

A Dialectic of Self and Other



Autoethnography refers to research and writing aimed at describing and systematically analyzing (graphy) personal experience (auto) with the aim of understanding cultural experience (ethno). A researcher uses fundamental beliefs of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. It is a form of self-reflective writing, which takes an exploration on a researchers personal experience and makes a connection between this autobiographical story to wider social, political and social meanings and understandings. It is different from ethnography qualitative research method in which a researcher uses participant empirical observation and interviews aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of a groups culture, in that autoethnography lays focus on a writers subjective experience instead of interaction with opinions and practices of others. Therefore, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product. Mary Louise Pratt in her research studied what she called the contact zones. Contact zones are areas that allow the mixing of two or more cultures. She is saying that contact zones are social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and struggle with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.

From Pratts view, contact zones are important since they help people coexist outside their culture zones, which are promoted by transculturation

that takes place when people from different cultures stay together. A child from Africa who is taken to study in America would find life in the United States very hard initially before coming into terms with it. The very first few days in school would prove troublesome to a child. This scenario can only be explained from Pratts perspective of contact zones. This happens because of the clash of cultures that would exist between cultural background that this child is accustomed to and a new cultural set up a child becomes exposed to. Africans have many different cultures from Americans making it hard for a kid to get used to them at first. One thing that is different from American kids and African kids are their loyalties to each other. A child will notice some elements of transculturation between him or herself and other American kids. American kids are always overprotective of one another. They also bond well with each other, and seem to divide ranks among each other.

In America, school kids also dress differently. They attend classes dressed in fancy clothing and jeans while, in most of African schools, most kids are required to attend classes dressed in uniforms. This example is not only different contact zone, but also transculturation at its best. Initially, a child will feel isolated and will have difficulties interacting freely with other kids in school and will also find him or herself spending most of the time without company. Finally, after adopting the culture of American people and that of kids in the school, an African child will feel more wanted and accepted and, consequently, will fit their culture. Also, in the neighboring environment, an African child will find it weird by the superficiality in interactions exhibited by Americans. This is because, in Africa, a child is used to the social community where people interact freely with one another and where neighborhood is highly valued. Africans live in a social

society, which promotes interaction at different cultural practices and mindful of one another's welfare. Conversely, in America, it is not the case and a lot of interactions among people are superficial in nature and individuals mindful of their own welfare only. This, at first, will prove troublesome to an African child who will take time to adapt to the new environment. This example illustrates the concept of contact zone and transculturation as articulated by Mary Pratt.

Edward Said was a literary theorist who was the founding figure of the critical theory of postcolonialism. He was an activist of political and human rights of people of Palestine making him emerge as one of the most powerful writers. Said is well known for his cultural analysis and representations that are based on orientalism. It is important to notice that Said coined this word to mean the western study of eastern cultures and, a detailed framework of how the Westerners' perceptions to the Orient. This work by Edward Said has been critical to postcolonial studies and criticism.

Edward in this autoethnography identifies a number of stereotypes that the West has about Arabs: they believe that Arabs are irrational, against Westerns, threat and dishonest. He explores how these assumptions are made in opposition to what the West thinks of themselves and portrays the Orient what they are not. According to western civilization, they believe that the western culture is superior to all others. These concepts of supremacy and domination are clearly explored in the Said's ideas of Orientalism. Said believes that there is a danger, because these stereotypes can be treated as truth and, consequently, create a negative impact on West's and East's relations and their ideologies. In accordance to

Said, one description of Orientalism is that it is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the East and the West. Said claims that these misconceptions existing in the Western minds make the Orient be sociologically affected. He also goes on to describe the basis of Orientalism that is deeply rooted in the Western consciousness.

Said in his work, uses the phrase The other to elaborate Occidents perceptions on the Orient. This is as per Jacques Lacans terminology, which describes the mirror stage of development. This is a stage in growth and development during which children learn their own identity by being in a position to separate their own being from a mirror image of themselves. In this scenario, someone only finds an idea about themselves by contrasting with the other. It is under these circumstances that our desires and expectations of being whole are estimated onto this entity.

