Multiple Commitments and Ethical Dilemmas in Performed Ethnography

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Theater signals for me a kind of paradigm shift away from the purely textual toward the performative, the evanescent, the nondiscursive, the collaborative. It can attempt to make political/intellectual/aesthetic interventions in another register, enabling the playwright and audiences to confront dilemmas and situations that are “good to think” in powerfully engaging modes quite different from conventional academic prose (Feminist anthropologist, ethnographer and playwright Dorinne Kondo 1995:51).
In the last 20 years a number of ethnographers working in the field of education, myself included, have been experimenting with a form of writing and disseminating research known as “performed ethnography” (Brunner, 1999; Gallagher 2006; Goldstein 2007, 2006; 2003 [Appendix A]; Mienczakowski 1997; Sykes and Goldstein 2004). Also known as “performance ethnography” (Denzin 2003) and “ethnodrama” (Saldaña 2005), performed ethnography involves turning educational ethnographic data and texts into scripts and dramas that are either read aloud by a group of participants or performed before audiences.

The richness of performed ethnography comes from three sources: the ethnographic research from which a play script is created; the reading or performance of the play; and the conversations that take place after the reading or performance. In these follow-up conversations, research participants and other readers or audience members have input about the conclusions of the research. This allows for ongoing analysis of the research findings. The incorporation of audience input into on-going revisions of the play provides an opportunity for mutual analysis, and in doing so, can help create more ethical relationships between researchers, their research participants, and the communities to which the research participants belong.

Post-reading/performance conversations also allow ethnographers in education to link up their research to their teaching and larger public forums on pressing social issues. For example, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT), where I work as a educational researcher and teacher educator, the reading and performing of critical ethnographic scripts have engaged our teacher education students, and the general public, in critical analysis and discussions of critical teaching practices in the areas of multilingual, anti-racist, and anti-homophobia education (Goldstein 2000, 2004c, 2004b; Sykes and Goldstein 2004).

My own experimentation with ethnographic playwriting has been a deliberate attempt to engage with the postmodern literary turn in American anthropology that began in the mid 1980s (Behar 1995; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). This literary turn was set off by discussions about the predicaments of cultural representation in ethnography raised in the 1986 anthology *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. The anthology was edited by James Clifford, a historian of anthropology, and George Marcus, an anthropologist and critic of the “realist” traditions in ethnographic writing that were dominant at the time. As explained by feminist anthropologist Ruth Behar (1995),

“The book’s purpose was to make an incredibly obvious point: that anthropologists write. And further, that what they write, namely ethnographies—a strange cross between the realist novel, the travel account, the memoir, and the scientific report – had to be understood in terms of poetics and politics” (p.3).

At the heart of the postmodern literary turn in American anthropology was the understanding that ethnographers *invent* rather than represent ethnographic truths (Clifford 1983). Ethnographies were not transparent mirrors of culture that realist ethnographers presumed them to be (Behar 1995). The contributors of *Writing Culture* also questioned the politics of a poetics, a system of writing, that relied on the words and stories of (frequently less privileged) others for its existence without providing any of the benefits of authorship to the research participants who assisted the anthropologist in the writing of their culture (Fox 1991; Geertz 1988).
In response to these predicaments of cultural representation, James Clifford set out a new agenda for (Western) anthropology in his introduction to *Writing Culture*: Anthropology needed to encourage more innovative, dialogic, and experimental writing that highlighted the ways ethnographies are invented by the ethnographers who write them. At the same time, the “new ethnography” needed to reflect a more profound self-consciousness of the workings of power and the partialness of all truth, both in the text and in the world (Behar 1995). As summarized by feminist anthropologist Ruth Behar (1995), while the new ethnography would not resolve the profoundly troubling issues of inequality in a world fueled by global capitalism, “it could at least attempt to decolonize the power relations inherent in the presentation of the Other” (4).

