

Disruption and silence: making sense of troubled times through autoethnographic writing

Joanne Yoo, School of International Studies and Education, University of Technology Sydney, Australia, 15 Broadway, Ultimo New South Wales, 2007, joanne.yoo@uts.edu.au

Bio: Joanne Yoo is a senior lecturer at the School of Education at the University of Technology Sydney. She has worked extensively across a wide range of subjects in the primary and secondary teacher education programs. Joanne's research interests include developing collaborative teaching partnerships, teaching as an embodied practice, action research and arts-based research methodologies, such as narrative inquiry and autoethnography.

Abstract

This paper presents an autoethnography of one female academic's struggles for work/life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such autoethnographic accounts can shed a powerful light into our lives as academics and practitioners during turbulent moments in human history. This narrative depicts how the work/life balance struggles experienced by female academics have intensified during lockdown as professional, schooling and parenting roles merge.

Autoethnographies embody an expansive language that can convey the intense affective states emerging from the stresses of social isolation and relentless workload. This paper explores how autoethnographies can help us to tap into the reflexivity that emerges from disruptions, as well as the musical words that can transcend the panic and pragmatism triggered by the pandemic.

No words

Night time terrors have invaded my days. For someone who often dreams of terrifying places, this pandemic-stricken world appears surreal. Fear accompanies my wakeful moment as the world is ruled by loud headlines that makes everything appear unsafe and stretched tight. The lack of a routine and the long hours at home means that I move seamlessly between both realms. The day brings the anxiety of not being able to obtain daily necessities, as well as the ever-present threat of poverty and illness; and at night, I find myself facing shadowy dangers that I cannot escape. Faced with such sobering realities, the creative practices of the academy appear increasingly obsolete. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the global landscape. With more urgent matters at hand, creative endeavors are the first to fall away. There is no time

or space to engage in the pleasurable aspects of academic work, which appear fitting for times of carefree abundance. It is difficult to concentrate under the bombardment of constant updates on newsfeeds. Infection rates. Mortality rates. The imminent eruption and teetering health systems that are unable to fathom the recurring peaks. Everyday routines are upended, and the possibility of infection generates a fear that exhausts. And finally, words themselves feel inadequate for describing these troubled times.

I have lost my words. In Sydney, Australia, where I reside, the lock down has come too soon and not quickly enough. With schools and all public facilities closed, there are not many places people can go. Borders have closed and international students can no longer enter the country, and like many other Australian universities, our institution struggles to stay afloat. Within a period of a few months, the voluntary redundancy package has been unveiled, and with the recent spate of early retirements, we have lost over half of our continuing staff. The devastating impact of the pandemic continues, as our largest course, among the first to be established in Sydney, has been *paused*. The lack of financial viability was the reason given. Tough times call for tough measures. The future looks grim as none of my colleagues have ever heard of a course being reinstated after a pause. We will have jobs through the phasing out period, but then what? An unknown future awaits. With all this hanging over our heads, staff continue to work day and night, every day of the week, with a feeling of gloom. So much loss, seemingly overnight, it is difficult to catch a breath. The promise that the world will remain as we had left it is simply an illusion.

A time of scarcity

The pervasive feeling of scarcity constricts. Each new wave of restrictions suffocates, even though they are there for our protection. The creative activities and social encounters that are deemed 'non-essential,' have all been squeezed out, and with many places of business on the verge of closing their doors, pragmatism invades my thinking. Potential salary cuts loom in the distance as a preventative measure against potential redundancies. My own institution has cut spending to the bone and only a skeletal presence remains. Buildings have been closed to save costs as we prepare for the long and harsh winter. Research and writing almost feel illicit in such a climate; they are introspective and time-consuming activities. It is not surprising then that the research positions have been amongst the first to go. There are too many things going on, which appear more vital, and the creative activities that drew me to the academy have been snuffed out. I sense the gloom of a long cold winter ahead as I sit in front of the computer, unable to justify the time spent on writing, or to even muster up the energy.

