

Short Paper 2.2: Autoethnographica

engl 131 / sec. A3 / spring quarter 2005-06 / chang



Our lives are filled with rich, curious, overlapping, and at times contested texts. Some of these texts we encounter on purpose, by way of outside direction, accidentally, and sometimes by serendipity. Via these texts, you will explore and accept and reject conventions, theories, facts, histories, experiments, and visions across disciplines. It is then in the many and varied spaces and voices where the difficulty and delight of the contact zone emerges.

Mary Louise Pratt defines “contact zone” early on in her essay saying, “I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (586). Relatedly, she defines an “autoethnographic text” as a “text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made with them” (588).

You have already written an autobiography for the first sequence, a kind of autoethnographic text. It is time to complicate the idea of an autobiography. Consider the autoethnographic texts in your own life, your own work. Where might you locate contested texts – oral, written, drawn, built, danced, evoked – in your own experience that describe yourself, your history, or your community? How do these texts use or borrow familiar forms, structures, themes? How do these texts change, personalize, subvert, resist them? How do these texts engage other communities, differences in power, conflicts in ideology?

Your task is to imagine and create an autoethnographic text that employs Pratt’s hopes and fears of the contact zone. **Choose an identification, a culture, or a stereotype that you wish to describe, illuminate, and complicate.** You may want to complicate a label like “Asian” or “American” or “college freshman” or “athlete” or “homosexual” or “Jew” or “learning disabled.” Consider the end of Pratt’s essay where she describes the course she taught on “Cultures, Ideas, Values” and how “virtually every student was having the experience of seeing the world described with him or her in it” (596). Your text then must show how you understand, how you imagine your community is described in and *into* the world. In **only 3-pages**, describe yourself, your culture in the spirit of Guaman Poma or Pratt’s son Manuel or the students in Pratt’s course. However, these 3 pages **must contain** the following (use your space well):

- 1) prose or standard essay writing or narrative,
- 2) verse or poetry, and
- 3) images, drawings, figures.

Your autoethnographic text must **argue for something**, want to relay something, have a stake in showing your audience something about you and your culture. Consider how you wish to put together your text, how you wish to arrange or mix the pieces. The composition of your text is up to you, but keep in mind your overall goal and your intended audience; it could be a traditional essay mixed with verse and image, or it could be a comic book, a mixed-media collage, a newsletter. Again, the text must have both writing and image, prose and poetry, argument and art. Remember that the text must draw on and resist the ways others have represented you and your culture. Push the idea that your text is a space where cultures “meet, clash, and grapple.” Have fun, be creative.

Targeted outcomes: _____

Turn in: 3 pages

Due: Tuesday, May 9