Having experimented with performed ethnography for almost a decade now, I believe that ethnographic playwriting offers ethnographers a productive way of engaging in the political and ethical dilemmas of research production raised by postmodern anthropologists. However, I also believe that its hybridity as a text—which strives to be, at once, ethnographic, dramatic, and catalytic (Lather 1986)—demands multiple commitments of the researcher. In this piece I argue that at the same time as performed ethnography is able to respond to political, cultural, and ethical predicaments of research production, it creates new ones. In making this argument, I begin with a discussion of performed ethnography’s potential to respond to contemporary, postmodern challenges to realist traditions in ethnography. I then move to a reflective analysis of the ways the hybridity of performed ethnography creates new ethical predicaments or dilemmas for the performed ethnographer.

**The Possibilities of Performed Ethnography**

Contemporary educational ethnographers and researchers have inherited a legacy of racism and colonialism that makes our research suspect … my task is to attempt to represent the experiences of those who participated in my study in a way that does not lead to the reproduction of the policies and practices of colonialism and racism I mean to challenge (Goldstein 2000).

As I have written elsewhere, there are a number of reasons why ethnographic playwriting holds exciting possibilities for responding to postmodern challenges to realist ethnography and for ethically representing the educational and schooling dilemmas facing Other people’s children (Goldstein 2000)[1].

First, playwriting allows ethnographers to challenge the “ethnographic authority” (Clifford 1983, Lather 1993) of their own writing. Ethnography is an interpretative, subjective, value-laden project. Writing up ethnographic data in the form of a play (in which the conflicts are real, verbatim transcription is often used, but the characters and plot are fictional) reminds readers and spectators that ethnographers invent rather than represent ethnographic truths. The artificiality of playwriting itself is a challenge to the ethnographic authority of realist writing. Playwright Kathleen George reminds us that “Dialogue in playwriting is not conversation as we know it in our lives—it is the action of the play” (George 1994:xv).

Second, the theatrical performance of ethnographic playwriting and the reciprocity of meaning making that occurs between the performance of a play and its audience discourages the fixed, unchanging ethnographic representations of research subjects, which have contributed to the construction of our destructive ideas of Other people and their children. Performance allows for changes in acting, intonation, lighting, blocking, and stage design. These changes can shape or even transform meaning of the ethnographic text each
time it is performed (Kondo 1995:51). Other actors and their audiences can enact and
enlarge the identities of the characters that I have created. Asian-American
anthropologist/playwright Dorinne Kondo writes, “The live aspect of theater is critical. Live
performance not only constitutes a site where our identities can be enacted, it also opens up
total realms of cultural possibility, enlarging our senses of ourselves…”(1995:50).

Third, as mentioned earlier, when ethnographers write up their findings in the form of a
play, which is then performed, the subjects of their research and others in their
communities can view a performance of their ethnographic work and ratify or critique its
analysis. Ethnographers can keep re-writing and performing in response to Other people’s
responses. This provides their work with “internal” (Lincoln 1997) or “face” (Lather 1986)
validity, which are important in discussions of rigour in ethnography.[2]

Fourth, playwriting allows ethnographers to evaluate how their own biases may dominate
the text. Importantly, performed ethnography offers ethnographers opportunities for both
comment and speechlessness (Diamond and Mullen 1999). An analysis of their characters’
words and silences allows ethnographers to ask, “Who gets the best lines?” “Who gets the
final word?” “Who gets to speak and who doesn’t?” “How have I used silence in this
play?” “How does my character’s silence speak on stage in a way it cannot in a traditional
ethnographic text?”

Finally, as also mentioned earlier, performed ethnography has the power to reach large
audiences and encourage public reflexive insight into the cultural experiences the
ethnographer has presented (Barone, Eisner, and Finley 2000; Mienczakowski 1997). At
OISE/UT, there have been times when teacher candidates have said that encountering a
new perspective or point of view from one or more characters (i.e., research participants) in
an ethnographic script or performance has helped them question or re-think their own
professional practices. In these moments, I know that my ethnographic play script has
provoked reflection that is useful to my students.