It has taken us a long time to find our feet as we were taken by surprise. I think back to the time just before the restrictions had imploded. Having finally made it to the supermarket to do my weekly shop and was alarmed at what I saw. Essential daily items were no longer available. Entire shelves had been emptied of rice, hand sanitiser, medicine, tissues and toilet paper. We had been running low on our daily staples and I could not find a single bag of rice anywhere. I grabbed a couple of last remaining packets of pasta and ran out to the car park. No time to mull it over; it was school pick up time. The bell rang as soon as I reached the school gates. A stream of small bodies poured out of the classrooms, and like any other afternoon, my children clamored for my attention, hungry and irritable, demanding that I attend to their needs and forget my panic

over the empty pantry. My body had itched to go to the store to pile a shopping cart full of items, but first I had to smooth away their tiredness and dull their hunger pains.

That afternoon we went to a friend's house. A group of parents sat on the balcony of a friend's house, drinking glasses of rose wine, watching our children playing in the back garden, kicking balls and jumping on a trampoline. Aside from the rigorous hand washing upon entry to her house, shoes kept outside the front door, and an overly well-stocked pantry, signs of normality still existed. Was it always like this, I wondered, with food spilling out of cupboards and piled up on the kitchen bench tops? We leisurely sipped our wines, enjoying the sight of children playing whilst nibbling on an array of soft cheese, fruit and biscuits. The sight of plentiful food provided a peace of mind.

The conversation warmed up quickly as people talked in anxious tones about the pandemic. Tension was palpable on bodies as someone commented on the lack of items on supermarket shelves, fears about the economy and the prospects for the industries they and their partners worked in. They worried about whether their sectors would pull through the current crisis. I quickly wondered how academia will fare in comparison, with the government refusing to provide financial assistance. Not well, I thought, considering our reliance on the students whose numbers have drastically reduced. One person talked about which household expenditures could be cut, listing gym memberships, coffees, children's extracurricular activities and a subscription to an online newspaper, even though life seems to hang in the balance of keeping informed. Not knowing is to be left hanging on a limb, and to be left facing empty shelves at a supermarket, not

fast enough to acquire necessary daily items. The talk continued. Disclosing anxiety has made the fear of the unknown more bearable.

Being isolated

Time stops for no one. I am conscious of this maxim as I complete *necessary* paperwork for course accreditation. It needs to be done, but none of it seems to matter in light of the recent turmoil. This realisation makes it difficult to concentrate. *Push through. Push through*, I urge myself. Even as I fill in the blank spaces of the application, I think about what lies ahead. Will the academy be able to outlive the pandemic? Who among my colleagues will remain standing; who will be expendable? With the imminent closure of schools, my focus disintegrates even further. The boundaries between motherhood and work life have always felt tenuous, but now they are on the brink of collapse. I had not thought it could be possible to supervise my children's schooling each day while completing my own work. The pandemic continues to surprise. But if this has been possible, at what expense? My heart has raced each day from the moment I wake, as I scabble to find spaces to work amongst the schooling, cooking and cleaning, as each moment is filled with some kind of movement or sound. The stillness, when it comes, does not last long enough to sustain concentration. I call my supervisor and tell her about the deadlines that I may not be able to meet, as voices swirl around in my head, whispering that my head is on the chopping block.

Perhaps I am being too pessimistic, but the social isolation makes it easy to lose perspective. Not being able to regularly communicate with others means that more time is spent in my own head.

There is more second guessing, little fresh input and endless senseless distractions. Since the isolation is not my choice, it hurts. The term isolation in itself is revealing. It has been associated with being alone, solitary or removed, derived from the Latin term 'insula' (island), that describes a body of land that is surrounded by water, impenetrable and broken away from meaningful interaction and activity (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). The island symbolises the deprivation of vital outlets and of being made to go around in circles within my own head, cut off from the nourishment of a vibrant community. Social isolation has impeded opportunities for action and the ensuing possibilities for creativity, vitality and generativity. Life is put on hold and the future remains uncertain. The new world order has been a shock. Despite the frequency of nightmares, I had never truly believed that my night terrors would ever become a reality. I had thought that I could always return to the world as I had left it.

There has, however, been an unexpected upside of losing one's taken for granted assumptions. It has been the increase in reflexivity. Reflexivity's value comes alive during such bewildering moments when the ground opens up under your feet. When knee jerk fearful reactions threaten to sweep us mindlessly along, reflexivity also allows us to contemplate, steadily, with attention and intent, any new landscapes we encounter (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). Changed environments require new ways of working and being. It does not help to continue with old ways; perspectives need to shift to see the alternate ways forward. The capacity to pause and to engineer new responses has never seemed so vital.

