldn't have allowed me to have such an intimate understanding of my own life and the ways in which it relates to other African American women. Plus, I was reluctant to use ethnography for reasons well explained by Crawford:

> For me, what is most problematic about fieldwork, what may make it wrong in some way, is the deliberate interference it entails. We go into the field. We place ourselves in some social setting. We may even ask the "natives" to take us in, or better yet, be invited without asking. I am skeptical about this (1996, p. 162).

After all considerations, I knew I had to use auto-ethnography. But, it was not until I had reflected about my experiences that I came to know the true thrust of auto-ethnographic research. It allowed the researcher to see him or herself anew. Ellis (1999) writes, "You come to understand yourself in deeper ways. And with understanding yourself comes understanding others. Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world" (p. 672). Auto-ethnography can show varied dimensions of a person. I found this out the hard way. Just take a look at an encounter I experienced while in Burkina Faso.

It reads:

> Upon my walk, I came upon an older woman and some children.
>
> "Madame, Madame," they yelled while rushing toward me.

"Parle Vous Anglais? [*Do you speak English*?]" I asked.

Just then they circled me. I didn't understand what was happening. I didn't speak French fluently and apparently they didn't speak English.

"Madame, Madame," they began motioning with their hands, the woman, old and frail, and the children, some with ringworms and mouth infections. Apparently, they wanted something to eat. I grabbed a can of Pringles and gave it to the woman. Just then, she turned and gave it to all the kids, leaving herself with nothing. They continued tugging at my shirt, but I didn't have anything else.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have anymore," I replied, knowing they didn't understand, and truthfully, their incomprehension of English allowed me to escape the situation.

I was silent on the bus ride home. I walked through the gates of my house, greeted the family members and continued to my room. I shut the door, turned the lights off, threw myself on my bed and cried. I fell into a deep slumber. I wanted to sleep the night away, sleep until days were filled with sunshine, where people didn't have to beg for food, where they didn't have to sleep outside on corners, where they didn't have to suffer from health abnormalities, where they didn't have to struggle to survive. But, sleeping wouldn't solve the problem, for it is a reality that "people do not choose to be poor . . .; instead, they are limited and confined by the opportunities afforded or denied them by a social and economic system" (Mantsios, 2000, p. 179). And sleeping couldn't blind me to my own socioeconomic privilege, a privilege that was built on the back of lower-class Blacks who participated in anti-racist struggles. I even hate to admit that I may have even masked my own class privilege because of the overwhelming burdens of race in the U.S. I was one of those people that hooks'describes as:

> emphasizing racism as a system of domination without drawing attention to class. They do not want to call attention to the way in which class power mediates the extent to which they will suffer from racist exploitation and aggression. Instead it is in their class interests to emphasize the way racism inhabits their progress. (1995, p. 166)

I was settled into a "luxury of obliviousness." But it is this experience, with hunger, that brings my own class privilege to the forefront. The privilege of not being hungry— something that I would likely take for granted in the U.S.—is a privilege that sleep cannot hide. Sleeping affords me the opportunity for doing just that: sleeping.

As you can see, auto-ethnography forced me to come to grips with myself and to acknowledge the ways in which I occupy this world. If it could do that for me, it may work wonders for the communication discipline itself. It could transform relationships, strengthening understanding of ourselves and others. Or maybe it could diversify communication scholarship by widening the scope of research topics, ultimately changing the materials used in college courses and challenging the composition of the classrooms. It could even help break the monotony found with traditional research strategies by adding versatility to the methodological repertoire available and by "open[ing] up social science discourse to a larger and more varied audience, mak[ing] social science discourse more useful" (Ellis, 1997b, p. 134). Auto-ethnography proves that there is much more to research than just experiments or surveys, in–depth interviews or participant observations, or statistical studies. Statistics are wonderful, yet, they only reveal a small part of a larger story. Readers are more likely to remember stories as opposed to numbers, as James writes:

> Stories are memorable in ways that statistical studies are not. As they are recalled and given meanings, stories are not 'right' or 'wrong'. Facts can be challenged, but a person's story *just is*. One of the most powerful ways to gain an understanding of 'the other' is to hear or read the story of 'the other' *in his or her own words*. (2004, p. 62).