As a hybrid writing method that links ethnographic data analysis to dramatic writing,
theatrical performance, critical discussion and institutional change, performed ethnography
demands multiple commitments of the researcher, commitments that sometimes compete
and lie in tension with each other and present the researcher with new ethical dilemmas. To
illustrate these tensions, I will undertake a reflective analysis of two different ethnographic
play scripts I have written from the same body of ethnographic data and reflect upon what
is gained and what is lost when one set of commitments is prioritized over another. In the
analysis, I will specifically explore how different commitments impact on some of the
ethical commitments I have as a performed ethnographer to the participants in my research
studies.

There are two related reasons why such a reflective analysis is important. First, while there
has been some preliminary writing about criteria to assess the merit of individual performed
ethnographies and other arts-based research projects (Denzin 2003; Bochner 2000; Clough
2000; Ellis 2000; Richardson 2000a, 2000b, 2000c), and some preliminary writing about
whether it is desirable to devise any criteria at all (Bochner 2000, Clough 2000), there has
been little, if any, about the competing writing and dissemination commitments that
underlie arts-based research projects and the impact they have on the researcher’s ethical
commitments.

Second, as more and more graduate students and established scholars in education become
interested in using arts-based methods to produce and disseminate the findings of their thesis studies and research programs, practicing arts-based researchers need to model the ways they identify the multiple commitments underlying their work and the ways they have responded when one or more of these commitments have come into competition or tension with another. Such modeling of how to respond to predicaments of research production and dissemination can contribute to the pursuit of ethical practices in arts-based research. Underlying the following analysis, then, is the assumption that performed ethnographers working in the field of education need to be self-conscious of the tensions between the various roles they play—ethnographer, playwright and critical educator—and the commitments of form and dissemination they hold in each of their projects.

When I was thinking about ways such self-conscious reflection might be made available to readers and spectators of performed ethnography, the convention of “Playwright’s Notes,” which often appear in programs of theatre performances, came to mind. Playwright’s Notes are a place for playwrights to discuss aspects of their plays that they think are important for the audience to know about. For example, some playwrights discuss the historical period and/or geographic location of their plays; others discuss the prominent themes that are embedded in the play or the actions of a particular character. Playwright Notes are often reflections on aspects of a play that may not be immediately evident or visible to the audience.

Similarly, my Performed Ethnographer’s Notes below are reflections on the tensions and dilemmas of writing and performing an ethnographic play script that may not be immediately visible to the reader, performer or spectator. In the notes that follow, I write about three ethical dilemmas I encountered during the writing of two different ethnographic play scripts: *Snakes and Ladders* and *Alliance*.

**Snakes and Ladders and Alliance: Performed Ethnographer’s Notes**

*Snakes and Ladders* and *Alliance* are both based on research findings from a one-year study on anti-homophobia education practices at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) undertaken in 2002-2003. *Snakes and Ladders* was the first ethnographic play to be written from the findings. The play captures the political conflicts and tensions that occur when a group of experienced teachers, student teachers, and their students decide to put on a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) Pride Day at their high school. The title of the play refers to the children’s board game known as Snakes and Ladders and is meant to symbolize the “ups and downs” of engaging in anti-homophobia education in public schools. The play is a 60-minute ensemble piece that features twenty characters including two school principals (one experienced, one new to the role), two teachers (one straight, one lesbian), four student teachers (two straight, one gay and one questioning), six high school students (three involved in the school’s Gay Straight Alliance and three involved in its Students and Teachers Against Racism [STAR] group), three parents of students attending the high school and friends and family members of the gay student teacher.

*Alliance* is a 30-minute adaptation of *Snakes and Ladders* that tells the story of a new high school teacher who comes out to a high school student questioning his own sexuality. The alliance that is suggested in the title is an alliance between the gay teacher and the questioning student. The number of characters in *Alliance* has been radically reduced from twenty to five making the plot more focused and aesthetically compact and dramatic. Importantly, *Alliance* was written after I had workshoped *Snakes and Ladders* during the
first semester of the MFA in Playwriting program I completed at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky.

