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Thinking ethnographically in creative writing – case study of a writing prompt

INTRODUCTION

Creative writing prompts are used in guidebooks, classes and groups to give the writer something to write about. They are there when the page is empty and you have nothing to say. They will do their best to convince you that the story, or poem, or scene is almost already there. You just need to give it form, write it out, and this is where the prompt will help you.

In creative writing manuals, writing prompts can illustrate or elaborate on a craft-related theme, like plot, character, or rhythm. The prompts may be built on implicit or explicit theories about writing or learning (for a collection of prompts with explicit pedagogical objectives see Walker 2012). However, the process of prompt-making is often intuitive and hard to verbalise, and it is not that common to read about how prompts are designed.

In this article, I trace some tentative connections between autoethnography and the composition of a specific creative writing prompt. By autoethnography, I refer to research that records, analyses and presents the researcher's personal expe-

rience in order to do ethnography – that is, to study culture (see eg. Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis 2015).

Writing is and has been a central method of both producing and presenting ethnographic knowledge. What kind of knowledge is produced, and how accurately or biasedly it is presented, has been a long debate (see Clifford & Marcus 1986; Behar & Gordon 1995; Visweswaran 1994). I think of language-based ethnographies as stories written by researchers, based on field work and previous research. They are influenced by academic and narrative conventions as well as the researcher's background, personality and writing style. However, in this text I am not interested in how creative writing can improve the narrative skills of ethnographers, or how the crafts of ethnography and creative writing have merged in the past. Rather, this text is an exercise in ethnographic thinking in the context of a creative writing prompt. I will attempt to unpack the process, content and context of one particular prompt, in order to open up new ways for thinking about creative writing and ethnography. I am interested in creative writing as concrete, lived situations and in ways of sharing texts outside the write, share and critique -models of creative writing workshops (see Gross 2010, 55).

I focus on a prompt I designed for a lecture on creative writing and ethnography at the doctoral seminar of creative writing at the University of Jyväskylä. In my lecture I talked about the history of ethnography and the questions of writing ethnography, specifically writing rituals, a topic I had addressed in my PhD (Karjula 2020). I knew there was an interest in autoethnography in the group and I had also applied the method in my own research, so I wanted to make a prompt that would use the writer's personal experience as a

starting point. I have previously designed an exercise called “The writer as an Ethnographer” that plays with the method of participant observation (Karjula 2016, 15–16). The prompt introduced in this article, “Narrating transformations”, continues my exploration into how ethnography can be approached through creative writing. This time the focus is more on the writer than the “object” of study.

This is how the prompt goes. If you have fifteen minutes to spare, you can do it now.

Narrating transformations

Think about a moment when something in your life changed, shifted, was transformed. Describe the moment as quickly and in as much detail as you can: where it happened, who was there, how did you feel.

You don't have to tell a coherent story. Write in the order and in the words that first come to you.

Now imagine you are talking about the experience to someone you don't know very well.

Underline the parts in your text that you might tell them first, or that you would be comfortable sharing with a stranger in the first place.

Look at the words and phrases that you underlined. Then look at the ones you didn't. What do you notice?

I will first introduce tenets of theory that are relevant to the prompt and then take a closer look at the ethnographic assumptions (or assumptions of ethnography) that shape it.

NOMADIC ETHNOGRAPHY AND CRYSTALLIZING
WRITING PRACTICE

My approach is focused on writing as a set of material, affective and social practices. I have been inspired by feminist theorizations of materiality: questions of subjectivity, non-human agency, material-discursive arrangements of social life, and spaces of thinking and expression that resist conventional academic ways of knowing. (Braidotti 2006b; 2013; Ringrose, Warfield & Zarabadi 2019).

Drawing from Deleuzian, post-structuralist and feminist thinking, Hanna Guttorm (2014) calls her genre-bending, temporally complex ethnographic writing “nomadic ethnography”. Poems, theoretical musings and data from the field form assemblages that refuse to conform to fixed categories. Writing (and reading) nomadic ethnography is a practice that keeps the trajectories of the knower and the known in constant movement.