Perspectives, reflexivity and autoethnographic writing

Disruptions to normal routines open spaces for reflexivity. Reflexivity is vital for making sense of our isolated existence. It helps us to make the best of challenging circumstances and not to succumb to inertia or to become overwhelmed by anxiety. As a female academic struggling to manage work life balance, reframing isolation's meaning has required stepping back from the predictable trajectory of an academic career. Spaces have opened, as taken for granted routines are no longer possible and there is more silence and space to ponder 'what else.' Poulos (2010) describes silence as a way into possibility. Silence brings him into a contemplative space that allows him to listen deeply and to be receptive enough to "write stories" (p.50). He likens this silence as a form of awakening. He describes the act of sitting within the silence and finding ways to express what is discovered within it, as a way of "deepening meaning, expanding awareness, and enlarging understanding" (Eisner, 1997, p. 5). Silence has enabled an opening of perspective that can shift trajectories.

Visibility increases as perspectives are altered. The art world has long known that perceptions can transform reality and turn obscurity into salience. As an adolescent I had learned about the artist Escher, who drew many fantastical images that tricked the eye. Through 'borrowing' his perspective on the world, we could imagine an 'impossible' world. He painted pictures of waterways flowing upwards and staircasing merging into each other, which triggered small electric shocks that released waves of reflexivity. Such disruptions allowed us to turn our reflexive gaze upon our sense making processes, as Lather (1993) writes, "It is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing— spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge" (p. 675). Through

disruptions in perspectives, we can catch ourselves in mid-thought. This provides an opportunity to reframe our thinking.

Unique and creative form cultivates reflexivity and elicits multiple possible interpretations (Gadamer, 1989). There is no closure as each viewer engages through their own unique perspectives (Freeman, 2019). As a result, they “bring what is at play within the artwork into fuller being” as they attempt to make sense of what they know (Davey, 2013, p. 48). An aesthetic medium comes alive through its interpretation; it provokes dialogue as “every encounter is a partial manifestation of an ongoing conversation and an opportunity to give it new shape” (Freeman, 2019, p. 4). Dialogue allows us to evolve, change direction and to grow responsively to our encounters. Freeman (2019) explores this artistic evolution of life and creation through the dynamics of jazz improvisation, as she ponders on “the anticipatory potential . . . [of] . . . a single note” which represents “. . . an opening to the vibrations of the world’s rustlings, the known and not yet known, recollections and imaginations, its possibilities gaining momentum until the next note disrupts the effect, only to create a new effect, singular, yet never alone” (p. 1). Improvised notes and chords can be reconfigured in new and unexpected ways, as Freeman (2019) reflects, “improvisation reconfigures musical combinations in ways that alter one’s expectations of previously used notes or chords by bringing them into being alongside unexpected overlaps or changes in tonal structure or tempo” (p.6). As an aesthetic and evocative research medium, the autoethnography can trigger a multiplicity of encounters. It can evoke dialogue, as readers are invited to make sense of the teller’s story. Similar to how jazz musicians tune into each other’s melody, readers can listen deeply to the vibrations of the single words that construct an

autoethnography. Each note is perceived as being alive, animated, full of affect, spirit and resonance, carrying the capacity for action and change.

Due to its focus on personal narrative, autoethnographic writing can relay the inherent affective nature of our encounters, as Smith and Lloyd (2019) assert, “Life brims over with affectivity that at the most moving of times cannot be held within the bodily containers within which we mold and ordinarily hold our feelings and emotions. It is as if we are, at times, beyond ourselves” (p.1). Writing autoethnographically helps me to keep in touch with the affective world and my receptivity to “life sensations from within the very movements of life itself” deepens as I write in this way (Smith & Lloyd, 2019, p. 4). This receptivity and responsiveness can increase relationality and dialogue. Freeman (2019) brings our attention to how the medium of jazz allows musicians to become “dialogic partners in life’s play” (p. 8), describing how jazz entails such deep listening, attunement, and acceptance of “the uncertainty of the outcome, the reality of not knowing the next note or the one after” which leads to surprising and creative configurations of meaning (p.8). She conveys that/how the ‘hear and now’ power of jazz music allows musicians to engage in a “state of becoming-together [unfolds] to create something meaningful for this occasion and time” (p.8). The boundaries between the other and self dissolve, to generate creative understandings. This borderless state can be accessed any time and place, even within the confines of isolation, as by, “. . . even sitting still, we can bring up life by feeling our seeing, living within the moment, all the while being moved by and with others of our own kind and of an other-than human kind” (Smith & Lloyd, 2019, p. 5). Like a jazz musician, I improvise with words to capture the myriad of affective states that the pandemic evokes.

