



CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY CONFERENCE 2016: A FACTIONALIZED REVIEW

Esther Fitzpatrick
University of Auckland
e.fitzpatrick@auckland.ac.nz

Esther Fitzpatrick, PhD is Lecturer at the University of Auckland, where she specializes in education, postcolonial identities, arts-based research and pedagogy. She has published in journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, and the *Journal of Educational Enquiry*.

ABSTRACT: In this factionalised script, a blend of fact and fiction, I provide a review of the Critical Autoethnography (CAE) Conference, which took place in Melbourne, Australia, July 21-22, 2016. Participants gathered from across the globe to discuss the themes of affect, animacies, and objects from a critical autoethnographic vantage point.

KEYWORDS: CAE, critical autoethnography, affect, animacies, objects

Act I: Pre-Conference

Scene I

Setting: A busy coffee shop in central Melbourne, Australia. Rain bounces off the windows. It is July 21st 2016, an early morning winter's day. A group of New Zealanders huddle around a small table drinking coffee and laughing.

Ranui: So great to be here at the *second* critical autoethnography (CAE) conference – and with a bunch of friends!

Esther: Wow, yeah, we all made it! After misplaced passports and phones dropped into toilet bowls, I was a bit worried (*they all laugh again*). Looks like one of us is presenting in each block: Toni and Julie are presenting in the “affects” stream, Fetui is presenting in “animacies” and I’m in the “objects” stream. I find these theories about our affective relationships with things, (the non-human or the more-than-human), and the flattening out of these relationships, an exciting area of exploration. This year I’m particularly interested in embodied memories – how things, places, and objects can summon up memories of being-in-the-world, being-in-the-world with others, and remembering being-in-the-world (Dion, Sitz, & Remy, 2011; Waskul & Vannini, 2006). For example, through a story of a trip back home I describe how in a particular cultural and geographical setting, I experience, through the body, a sense of belongingness (being-in-the-world); the sensual giving over to the caresses of the sea and the comfort of sitting with Ms. Pahewa for tea. As Dion et al. suggest, “those physical states experienced in ethnic settings reinforce ethnic feelings because they can live in their flesh their ethnic singularities” (2011, p. 317).

Julie: Yep, well I am still a beginner with all these terms and theories on our relationship with things! I’m really nervous about presenting ... I thought everyone had to submit an abstract just to attend! This is my first conference and I’ve not finished my Master’s.

Esther: (*Smiling*) That’s what happens when you submit and get your abstract accepted! You will be great. Everyone is very supportive and you will have an opportunity to hear about a range of different critical autoethnographic projects using innovative methods, and you will get thoughtful feedback on your research. Your arts-based work on

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quilting as method fits perfectly with the themes “affect” and “objects” where you work in response to, and with objects, to create a quilt from the stories you generate. Quilting as a material manifestation of the generation and movement of intensities adds to and gives force to the quality of an experience – from hand to hand, body to body, person to person (Shouse, 2005).

Fetaui: (*Leaning in and giving Brien a hug*) Yeah, you will be great. I hate presenting but I do it to learn. When Esther and I came last year we really felt at home. Anne Harris and Stacy Holman Jones, the co-conveners from Monash University, envisioned a gathering that would create a community of scholars, artists, and teachers interested in autoethnography, and also interested in – to use Judith Butler’s (2015) construction, assembling a “we,” a collective of scholars that creates the freedom to speak and a community dedicated to asking critical questions about how we might act in the world together (Holman Jones, 2016b).

Esther: And Fetaui, what you share is so important for others to hear. This conference creates space to build a community of scholars. It’s awesome that we could come together as a group from Auckland University to develop this community further. It’s a privilege. (*turning to her students*) I hope you all have the *Handbook of Autoethnography* on your reading list; it is a fabulous and important read because it charts the history and the state of the art in autoethnographic research and methods, including critical approaches to autoethnography (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

Ranui: Yep, I’ve brought my copy with me!