I had enrolled in the program because I care deeply about the aesthetic commitments associated with the writing of performed ethnography and wanted to become more skilled at using the dramatic conventions and techniques that characterized professional, award-winning dramatic scripts and theatre productions. I wanted my plays to meet my audience’s expectations of “good theatre.” Choosing to develop my playwriting skills through the pursuit of a MFA degree did, indeed, teach me how to meet an audience’s expectations of good (i.e., conventional) theatre in the same way that conventional graduate studies programs teach their graduate students how to disseminate their research findings through conventional academic writing. I rewrote Alliance in direct response to the critique I received about Snakes and Ladders in the workshop. Both my playwriting mentors (instructors) and workshop mates felt the play was “more ethnographic than dramatic” (Johnson 2004). In revising Snakes and Ladders into a play that conformed to the dramatic conventions I was studying in that first semester, however, I found that I was privileging my commitment to the conventional drama over my commitment to the words and ideas put forth by the participants in my ethnographic study. This privileging of conventional dramatic writing produced a number of ethical dilemmas for me as a performed ethnographer. While some of the dilemmas I describe are dilemmas all researchers face as they decide how to disseminate their research findings, my desire to represent my ethnographic findings in a way that would be conventionally dramatically pleasing resulted in a set of dilemmas that are particular to the genre of performed ethnography.

Dilemma 1: Whose story will I tell?

My MFA playwriting mentors taught me that conventional theatre audiences expect a play to begin with an exciting dramatic moment and an introduction to the main character of the play so that they know whose story is being told on stage. In the following excerpt from the first scene of Alliance, I worked to accomplish that dramatic moment and introduction by having the character of Jeffrey Lee knock his fist against his locker to express the anger he feels in response to the homophobic name-calling and bullying he experiences at school.

Excerpt from scene 1, Alliance

(Lights up on JEFFREY, who enters stage right and walks to his locker.)

VOICES OFFSTAGE

Faggot. Fag. Fudge packer.

(Jeffrey knocks his fist against his locker.)

VOICES OFFSTAGE

(Louder.) Faggot. Fag. Fudge packer.

(Jeffrey knocks his fist against his locker with more force.)

VOICES OFFSTAGE

(Even louder.) Faggot. Fag. Fudge packer.

(Jeffrey knocks his fist against his locker with even more force and continues to knock against it in a rhythmic pattern. Blackout. A tape recording of JEFFREY
hitting the locker continues while he walks over to and enters the bathroom stall. JEFFREY begins to hit the wooden door of the bathroom stall. The tape recording of the locker knocking ceases but the knocking against the wooden door continues. Lights up on the entire stage but remain brighter on the bathroom stall. A teacher, ROBERTO, walks over to the bathroom stall.)

ROBERTO

Hey!

(The knocking doesn’t stop.)

(Louder) Hey. Are you okay?

(The knocking doesn’t stop.)

(Even louder) Hey!

(The knocking stops.)

Are you okay?

(Silence.)

Do you need help?

(Silence.)

Open the door.

(Silence.)

Open the door.

(Silence.)

If you don’t open the door, I’m calling the vice-principal.

JEFFREY

(Whispering) No.

ROBERTO

What?

JEFFREY

(Louder) No.

ROBERTO

Then open the door.

(Jeffrey opens the door and starts walking away.)

ROBERTO

Wait. What’s your name?

(JEFFREY reluctantly stops and turns around.)

JEFFREY

Jeffrey Lee.

ROBERTO

Your shirt.

(Nothing.)

It’s torn.

(Nothing.)

How did that happen?

(Nothing.)
You’re shaking. Come with me.

In contrast to *Alliance*, *Snakes and Ladders* begins less dramatically, and more ethnographically, with a conversation between two of the play’s ensemble of characters: Principal Karen Diamond and teacher Rachel Davis who runs the school’s Gay Straight Alliance group (GSA).

**Excerpt from scene 1, *Snakes and Ladders***

RACHEL

*(Sticking her head into the office)* Hi, Karen. Did you have a chance to read the GSA’s proposal for putting on Pride Day?