Autoethnographers improvise with words as they engage responsively with their environment. Poulos (2010) depicts this responsive way of writing as “accidental ethnography,” which begins when writers follow the scent of “a sign, a hint, a clue, a dream, a whisper, a secret, a fragment of a memory, an aside, a look (sharp or otherwise), an innuendo, a surge of energy, a moment of passion, an inspiration, a small smile, a direction or misdirection” (p.55). Autoethnographers or accidental ethnographers have a well-trained ear, a readiness to tune into signs and an ability to “improvise a way into and through an evocative, compelling story” (p.55). Poulos (2010) believes that such fluid and expansive writing requires both discipline and agility, as well the joy of writing to “break or exceed the rules of the game . . . stumbling along into the search, tripping headlong into an epiphany, or maybe even a full revelation” (p. 55). Autoethnographic writing rests on the writer’s level of responsiveness to vibrations and their ability to improvise the right words to depict it.

The pandemic presents a unique opportunity to engage in autoethnographic writing as our receptivity can deepen during these times of social isolation, as many outward activities and our worlds turn inward, and there is greater space to listen, hear and respond. The disruption of the familiar also allows us to perceive things anew as taken-for-granted assumptions fall away. The security that we once believed in no longer exists and our realities are challenged, opening up new possibilities for knowing and being. Through such broadening of possibility, we may find positive and meaningful ways to exist in our ever-changing world.

Finding words again

Things are slowly changing again. Shelves are being restocked and schools and businesses are cautiously implementing the stages of opening. There is a flickering light at the end of the tunnel as careful plans are laid to relax the lock down. And yet, the world will forever remain altered. I think of how we may lack the words to describe this new landscape, as terror and sadness makes us mute. This silence in the face of suffering reminds me of how “we walk a razor’s edge, a thin line of separation, a liminal space where we might, at any given moment, fall into tragedy. Or comedy” (Poulos, 2010, p.52). This truth has become profoundly visible as there has been much loss. There has been a fundamental break-down in our beliefs of a known and trusted world, which may never return.

It is not possible to stay on a state of high alert forever, nor can we stay barricaded away in our homes. Eventually, one day, we all need to venture back outside to experience the warm sunlight on our face. I think back to panic stricken days when I would fritter away precious time, fearfully reading news articles to safeguard myself from an uncertain future, sitting in isolation and anxiously waiting for the worst to pass by, holding my breath as I raced through each day, working, mothering and teaching, suppressing my need for rest, creativity and pleasure, just to get more out of the day. As a woman and a mother, I seamlessly moved into this borderless world of childcare, schooling and domestic work, losing myself in the process. It had been easy to adopt this functional role as the world was closed in by pragmatism. Foregoing these aspects that cultivates humanity has, however, come at a cost. The stream of vitality slowed down to a trickle, and I lost my words. They had been suppressed by the notion that everything had to ‘count.’ This rigid and fast paced life is now beginning to crumble, slowly letting words back into my life. Their warmth feels good, and this reminds me that the sun does rise again.

How will we have changed once, and if, the pandemic passes? Will we speak the same words, using the same tone, or will our language be altered by the time we emerge from our strangely silent and separated world? In the same way that we have learnt to wrestle with our fears, perhaps we will learn to sit with the painful silence and to eventually move beyond the restless agitation. The breakdown of old assumptions may make us more open to listening and sensing, to find creative ways to transcend suffering through improvising beautiful words, which Poulos (2010) alludes to as he describes the possibilities inherent to jazz, relating:

Jazz, and its brother, the blues, began as a way to turn hardship into beauty using the discarded tools of conquering soldiers. It is music of the people, by the people, for the people. Jazz, like most good music, serves as a way to transcend— to transcend pain, oppression, hardship, grief, suffering, or even just the doldrums of ordinariness (p.55).