Esther: Also Anne Harris (2016) has just had a beautiful piece published on the intersections of affect, memory, identity, and autoethnography that we will look at together later in the year in which she writes, “We rewrite unacceptable truths with lies and ambiguities to recraft unbearable complexities into survivable simplicities ... Lines become blurred ... But lines [between reality and fiction] were always blurred” (p. 2). Toni Bruce, I thought of your work when I read this, where the blurring of lines between fact and fiction aligns with your presentation on “factionalisation” (Bruce, 2014), and also your work Fetaui, on “ethical research” (losefo, 2016).

Toni: Excellent, I must read this ... Through investigating the affects of textual production constrained by different genre expectations, claims to truth, and methodological and ethical issues, I hope to reveal some of the fears, pleasures, and power of producing diverse texts.

Fetaui: For sure Esther, but remember my work in critical autoethnography is a porthole of hope for the marginalized to decolonise, deconstruct, uncover; discover, reveal, and unlock the sacred spaces of researcher and co-researchers.

Act II: Conference

Scene I

Setting: Forty plus people sit in rows in a conference room on the second floor of the State Library in downtown Melbourne. A table at the back holds cups and saucers for tea. The spotlight brings our attention to the front of the room where we see the co-conveners, Anne Harris and Stacy Holman Jones, welcoming the participants. Many of the participants were here for the inaugural conference last year and have been excitedly catching up. There is a warm buzz in the room. Anne outlines the plan for this year's two-day conference, following the pattern of last year with two streams and collaborative "making workshops" each afternoon. Anne then pauses and graciously calls Stacy to come and open the conference with a few words.

There is a distinct shuffling sound as the participants ready their notebooks.

Stacy Holman Jones: Two years ago, when we were first dreaming up this conference, we envisioned a gathering that would create a community of scholars, artists, and teachers interested in autoethnography ... Our goal in putting together this year's call for participation was to create work that asks what happens when we connect the affective, the animal, and the vibrant objects of our lives and the autoethnographic; when we connect the singularity of one person's experience in meaning and in time to what Brian Massumi says is a "vital movement" that can be "collectively spread" (Massumi, 2002, p. 250; Holman Jones, 2016b)

...

Further, autoethnography is an affective force, where the affective is, as Kathleen Stewart puts it, "a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact" (2007, p. 128). Affect is not a quantifiable or mutually shared emotion. It is not the elusive search for the "evocative" in our writing or moving others to tears in hotel conference rooms. It is "not about one person's feelings becoming another's" at all, "but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought" (Stewart, p. 128; Holman Jones, 2016b).

Scene II

Setting: A rainy early winter's morning. Day two of the conference and the New Zealanders are again in the corner of the busy Melbourne café. They are sharing stories of their experience so far.

Julie: (*reading lines of verse she wrote in her journal*)

Fledglings and masters all arrived
for a feast with the heart and the soul.

Days spent in a rotating hourglass
Bookmarked with abundance in tow.

Ranui: Fledglings and masters – yeah, never really sure who is “world famous” and who is not, at this conference. Everyone seems to respect each other.

Esther: “World famous” is such an interesting term. I suppose in New Zealand the world of autoethnography is still relatively small. We need to gather together to encourage, critique, and disseminate our work. Most of the time I just assume that most people are more “famous” than me, the new girl on the block. But, then I remember how relatively “new” autoethnography is in the history of modern research methods, and think that in some way we are all “trail blazers.” I mean spell check still underlines the word autoethnography in red! I like to think that with *critical* autoethnography we can all be world changers.

Ranui: I probably fall into the category of “brand new scholar,” hence this group of researchers was important for me as a place of “belonging.” Building community and relationships are important strategies to support each other and resist the current focus on competition and individualism. In some way, we are all employing what Springer (2016) calls a “prefigurative politics” when emphasizing the embodied practice of enacting horizontal, or, as you described, flattened relationships. Through enacting a non-hierarchical community, we experience the “joy that comes [when] being together as radical equals” (Springer, 2016, p. 287). The CAE conference demonstrates a care for one another that is loathsome to neoliberalism, or as Springer so elegantly says, “We can start living into other possible worlds through a renewed commitment to the practices of mutual aid, fellowship, reciprocity, and non-hierarchical forms of organization that reconvene democracy in its etymological sense of *power to the people*” (Springer, 2016, p. 269).