KAREN

Yes. And I have a lot of questions.

RACHEL

Oh?

KAREN

*(Looking at her watch)* Starting with, what does GSA stand for?

RACHEL

Gay Straight Alliance.

KAREN

We have a student group called Gay Alliance?

RACHEL

Yeah – I mean, no. I mean it’s called Gay *Straight* Alliance.

KAREN

Why didn’t I know about it?

*AMY, ROBERTO, RAHIMA and JOHN leave the English office and walk over to the Principal’s office. When they arrive, they stand outside waiting for KAREN to finish talking to RACHEL.***

RACHEL

*(Surprised)* Well, uh, I’m not sure. We got started late last year. Before you arrived. We’re listed under “Student Clubs and Groups” in the Student Agenda book.

KAREN

I must have missed the listing. *(Looks at her watch)* Rachel, I’m sorry, but I have another meeting in five minutes. We’ll have to talk about this at another time. But I want you to know that I am very surprised to hear that we have a gay group here. *(Pause)* I don’t like surprises.

RACHEL

But it’s not a gay group. It’s a Gay Straight Alliance group. The students talk about discrimination. Homophobia.
KAREN

Who started the group?

RACHEL

One of my students approached me last year and asked me to be the faculty sponsor. Helen Lee. She’s Jeffrey Lee’s sister. Jeffrey was a gay grade 11 student who transferred out last year because of verbal harassment.

KAREN

What kind of harassment?

RACHEL

Three of his classmates surrounded him at his locker and taunted him.

KAREN

What did they say?

RACHEL

Things like “Are you gay, guy?” “Are you gay?” “Are you a fag? We think you’re a faggot.” Karen, those words are just as hurtful as “Paki” or “Chink”. And you know how hard we try to make sure that we don't let those slurs go by. If we had a Gay Straight Alliance group here last year, Jeffrey Lee would have had a place to come and talk about what was happening. Maybe he’d still be here.

KAREN

(Looking out of her office.) Your student teachers are waiting outside. Look, I appreciate hearing about the slurs. We need to talk about this some more. But Rachel, we’re teachers, not social workers. It’s not our role to facilitate support groups for gay kids. We’re not experts. We have counsellors we can refer students like Jeffrey to if necessary.

But –

RACHEL

KAREN

(Interrupting, moving closer to RACHEL lowering her voice) Most parents don’t want their children to hear about regular sex at school, never mind gay sex. I need to talk to the student teachers. I’ll see you tomorrow.

While both plays include the story of Jeffrey Lee’s experience with homophobic name-calling and bullying in their beginnings, Alliance dramatizes the bullying and reproduces it on stage while Snakes and Ladders refers to it in conversation as one of the reasons why it is important to establish a Gay Straight Alliance in the school. When my first scene of Alliance was read aloud on the last day of my workshop in that first semester—as a revision of the first scene from Snakes and Ladders that had been read earlier in the week—it received spontaneous applause. In the eyes of my mentors and workshop mates, I had succeeded in making the first scene of Alliance more dramatic and emotionally engaging than the first scene of Snakes and Ladders. As well, by clearly positioning Jeffrey as the central character of the play, a character who would go on a journey during the play and by the end of experience some growth, I had demonstrated that I had mastered an important principle of conventional dramatic writing. However, this gain in drama provoked a second dilemma for me.

Dilemma 2: Whose story is getting lost?
While I was pleased that I had gained a dramatic beginning and solid dramatic structure for my play, I was concerned that I had shifted the focus of the play from a set of teachers and students trying to put on an Anti-Racism and Pride Week at their school to one student being victimized by homophobic bullying. The perspectives and voices of the teachers and students doing anti-homophobia education work in their schools were being muted in favour of the drama attached to the act of bullying. Also absent was the principal’s voice and her perceptions of what the students’ parents would think about the school undertaking anti-homophobia education. So I tried to bring back some of these voices back into the play. In the excerpt below, two teachers, Robert and Rahima, converse in the second part of the first scene in *Alliance*.

