

Constructing a multivocal self: A critical autoethnography

Juria (Julie) Choi

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student:

Date:

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I have been so privileged to have had the opportunity to work with my amazing supervisor, to share intellectual conversations with my close friend after work each day, and to have been supported and encouraged in the most caring and inspiring ways by my partner. Each of these individuals has patiently listened to me telling and retelling my story endlessly over the last six years and when this is all over, I am sure they will welcome the break! This is a long-winded way of conveying my gratitude to Professor Alastair Pennycook, Professor David Nunan and Dr. Emi Otsuji for their amazing support, professionalism and friendship. I have taken much more than their advice and conversations over the years; their voices and ways of seeing are also deeply intertwined with who I see myself becoming.

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On that note, I am also aware that in work that deals with the construction of multilingual narratives, there is a tendency for the writing to exude a kind of "multilingual pride", a pride that sometimes positions multilingual experiences or identities as superior to their so-called monolingual counterparts. The close interactions I have had with those I have mentioned here, listening to their stories, and thinking about their own multilingualism, have forced me to think much more cautiously about the ways I present my ideas and the tone of my writing. This is an ongoing process for me and the highly introspective nature of the kind of work I am involved in sometimes makes it very difficult to put aside or pull back from the benefits that I have received living a multilingual life. I have, to the best of my ability, tried to avoid such romanticizing. However, depending on the reader, this may not always appear to be the case throughout the thesis. The message I wish to convey here is my recognition of this issue and my continuing commitment to work towards writing productive narratives that focus on the important aspects of multilingual and monolingual, or in the case of my thesis, "multivocal" lives.

Scott (1985) pointed out that people often don't realize how "millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef" (p. xvii). Similarly, it is every single minute these individuals have so generously shared with me or lingered in my mind that this work became possible. I hope I have used the experiences, insights and dialogues well in the finished product.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the possibilities of critical autoethnographic study in helping multilinguals become more aware of the larger politics underlying the relationship between language and identity, examine their own roles and vulnerabilities in social situations, and work towards the transformation of an ethical subject.

Although there is literature to show how mobility and the large-scale, global flows of people in the current era are increasingly dissolving essentialist ideas of race, nationality, cultural practices, linguistic identities and so on, twenty-first century multilingual accounts still exemplify a deep level of anxiety, confusion and frustration on issues of authenticity and legitimacy in relation to language and identity. Critical reflexive multilingual accounts can play an important role in transforming these vulnerabilities into knowledge, capital, and necessary vulnerabilities. This study adds to this growing body of work.

Using my own multilingual experiences as data in the form of diary entries, photographs, correspondences with others, media clips, and memories, I demonstrate not so much how individuals are able to take an active role in self-interpreting and constructing their own lives, which is self-evident, but rather, the process of how individuals can learn to think differently and re-frame or re-signify their understanding in order to open up multiple future possibilities. Starting with my own critical incidents of feeling dispossession in one of my languages (Korean) in my linguistic repertoire, I draw on a wide range of scholarly literature to critically self-analyze and interpret past and present experiences, desires, intentions, complicities, and performances using a narrative structure.

By placing my experiences within a scholarly framework, this study attempts to demonstrate the importance of questioning what lies behind everyday utterances and life events, and to think about the political and ethical implications of the utterances, thoughts, actions, and stories of the self and others. As a result of this work, I argue that troubling one's own epistemological understanding of language and identity enables one to re-imagine and re-fashion one's identity. In the case of this work, the study has enabled me to re-signify my identity from a "multilingual" to a "multivocal" identity.

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