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Esther: I've been considering Stacy's question last year about what is the "critical" in critical autoethnography. Critical *ethnography* is concerned with an ethical responsibility to pay attention to issues of unfairness or injustice with a focus on social change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Madison, 2008). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2010) argue that autoethnographic research is a political, socially just, and socially conscious act. Further, as a form of critical social research it has the potential for moral effect through disrupting socio-political structures that are unjust and unfair (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). How does critical *autoethnography* work to bring about justice?

Ranui: (*Excited*) This is a great question. I suppose the reason I got interested in autoethnography to begin with was the belief that as a researcher, I don't have the right to tell others' stories without being first willing to tell mine. Also, in telling others' stories I need to be as transparent as I can be about my own perspective – to write through my own lens, to show how I am reading their stories. In telling the stories of others there will always be a personal bias and this bias needed to be recognized up front. It was Soyini Madison's (2012) work on postcritical ethnography that led me to autoethnography; I never realized how big a journey this would be. Madison's work encouraged me to consider my own position in a research project. Using the theoretical framework of a postcritical autoethnographer I need to make transparent what my own story is, to interrogate the power dynamics at play and ensure I maintain a critically reflective position (Madison, 2012). And now here I am. In telling, writing and performing my stories it is always with intention to bring about justice, and to offer counter stories to the dominant stories in postcolonial histories. My work has involved a lot of conversations with ghosts, both micro (my ancestors) and macro (ideologies that dominate, such as the influence of the Enlightenment on our societies). Derrida's (1994) concept of hauntology has been useful when exploring my stories and his premise that "to live, ...to bring justice ... one must speak with or about some ghost (p. 221)." When using creative or arts based methods I am also an Eisner (1997) fan; I understand my role is as a researcher first, who uses arts based methods. Therefore, it is not just the quality of the work that must be aesthetically pleasing, but also the work I do must transform, enlighten, illuminate – it must *do* something. My second answer to your query about the term "critical" is the importance of interrogating and integrating our stories with theory. When I write a story I always include a theoretical voice as one of the key characters or elements. I hope in my writing to create dialogue that embodies what Holman Jones describes as a commitment to "theory and story work[ing] together in a dance of collaboration" (2016a, p. 229). Hence, in my work I interrogate and integrate my stories with theories to merge with my creative and scholarly voices (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

Esther: There were some great examples yesterday of a focus on social justice issues. For example, Jessica Gullion approaches her work with a social justice orientation. She connects people to her work through the personal storytelling of autoethnography. She writes and presents in a way that influences our own lives. Yesterday at the conference she

presented on the intra-action between her human self and the nonhuman cells in her body (her gut biome in particular), and how she unknowingly decimated millions of bacterial colonies through her overuse of antibiotics. When that happened, her ability to digest many foods was compromised. Overuse of antibiotics is a global problem, one as a medical sociologist she is concerned about. Several people who had their own gut problems approached her after the presentation. They had not considered that the "gluten free craze" and other food intolerances could be related to antibiotic use.

Scene III

Setting: A large room in the Library. All participants are gathered again for the closing discussion.

Esther: (*Raising her hand to speak in response to a question about the format for next year*) Should the conference stay small and open only to the select few, or should we make it larger and open up spaces to hear new voices? For me the conference is about respecting many stories – especially those that disrupt normative assumptions of what counts as research and what counts as a “real” story. I also think that we must resist becoming *the* voices of global South autoethnographers.

Ranui: I believe it's important conversations are maintained with the “West,” but also essential to include non-Western voices as equal members in the conversation about critical autoethnography. I wonder also if we need to contest the use of the word “West” here. It begins to read like the “West” and the “Rest!” I suppose what we are really getting at here (especially I notice now with my use of the word “equal”) is the unequal power relations that exist in our societies. In considering the above, the CAE conference provided an opportunity for a range of autoethnographic stories to be shared from both experienced scholars and emerging researchers. We also collaborated together in “making workshops” each afternoon where we brought together our different lenses, theoretical understandings, and skills to a set task to create multi-modal performance about affect, animacies, and objects. Presenting these at the end of the conference was a great way to come together. I found these making workshops, both this year and last, offered an important opportunity to get to know other participants, glean from their different perspectives of the set task, and hence learn about the world differently. I found you also learn more about yourself when you rub up against others!