A second excerpt from scene one, *Alliance*

*(Lights fade on the bathroom stall and come up on the hallway downstage centre. JEFFREY exits. ROBERTO crosses to the hallway. RAHIMA enters. ROBERTO and RAHIMA begin to patrol the hallway.)*

ROBERTO
I asked, “How long has this been going on?” He said a couple of weeks.

RAHIMA
That’s terrible.

ROBERTO
I know. I didn’t sleep very well last night.

RAHIMA
You should talk to the Admin about this.

ROBERTO
I tried to see Karen this morning. But she was in a meeting with the VP’s.

RAHIMA
Maybe you can catch her after school.

ROBERTO
I’ll try. In the meantime, I think we should plan to patrol the hall after school, too.

RAHIMA
Okay. Except for Friday. I’ve scheduled a meeting for our anti-racism group.

ROBERTO
Right. On Friday, you start the meeting. I’ll patrol the hall and join you later.

RAHIMA
That works.

ROBERTO
Can you patrol this afternoon while I try to find Karen?

RAHIMA
Sure.

ROBERTO

Good. He’ll feel a little safer if there’s a teacher around. (Pause.) So around three in morning, instead of sleeping, I was thinking.

RAHIMA

(Smiling) Oh, yeah. Thinking again, were you? About what?

Talking to Jeffrey.

ROBERTO

Talking to Jeffrey about what?

RAHIMA

Being gay.

ROBERTO

(Surprised) Oh. (Concerned) I don’t think that’s a good idea.

Why not?

ROBERTO

You don’t even know if he’s gay. Just because he’s being called names, doesn’t mean he’s gay.

I think he’s gay.

ROBERTO

How do you know?

RAHIMA

Gaydar.

ROBERTO

Seriously.

RAHIMA

Seriously. I think he’s questioning his sexuality. Don’t forget. I was Jeffrey not too long ago.

What if you’re wrong?

ROBERTO

What if I’m right? He needs support.

RAHIMA

But that’s not your job. We’re not social workers. Maybe you could send him to Guidance.
ROBERTO
None of the people in Guidance is gay. None of them has gone through what he’s going through. I have. (Beat.) You counsel some of the Muslim girls about dating.

RAHIMA
Yeah, but that’s different.

ROBERTO
How?

RAHIMA
Well, for one, it doesn’t involve coming out. There are still lots of parents who don’t like the idea of gay teachers in their kids’ school. And you’re still on probation. Ask the Guidance people to talk to him.

ROBERTO
(Soft.) The kind of homophobic bullying Jeffrey is facing?

RAHIMA
Yeah?

ROBERTO
It leads to self-hatred.

In the second part of scene one of Alliance, I was pleased to see that I had been able to bring back some of the teachers’ perspectives back into the play through the characters of new teachers Roberto and Rahima (in Alliance Roberto and Rahima have graduated from being student teachers to new teachers). However, I had lost one of my favourite lines in Snakes and Ladders, a line that appears in scene 3 when Rachel talks to her colleague Anne about her meeting with the principal.

Excerpt from scene 3, Snakes and Ladders

RACHEL
I tried to explain that it wasn’t a gay group and that we were talking about homophobia, not sex. But she couldn’t hear me. For her, talking about gay issues means talking about sex. Homosexuals are homo (emphasizing) sex uals.

The loss of this line led me to a third dilemma.

Dilemma 3: Which ideas are getting lost?

The reason the line “Homosexuals are homo (emphasizing) sex uals” is one my favourites is because of the pedagogical work it is able to do in post-play reading discussions. I use the line, which usually gets a laugh during the play reading, to talk about how the lives of LGBTQ people are often hypersexualized and, in turn, how such hypersexualization helps produce homophobia in schools. While I could imagine Rachel using the line in a discussion with her colleague and ally Anne in scene three in Snakes and Ladders, I could not imagine Roberto using the same line with Rahima in the first scene in Alliance.