Edward Said work is an example of an autoethnography, since he is reflecting on various stereotypes and misconceptions rooted in the minds of Westerns against the East. Moreover, since he was from the Orient origin, he was in a better position to reflect on these ideologies. For example, in his essay States of autoethnography, Said introduces the topic of hardships Palestinians have to face. He said, The earth is closing on us, pushing us through the last passage. In this quotation, he is expressing the way Western ideologies were in place to clash the Orientals, whom Westerns perceived with all negative conceptions. Edward uses a lot of pictures in his literary work all trying to explain how Palestinians were mistreated. This occurs because even though they were living in different

countries, they were ever regarded as terrorists. Also, they were assumed as foreigners even when they held high standard jobs, they were never accepted in the society of Westerns. Edward produced photographs of some Palestinian refugees in his book. These photographs were produced in collaboration with Jean Mohr who was a documentary photographer of Swiss origin. Edward autoethnography creates a significant impact in the minds of the readers. First, it advocates for erasure of boundaries that exist between the Orient and the West. He also advocates for a more moderate way of thinking. Edwards criticizes the political and cultural struggles of Arab and Muslim regimes who acted contrary to the interests of their people.

Mary Louise Pratt and Edward Said present very good ways of preserving self-national identity. In Mary Pratts paper *Arts of the Contact Zone*, she provides illustrations of people who are in the contact zone. Contact zones are where persons are meeting other philosophies and ways of life endowed to other people, and they have to remember to adhere to their own. An illustration of the Art of the contact zone is what happened to Palestinians in transculturation. Transculturation is whereby people learn different cultures and combine them. Palestinians have been spread to all corners of the world. In most instances, they have been forced to take the ways of their surroundings and become assimilated in order to fit the norm of the society, while still keeping ways of their culture with them. Edward Saida's essay is a very powerful tool by itself. Its sole purpose is to demonstrate to the global what occurred to Palestinians and to prevent this from recurring. In his essay, he is stressing a point that Just as we once were taken from one habitat to a new one, we can be moved again. The multiple use of the article we throughout Edwards work clearly shows

that it is an autoethnography as he is articulating points from the point of selfreflection as opposed to ethnography whereby a person articulates point from the point of empirical observation.

Both Mary Pratt and Edward Said provide many different essential tools of helping maintain ones national identity. For Mary Louse Pratt, her main tool based on her literary arts of the contact zone is to avoid assimilation. Mary advocates that the simplest way for one to lose his or her identity is by assimilation. Therefore, if Pratt had a say on what is happening to Palestinians in the Edwards essay, I believe Pratt would offer encouragements to Palestinians to find safe houses. Pratt idea of safe houses is a social and intellectual space where groups can come together and constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, mutual understandings, and temporary protection from oppression. A safe house is somewhere one can run to in order to feel safe, where a person will be encircled by individuals who are comparable to him/her. Another Pratts idea of maintaining ones identity is via transculturation, which involves mixing of two cultures so that they can meet at half way, instead of becoming rooted to others culture and letting a persons identity slip away from him/her. On the side, Edward Said believes that transculturation or search of a safe house is not important since people should just embrace one another regardless of their diverse culturalbackgrounds and have a harmonious living.

From Mary Pratts article, it is significant to note that the reader of the comfort zone must be prepared to think differently. Since, for one to maintain his/her identity it is not a must for him/her to undergo

transculturation or a safe house where he/she will be protected against breach of his/her cultural values. Therefore, Edwards concept of harmonious living in his autoethnography should be upheld by all people living together. This illustrates dialectic of self and others that can exist in a multicultural society. Negative stereotyping of a group of people should be discouraged. Edward mentioned in his autoethnography, The prospects of deracinated people, like us, being so uncertain that it would be best to send me as far away as possible. This reflects how the Orientals were not accommodated by the westerners and, therefore, advocates for rational thinking.