Gibson: (*standing up to share his poem*)

Out of a menagerie of cultures, ideas, and experiences comes a singular voice of humanity. It's the perplexing binary of difference on the one hand and similarity on the

other ... despite our multitudinous stories, despite wearing our proud badges of uniqueness and individuality
 We each still occupy that
 noisy
 overlapping
 grey space
 which at some yet unknown point merges into ubiquity
 Emblazoned with the tattoo that connects 7 billion
 being human. (Makia Gibson, 2016, personal communication)

Act III: Post-Conference

Scene I

Setting: An airport lounge at Melbourne Airport. A woman sits reading a poetry book as she waits. She smiles.

Waitress: (*Setting the coffee down*) What are you reading? You seem to be enjoying it.

Esther: Oh it's a book of poems. I had the good fortune to see the poet perform a one-woman show, "Slant" (Beard & Gingrich-Philbrook, 2016) at a conference I just attended. It was very powerful, everyone was engaged, singing along with the performer at points, laughing with her, crying.

Waitress: I write poems. I'm at university, but I would like to be a poet. (*She leaves*)

Ranui walks into the lounge and sits with Esther.

Ranui: Well that was some conference! I'm full up with ideas, stories, entangled with enriching theories. Some of those stories were fabulous but hard to hear. Provocative.

Esther: (*Smiling*) Yeah, I said to Anne Harris as we left that I would tell anyone who comes to a CAE conference in the future to bring a box of tissues! And now thinking about that I would also tell people to bring: a story tucked in your pocket, next to your heart; a pair of listening ears and an open heart (a generous heart is even better); walking shoes – and feet willing to walk in the shoes of another; eyes that notice, recognize and are responsive; and humility, which explains itself...

What did you think about the overlapping themes, animacies, affects, and objects? What inspired you about these subjects?

Ranui: Funny how even though the conference was small we still missed hearing so many of the contributions. From those I was able to attend I left inspired and with an enriched understanding of the relationship between critical autoethnography and the three themes. In particular, Professor Peta Tait's keynote enabled me to grapple with the theme "animacies" as she shared her own story of a sensory response to an art installation. Through a series of evocative photos of Cai Cuo-Qiangs installation "Heritage of 99 animal replicas," she storied her initial response of enchantment that quickly shifted to disenchantment. Integrating theory throughout her storying, she critically interrogated her response on "human–nonhuman encounters in art and performance that politically engages by implicating sensory emotional effects" (Tait, 2016, p. 3). I felt like I was starting to get a sense of what the animacies theme was about, how it related to my own work and the work we do in autoethnography.

Esther: In many ways this conference for me was about falling. Falling, I was reminded, as Ashley Beard powerfully performed her one women show "Slant," is an important part of life. Inspired by Emily Dickinson's famous line, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," (cited in Beard & Gingrich-Philbrook, 2016, p. 4) we should learn not to be afraid of falling and failing. As I pondered on falling I wondered if all our stories at CAE were in some small way falling stories. We had gathered together in our vulnerability to share stories of falling. Those times we have fallen short of the expectations of others or ourselves, moments we have fallen into

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the wrong hands – our hearts, our minds, our bodies, the fall of humankind from what it means to be human. Are some of us haunted by our falling stories? Falling is a transition, a shift from one place to another, it involves change. And change can be hard. Let us not forget to fall, to fall in love, fall into the arms of our lover, fall into that vulnerable space of trust.