But what is gained from telling a story? Will it provide some kind of therapeutic release? Will it offer some kind of psychological reprieve? Will it expose some hidden deprivation? Or is it as Audre Lorde (1997) writes in "There are no honest poems about dead women" (p. 409),

<div align="center">

What do we want from each other
after we have told our stories
do we want
to be healed do we want
mossy quiet stealing over our scars
do we want
the powerful unfrightening sister
who will make the pain go away
mother's voice in the hallway
you've done it right
the first time darling
you will never need
to do it again.

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Only the researcher will ever truly know the personal gains from this experience. Yet, I think more focus should be on what is learned from these stories.

Conclusion

Our discipline is in a very distinctive position.   It is overwhelmingly broad and diverse. For example, I recently attended Southern States Communication Association Conference in Norfolk, Virginia, in April 2009, where it featured nearly 20 different divisions according to specialty. This shows the uniqueness and versatility of the communication discipline. Emanuel writes:

> No other discipline makes human interaction its unique focus. This intense focus on what, when, where, how, and why humans interact is what is so special about the Communication discipline. From drawings on cave walls, to the bits and bytes of computer code, to academic and political debates, to just trying to get a date, communication has enabled the human race to define ourselves, record our history, and tell our story. It has been the means and meaning of our cultural advancement. (2007)

This focus makes communication a highly respected and sought after discipline. Communication is more than a skill—as it discipline, it acknowledges and documents human existence and contact. That's why the discipline is so adapt at changing as the world changes. It is evident from various research agendas that there is no distinguishing factor between what we research and who we are. So in performing research, communication scholars must take account for themselves and their experiences. Frankenberg (2000) proposes that "to theorize 'from experience' is thus to propose that there is no firm separation to be drawn between woman as member of society and woman as thinker, theorist, or activist" (p. 452).

I know many will be skeptical about using auto-ethnography. Some may be avid sticklers for rules and regulations, traditions and practices. So I won't badger anyone about this method. But since I do encourage its use, I cannot finish this writing without suggesting some successful strategies for undertaking it. First, **write**. **Write**. **Write**. Write until you can feel the vibrating pulse beating strongly in your veins. Write until you see night turn into day. Write until you hear the morning rush of traffic or see the night's falling mist. This will allow you to get to know yourself. Richardson (2000) states, "Writing as a method of inquiry, then, provides a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct our world, ourselves, and others, and how standard objectifying practices of social science unnecessarily limit us and social science" (p. 924). If you find yourself approaching a writer's block, don't get discouraged.

Keep the motivation and keep forward. Use Tami Spry words for encouragement. Clear your mind and softly speak aloud:

My voice feels powerful when it is engendering power with others.

I am better to engage the lived experiences of myself with others.

I am more comfortable in the often conflictual and unfamiliar spaces one inhabits in ethnographic research.

I am more comfortable with myself as other (2001, p. 721)

And if you still feel a bit discouraged, just think about the scholars who've vastly contributed to our discipline. Recall Geertz's (1973) plea that we must inscribe our lives and the lives of others within our ethnographic expressions—interpolating ourselves within a culture. Or try and remember Conquergood's (1991) call for self-reflexive questioning on issues of honesty and humility—specific aspects of lived subjectivities. Even if you are a trained empiricist, it is always possible to learn and use auto-ethnography. I mean, this is ultimately what Carolyn Ellis, a trained sociologist, did when she embraced auto-ethnography, causing her to change disciplines from sociology to communication. And her co-author, Arthur Bochner, joined her in efforts to pursue auto-ethnography instead of empirical research. They write (2000), "Human communication is not an object, or a discipline studying objects. Communication is a process consisting of sequences of interactions and the dynamic human activity of studying them" (p. 743). You may view communication in the same light. You may even still believe in interdisciplinary approaches to research or to studying all forms of human communication. Well if so, tell your story. Talk of your lived experiences. Give an evocative rendering of human emotions. Capture human complexities in all its form.

If you still believe in the mission of the communication discipline, then what's stopping you?

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