If jazz is about playing the notes in all its possible forms, writing about our pandemic experiences is to convey “all the various meanings of that word” (Poulos, 2010, p.54). It is to capture the extremity of emotions that arise from an unprecedented moment in history, and to provide an account of how we navigated a way forward. Autoethnographic writing enables readers to make sense of the process of living as it embodies the researcher’s personal voice through diverse and aesthetic forms of representation and interpretation (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). It allows others to form connections with universal human themes through thick descriptions of individual experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

To write about our experiences is not just about documenting them, but it is to provide vivid accounts of human history to shift perspectives and transform trajectories.

This is the power of writing ontologically, as Walsh (2012) explains, “art is a practice, a way of being in the world, something more ontological than discursive. A means of opening possibilities, undoing habits, codes, usual ways of being and knowing,” moving across boundaries to connect to “the phenomenal world” (p. 278). Autoethnographic writing evokes an “awareness, spaciousness, openness beyond the boundaries of skin, the self. . . The willingness to actually enter into “other” ways of being and knowing, the dissolution of the writer/researcher self” that enables new ways of knowing and being in the world (Walsh, 2012, pp. 276-277). If jazz is a way of transforming hardship and beauty, autoethnographic writing can also help us to improvise our ways forward on a creative path. Such musical words, I hope, are percolating within my colleague’s spirit, deepening in sound through her suffering, so when she is finally able to submerge from brokenness, she will speak with clarity and resonance. Through her eyes we might see the delicate balance of tragedy and comedy, as well as the redemption and renewal of words re-entering her life. Her words could convey a picture of her indomitable spirit finding its way forward in a world that was once impenetrable. When she speaks these words, which have pierced through her despair, I trust that they will be beautiful. I hold onto the promise that she made until then. “One day, when the time is right, I will write about it all, and I will let you know when I do.”

Concluding thoughts

The second wave, which had devastated other countries around the world, has come, but the numbers have not overwhelmed. Around greater Sydney, masks have been mandated in public places to limit the spread of the pandemic and as many Australians abide by these rules as their new normal, the devastating projections have not been realised. On an institutional level, our Faculty has resolved itself to the loss of its major flagship course that has come to a rest after four decades. Staff are resolved to finding a new way to re-invent themselves and their future, looking for ways to navigate this brave new world. Drastic change has been made and we recognise that we can no longer exist the way that we had. The initial shock of the pandemic's devastation has also worn off enough for us to realise that disruptions can also present an opportunity. As academic researchers we therefore find ourselves writing autoethnographically to explore what these opportunities are, documenting our uncertainty through this creative, vibrant and embodied autoethnographic lens, not only to capture the changing world, but to cultivate the imagination to re-envision the future.

References

- Davey, N. (2013). *Unfinished worlds: Hermeneutics, aesthetics and Gadamer*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Eisner, E. (1997) The promise and perils of alternative forms of data representation. *Educational Researcher*, 26(6), 4-10.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000).
- Ellis, C., Adams, E.T., & Bochner, A.P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research*, 12(1), 273-290.
- Freeman, M. (2019). Perturbing Anticipation: Jazz, Effective-History, Dialogue, and the Nonrepresentational Movement of Hermeneutic Understanding. *Qualitative Inquiry*. Advanced online publication. <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/doi/full/10.1177/1077800418819623>

Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (Rev. ed., J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum.

Lather, P. (1993). Fertile obsession: Validity after poststructuralism. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34(4), 673-694.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.-a). Reflexivity [Def. 1]. Retrieved March 14, 2020, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contemplation>

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.-b). Isolate [Def. 2]. Retrieved March 14, 2020, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/isolate?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld

Poulos, C. (2010). Spirited Accidents: An Autoethnography of Possibility. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(1), 49-56.

Smith, S.S., & Lloyd, R.J. (2019). Life Phenomenology and Relational Flow. *Qualitative Inquiry*. Advanced online publication.

Walsh, S. (2012). Contemplation, Artful Writing: Research with Internationally Educated Female Teachers. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18(3), 273-285.