By reducing the two experienced teacher and four student teacher characters in Snakes and Ladders down to two new teacher characters in Alliance I not only lost one of my favourite
lines, I also lost the opportunity to represent the strategic alliance work that the teachers in my research study spoke about. At the time, I felt that this work, which was represented in the play through the experienced teacher characters of Anne and Rachel in scene 9 of *Snakes and Ladders*, could not be represented within the more streamlined storyline of Roberto and Jeffrey dramatized in *Alliance* because it would take the audience’s attention away from the main characters (Roberto and Jeffrey). As a playwriting student learning the demands of conventional theatre I believed that I needed to make choices that resulted in my editing out key understandings that I had gleaned from my research.

**Excerpt from scene 9, *Snakes and Ladders***

ANNE
As the students who participate in STAR [Students and Teachers Against Racism] know, every year the club puts on a week of events to commemorate March 21, the International Day for Eliminating Racism. This year, Ms. Davis and I thought about planning a whole week of events that not only challenge racism but other forms of discrimination as well. The Gay Straight Alliance has been working on the issue of homophobia and has put together a proposal for a Gay Pride Day.

CHRIS
We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!

*(The GSA students laugh. The STAR students look uncomfortable.)*

ANNE
*(Smiling slightly)* What we propose is a set of Pride Days: Racial Pride, Ethnic Pride and Gay Pride.

CHRIS
Why are we calling it Gay Pride? Shouldn’t we call it LGBTQ Pride?

RAY
What do all those letters mean?

CHRIS
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendersed, queer.

GAIL
I thought the “Q” stood for “questioning.”

DIANE
What’s transgendersed?

CHRIS
It’s used to describe people who live in the gender that is not the one they were raised in. Like a person who was born male and is living as a female or vice versa.

Oh.

DIANE

RAY
Why do we have to have Gay Pride Day during Anti-racism Week?
DIANE
Yeah. Why don’t they celebrate it sometime in June when other gay people celebrate it? March 21 is supposed to be about racism.

ROBERTO
Some people experience racism (emphasizing) and homophobia. We need to fight both together.

In losing the representation of the GSA and STAR alliance in the second version, an alliance which at the end of *Snakes and Ladders* remains intact in spite of the tensions that underlie it, I lost a powerful example of what anti-homophobia activism looks like in school. While the example of how one teacher’s (Roberto’s) coming out story can have an important impact on a questioning student’s (Jeffrey’s) life story is also a good example of what anti-homophobia activism looks like in school, I was sorry to lose the opportunity to explore the intersectionalities, similarities, and differences between racism and homophobia that the GSA and STAR alliance in *Snakes and Ladders* usually provokes in post-play reading discussions. It is a discussion that anti-oppression educators (e.g., Kumashiro 2002; McCaskell 2005) tell us is sorely needed and a discussion that the teacher education students at OISE/UT don’t often have the opportunity to engage in.

So sorry was I to lose the post-play reading discussions of strategic alliance that in the years since I’ve completed *Alliance*, I have never taught with it. I only teach with *Snakes and Ladders*. *Alliance* remains an exercise I engaged in to learn about conventional storytelling and characterization. Ironically, my play *Alliance* lost the representation of how powerful a strategic alliance between two equity-seeking groups can be to the representation of an important, but less impactful alliance between one teacher and one student.

**Negotiating multiple commitments in performed ethnography**

In thinking about ways I might respond to the tension I experience between my aesthetic, ethnographic and pedagogical commitments, I have thought of rewriting *Snakes and Ladders* in a way that allowed me to keep its ethnographic complexity but add more dramatic tension and theatricality to the play. In discussing this possibility in a session that I convened at the 2007 Association of Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) conference entitled “Dramatizing Research about the Lives of LGBTQ Youth,” writer, director, and dramaturge Coya Paz from Teatro Luna in Chicago suggested that the model of traditional narrative theatre I had been taught in my MFA program doesn’t easily lend itself to the dramatizing of multiple conflicts. Thus, it may not be the best model for creating performed ethnography.