In a similar vein, I see writing as not giving form to thought that precedes it. Writing is thinking, “a way of knowing” (Richardson 2005). In the case of the prompt, words are material units that move about and keep changing. They are made of assembled lines, and they form new assemblages with other lines; under- and overlines. In addition to these visual characteristics, they have their sounds, rhythms and echoes.

Writing about ethnography as creative analytical practice, Laurel Richardson (2005) introduces the figure of crystallization as an alternative to triangulation (as in employing various methods to consolidate research findings). According to her, the triangle at the heart of triangulation is built on an

assumption that there *is* a fixed object of knowledge just waiting to be discovered. Although she does not locate her work in new materialist theory, her style at this point seems to echo new materialist concerns with approaching research topics as volatile sites of becoming rather than fixed, knowable objects: “[...] the central imaginary”, writes Richardson, “is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach” (Richardson 2005, 1416). As crystallizations, creative analytical ethnographies offer partial, shifting perspectives on the fields they study. I approach the prompt with this imagery in mind, describing in words the angles of the crystal that I am able to see.

THE PROMPT

The prompt seems to be structured around at least the following facets of ethnographic thinking:

storytelling – audience
story arc – impressions
strange – familiar
personal – cultural
silence – words
description – analysis

First, it asks the writer to recognize a meaningful moment, to consider what is meaningful enough to be passed on. Personal and cultural spheres overlap: What is recognised as significant, extraordinary experience can be both deeply per-

sonal, affective affair, but it is also connected to what kind of experiences and ways of talking about them are possible in the larger cultural and social context. It requires tacit knowledge on how to talk to strangers. Which details of a personal experience can be shared with someone we don't personally know?

The text will have at least two audiences: the writer, and the imagined person to whom they will describe the experience. The writer becomes the reader of their own words. Schindler and Schäfer (2021, 21) talk about field notes as liminal, strange objects when they are looked at from a temporal distance. Reading her own field notes after some time has passed since their writing, a liminal space opens up between the ethnographer and their words. The notes become "strange objects" and the writer becomes a reader. In the prompt in question, the temporal distance between writing and reading is short. However, there are still layers in the analysis.

For me, the most obviously ethnographic dimension of the prompt is the way analysis builds up on notes and observations. The ethnographic process of data production and analysis, and their material entanglement, is highlighted in the prompt instructions. They invite the writer to start writing already in the reading. As Schindler and Schäfer (2021) point out, analysis is made in layers: jottings turn into field notes turn into annotations turn into drafts turn into research papers. In the prompt, the material act of underlining produces and makes a visible starting point for analysis. Yet even the description of the experience is also already analytical, requiring discernment and attention to detail. Analysis, in turn, is mingled with style, a writerly voice. This is where

ethnography most comfortably meets creative writing: writing down impressions and memories, zooming into sensory details, sorting them out, trying out different expressions, choosing the most eloquent ones, possibly building a narrative around them.¹

The prompt can also give the writer information with another visual cue: the words that were not underlined. They talk about what is kept silent – private, non-shareable. This is where the context of the prompt becomes particularly interesting, and I move now on to the prism of the situation where the prompt was first shared.

The participants had come to the online seminar to listen to a lecture, not to write or talk about their personal, transformative experiences. The texts we wrote in answer to the prompt were not read aloud. After writing we talked *around* the texts. People might say that the event they wrote about was “a happy one”, but nothing more specific. Or they might say the exercise “worked” for them, or that it “brought up feelings”. It was not the kind of situation where more in-depth descriptions were expected. The silence around the written words seemed to echo the suggested silence in the prompt itself – pay attention to what you did not underline. This doubled silence opens up a space that is not in the researcher / teacher’s control.