Falling, fallen, fall. I thought of Anne and Stacy's heartfelt and humorous story, remembering the life of their dog who had "fallen," like a soldier, and her courage and wisdom at the end. I think how forever the word chicken will mean something different to me – how Murphy (the dog) and Stacy are forever morphed together in my imagination. Julie Peters hauntingly summoned up the voice of the "paddock," older by eons than mankind, reminding us of our fallen relationship with the land. Our feelings of falling short of others expectations were brought to mind in the beautiful poem read by Donna Henson. But as Mary Poppins reminds us "what falls down can come up." Liz Mackinlay sang us the songs of her Yanyuwa people, reconnecting us with the land. Rosemary Reilly told us the story of doll-making. The story of a group of women who sat

together creating and unfolding the stories of their lives that had been torn apart by abuse, sitting stitching their lives back together through the retelling and the remaking of an ancient story. And Fetaui Iosefo reminded us of falling in love, of trusting our families and our stories, of not being afraid to fall.

Esther and Ranui drink their coffees and reminisce about the conference. As Esther gets up to leave she walks over to the waitress.

Esther: (*Handing her the book of poems*) Here you can read this now I'm finished. It's got my email address inside if you would like to send me any of your poems. Keep writing.

Scene II

Setting: Auckland University staff room. It is a few weeks after the conference on a late Monday afternoon. Six colleagues/students are gathered discussing the conference and their work in autoethnography.

Mary: Wow, I wish I could have gone. I am definitely going next year! Will there be another critical autoethnography conference?

Esther: (*Smiling*) For sure. And you will have finished your thesis by then.

Ranui: It would be great to have another group from Auckland University at the conference. The making workshops were such an excellent idea. It's a pity you two (*looking at two of the students*) had such a difficult experience with your group almost "imploding."

Rob: Oh it worked out well in the end. At first we responded to the implosion with uncontrollable laughter, probably just the disbelief at the situation. We then began to talk and try to understand what had happened in our group and why someone left it. Of course we just assumed it was our fault. Did they leave because we were still not finished our Doctorates, so we were not worth listening to? Was it a cultural misunderstanding, or was it nothing like that and nothing to do with us at all?

Ranui: I'm wondering now what the future of CAE might be. (*To the two students*) You have just shared your story of a collaborative making workshop at the conference where you encountered a possible implosion in the group you were working with. As you shared this experience, I thought back to Stacy Holman Jones's talk at the beginning of the conference and thought "we" is a dream worth envisioning and investing in. However, it is not a "we" that flattens out hierarchy or difference, but rather (in her words) it is a response to precarity, difference and inequalities. That "[w]hen we gather and connect..., in conference, we

become a plural body, one that speaks, thinks, and acts together, if not in concert, then in conversation, dialogue, dissent” (Holman Jones, 2016b). As a diverse group of individuals we will encounter difference in its many and sometimes unexpected forms. And it’s what we do in/with this difference to gather as a “we” that’s at the heart of what we’re up to in the conference.

Esther: I too listened to you retelling this event and thought about the “we” and the assumptions we all make about who we are, the worth of our ideas, the value of our contribution. And I thought if we are truly to assemble a “we” – investing in one another, the “I am” needs to become subservient to the “we will.” As Stacy Holman Jones (2016b) said in her introduction to the conference, “our work is not our own singular statements spoken into a void, rather we have the power and responsibility to speak collectively about the precariousness of so many in our lives and worlds.” Perhaps also, it is being aware of what Holman Jones (2016a) describes as “utopian performatives” and that we are always in the process of becoming, emerging in difference, that the:

“Critical” in critical autoethnography—in how we do theory and think story as living bodies of thought—has the power to embody and materialize the change we seek in ourselves and our lives—even if that change is not quite here. (Holman Jones, 2016a, p. 235)

Ranui: True. We are all in some sense becoming, as individuals and through our collaborations with others. Tami Spry’s new book furthers this conversation on utopian performatives where she describes her work as “searching for a labor of reflexivity in performative autoethnography that represents the Other with the same kind of commitment as is afforded the self” (2016, p. 14). Perhaps, she suggests, autoethnography is not about the self at all; perhaps it is instead about a willful embodiment of “we” (p. 15). Critical autoethnography is a vulnerable, challenging and exciting space. Through intra-action (Barad, 2010) with the human and non-human, those quantum entanglements, we are always in a process of becoming.

I wonder what will be the focus next year? There was a suggestion that we will explore critical autoethnography and activism. I wonder what that theme will generate?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you Jessica Smartt Gullion for our conversations, your great ideas and support in the writing of this review.

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