Coya talked about a process she and others at Teatro Luna worked with to produce *The Maria Chronicles* and *Sexo*: they pooled stories they had collected in “first person conversations” from 15 women to produce a touring show that could be performed by 5 women. In writing this show from a set of first person conversations, they combined different parts of different conversations into different performance pieces. I am very excited by this model used by Teatro Luna and think it holds interesting possibilities for producing powerful performed ethnographies that not only honour commitments to both ethnography and drama, but that are also pedagogically or dialogically productive. Further reading in the field of feminist theatre and performance (e.g., Bennett 2006; Canning 1995; Case 1988, 1990; Goodman 1993; Hart and Phelan 1993) has led me to other interesting
theatrical models with which I can experiment.

As discussed earlier one of the reasons it is important for performed ethnographers to find theatrical and performance models that enable them to meet multiple commitments has to do with the ethical imperative of performed ethnography. In contrast to more conventional forms of writing and dissemination of social science research, performed ethnography aims to provide research participants with an opportunity to speak about their lives in their own words and contribute to ongoing analyses of the research. Meeting this ethical commitment means finding writing and performance models that can accommodate many participant voices without losing dramatic tension or theatricality. Yet, in the end, it is not always possible for performed ethnographers to meet all their ethnographic, dramatic, and social change commitments equally in one sole ethnographic play script or performance. When one set of commitments is privileged over another in a particular project, performed ethnographers need to be able to name the stakes involved in such a privileging and pay close attention to ethical concerns that arise as a result. Then they have to live with the choices they make and find ways of making their choices transparent so that the strength of their work can be assessed and critiqued by the members of their multiple and diverse audiences.

The Performed Ethnographer’s Notes that I’ve written out here above represent one attempt at such transparency. I look forward to future conversations between performed ethnographers and other arts-based researchers about other possibilities.

References


Goldstein, T. (2000). *Hong Kong, Canada*: Performed Ethnography for Anti-Racist Teacher


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[1] The phrase “Other people’s children” was coined by Lisa Delpit (1995) and refers to the children of people of colour who have been marginalized and oppressed.

[2] Ethnography’s concern with “rigour” has to do with the extent to which an ethnographer has used multiple data sources, methods, and theories in her research and is able to persuade readers that the her data and claims are trustworthy (Goldstein 2003, Appendix B). Ethnography’s concerns with “validity”—in the pursuit of rigour—have to do with how congruent the researcher’s claims are to the reality her claims seek to represent (Eisner and Peskin 1990:97). Put a little differently, an ethnographic concern with validity is a concern with the following question: Are the findings of this piece of ethnographic research sufficiently authentic in terms of the way they relate to the way others construct their social worlds that I may trust myself in acting on their implications? (Lincoln and Guba 2000). Face validity (Lather 1986) or internal validity (Lincoln 1997) refers to evidence that the research findings are authentic to the research participants who are being studied and represented in the research. Catalytic validity (Lather 1986) refers to evidence that the research process has led to insight, and ideally, activism on the part of the research participants. Similar concerns about rigour and validity in arts-based research arise in the use of terms such as impactfulness and evocation of lived experience (Richardson 2000).

**About the Author**

Tara Goldstein is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). Her teaching and research interests include working towards equity in education, the schooling of immigrant adolescents in multilingual communities, schooling and sexuality, anti-homophobia education, ethnographic playwriting and performed ethnography. These interests have all come together in her five ethnographic plays: *Hong Kong, Canada* (2001); *Satellite Kids* (2003); *Snakes and Ladders* (2004); *Alliance* (2004); *The Card* (2004). *Hong Kong, Canada* is included in *Teaching and Learning in a Multilingual School* (2003) published by Lawrence Erlbaum, which was nominated for the award of best book for English teacher development by the English Education Council in 2005. In 2005, Tara also won the Activist Scholarship Award from the American Education Research Association (AERA) Queer Special Interest Group, and in 2006 completed her MFA in playwriting from Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky. Tara is currently working on a number of different playwriting projects, including a play called *Zero Tolerance* which examines issues of school safety after the shooting of 15-year old high school student Jordan Manners in his school.