Only later on I realised that what I had thought of as an

¹ The prompt instructions explicitly remind the writer that there is no need to tell a coherent story. However, just mentioning it seems to assume that there actually is. I might rephrase the instructions in a way that leaves more room for uncoherent textual fumbblings.

exercise in beginning to think autoethnographically may have been received as an autobiographical writing exercise. Is there a difference? Does there have to be? After all, as Richardson (2005, 1419) reminds us: “The ethnographic life is not separable from the Self.” By this she refers to both the location of the researcher in the research, and the way ethnographic knowledge production is connected to mechanisms of disciplinary control.

But what, or which Self are we talking about? Writing from a nomadic perspective, Rosi Braidotti thinks of the self as a name we give “out of habit and intellectual laziness” (Braidotti 2014, 164) to the multiplicity we live with and through. Thinking with Braidotti (2002;2014), writing can be seen as engaging with a language-fuelled subjectivity embedded in power-relations as well as a way of channelling and enduring the intensity of life as a ruthlessly material force. She stresses that what we call and recognise as “our” self is populated by others: unfamiliar desires, affects and non-human ontologies. Her post-human is a figuration, threaded loosely together by technological, biological, social, political and narrative forces (see Braidotti 2006b; 2013.) Braidotti’s thinking is focused on reconfiguring the subject as non-unitary, but still socially and politically located and accountable. Thus the posthuman is also a conceptual frame (Braidotti 2019, 33–34).

A similar approach is present in Wyatt and Gale’s (2013) assemblage/ethnography, which they present as an alternative to autoethnography. Assemblage/ethnography is collaborative and relational. The writing voice, the autoethnographical I, is seen to consist of many voices and agency/authorship is distributed beyond the individual writer. From these no-

madic perspectives, the silences around, and created, by the prompt can be thought of thresholds, where we can stop and wait for something new to emerge. It can be thought of as a space for potential voices and understandings, and thinking about the purpose of the prompt, also potential (auto/assemblage) ethnographies. Through the silence, the “self” becomes a strange object like the field notes mentioned earlier.

I had thought of the prompt as an introductory exercise into (auto)ethnographic writing. To delve deeper into its “ethnographicness”, we might have talked more about how experiences are named and positioned, how our surrounding cultural contexts affect what and how we talk about, what kind of genres are available for narrating personal experiences. Having processed it in this text, I am now inclined to think the prompt was (auto)ethnographic in the making. Possibly, potentially ethnographic. What seems most relevant for creative writing education is how sharing (about) texts is always also sharing silences. In the prompt these silences were approached with material and visual gestures. Materiality of writing in this context is a matter of hands crafting – drawing letters or lines.

CONCLUSIONS

Writing prompts are widely used in creative, and perhaps increasingly also academic writing education. What do we expect the prompts to achieve and how does that relate to how we build them? How do we react when they do something we didn't plan for them to do? My purpose in this text has been to inquire into the process of making (creative)

writing prompts by giving an account of how one particular prompt was designed and touching on how it was received. More specifically, I have been writing about at least a potentially ethnographic prompt that may also give the writer a chance to play with their creativity or use their story-telling skills. I have processed ethnography in the process of writing and tried to tune into how this combination makes way for new becomings.

Ethnographic analysis is a process, where words gather and form assemblages, which reading, in turn, gives new directions and movements. Nomadic ethnography and thinking of writing as a material practice have a lot to offer for creative writing research and education. I think being aware of the materiality of words, of the strange vibrancies of the matter that is language, can open up to “writing otherwise” (Luce-Kapler 2004), to new ways of expression and being. It also has consequences for (creative/ethnographic) writing education. Learning can be thought of as a nomadic process, unpredictable in its course and outcome (Coya & Tailor 2014; Zapata et al 2018, 479).

Seeing writing and learning as processes of becoming without fixed aims or endpoints can make us aware of new connections among the different factors and authors of the writing process. With the help of the prompt, I found out that introducing ethnographic thinking to creative writing can lead to self-reflexive, autobiographical writing. It can also lead to interesting silences, silences filled with potential voices and words. Silence around the words could point to potential spaces where writing subjects can be reconfigured.

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