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Humanising the dehumanised: an autoethnographic performance project

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2020
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Title: Humanising the dehumanised: An Auto-ethnographic Performance Project

Masters Research





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Course code:

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Due date: 15 March 2019

Topic: Humanising the dehumanised: An Autoethnographic Performance Project

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MOEKETSI KGOTLE 15/03/2019

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This research report on creative research has consisted of several stages of work namely:

- **a research proposal**
- **an initial performance as a research project**
- **a reworking of the performance as a research project and its final performance**
- **a framing document**
- **a critical performance installation as a response to the performance as research**
- **a reflection research essay**

Taking the above stages into account, this research then is submitting the following as the body of evidence for the research report on creative research:

- **Essay 1. Framing document**
- **Essay 2. Performance as Research**
- **Essay 3. Critical Performance Installation**
- **Essay 4. Reflective Research Essay**



Masters Research

Framing Documents

Essay 1

Title: Humanising the dehumanised: An Auto-ethnographic Performance Project



Master Research

TITLE: Humanising the dehumanised: An Autoethnographic Performance Project

Abstract

The research seeks to find a way to help people who feel they have been dehumanised. A hero's journey is used as Applied Theatre to help people identify the issues that hold them back. They are then helped to transform those emotional issues into challenges. This Performance as Research project explores individual challenges and the resistance inherent in everyone to answering a call to duty (Bronzite, 2017). The call to duty, if we allow it, can be part of our own transformation process, taking us from a place of hurt to a place of healing. The research will take the shape of an autoethnographic intervention.

Problem Statement

Those who have been brought up in black society may have been traumatised by a dehumanising experience. When I finally got a chance to go to Wits University I realised that there were things that reminded me of the trauma I had been through. Performance as Research allowed me to ask why my body was reacting in that way. I found that performing helped me to be free of that trauma, by facing up to it. I realised then that people are sitting with different forms of trauma and that they need to be helped to address the trauma so that they can take the first steps to overcome it. I believe that, as people tell their stories, they can become aware of what has traumatized them.

Purpose of Statement

My interest in using autoethnography is to give people a chance to observe and reflect on their own life experiences. I used my personal story to explore the importance of addressing trauma. Performance as Research has given me a tool which I can use to reflect on my trauma and be enabled to share my experience with others. Autoethnography can help the audience to reflect on their trauma. Pavlenko supports me by saying that the main advantage of personal narrative is that it gives access to one's private worlds and provides rich data (Pavlenko, 2002, 2007). This research will present a way to move performance beyond mere description to a transformative action which becomes a transformative experience for the actor-audience relationship.

Sharing my initial story, with the specific intention of gaining healing from it, helped me find release. I therefore, take from my study of Performance as Research, clear steps and intentions which can be used to help others find lasting release from their hurts through sharing their stories.

Research Question

In what way can an autoethnographic performance intervention humanise dehumanised individuals in South Africa?

Rationale

The journey started in 2016. I left Parys to go to Gauteng to study at Drama for Life. To go to Wits without money and accommodation was stressful. At that time we were urged to celebrate that we were Africans. I was challenged a lot by the speech of former President Mbeki (I AM AN AFRICAN). The speech took me back, in thought, to my home and I asked myself if I was proud to be an African? The response was 'No' as there was nothing to be proud of. We were still fighting the same battles. The **Fees Must Fall campaign** was a student-led protest movement that began in mid-October 2015 in South Africa. The goals of the movement were to stop increases in student fees as well as to increase government funding of universities. The trauma of the Fees must Fall demonstration was felt in my body. I remember very well the morning we moved from Wits to Rosebank College to mobilise students for the Fees must Fall campaign. When we get there we found police officers on the road and they told us to go back to Wits. We did as we were told. We stood in front of the gate on Jorrissen Street with no guns or any form of weapons. I was next to the turnstile when I saw a white policeman whispering in the ear of a black policeman. The white man

moved to the police van. I saw a line of a black men standing with guns pointing at their own children! That picture made me cry. The black man that the white man had spoken to was the first one to open fire. I saw students running, trying to find a place of safety while the people who we had expected to protect us were shooting and beating us! I ran towards the Wits school of Arts and when I looked back I saw two horses in the road and a white man standing, neither shooting or beating anyone. Then the news spread that there were a bunch of hooligans causing nothing but trouble. It reminded me of what I had been through when working for a white couple in Parys.

The journey continued, from 2017 through to 2018. The journey was a personal adventure into my subconscious in an effort to understand and find closure for certain traumatic events in my past but, what started out as a simple journey quickly turned into an interrogation of a personal experience of racial discrimination. As a black society, we have a history of people being dehumanised by apartheid and by means of words, torture and acts of racism. Even our communities were being separated, as in Alex and Sandton. These two residential areas are divided by a road which cuts through them and I think that that was a way to dehumanise people that was devised by the government. I like the way Brene Brown speaks about removing people's moral protection first with words, and then with images (Brown, 2017). I agree with Brown because I believe that separation is one aspect of dehumanisation. In my Performance as Research, I show how working for an elderly white couple was not easy. The first thing I had to do when I arrived at work was to clean up the poop of the 5 big dogs that were running around the yard. While I was working the old lady would come and give me food on a metal plate and a metal mug which, for me, symbolised a prison. At

home, we do not use metal plates. On the plate were two slices of bread with a lot of sugary jam, and in the cup a black coffee with a lot of sugar.

The sound on the metal plate made me feel alone and cold. Remembering the plates and mugs that we used at home pained me and made me miss the warmth of my mother. I was not well treated by the white couple but I kept on working for them and holding on because we needed that R40.

The woman told me I should not put the plate in the sink. That statement made me ask the question why? As I was about to clean the kennels of the dogs, I found metal plates similar to the one that I was using. My body froze and my mind stopped functioning for a second. I felt lost. Sharing the story was just the beginning of my recovery. Stories are timeless and hold the vast wealth of the psyche, they provoke thought, they are meaning makers, and they teach and inspire us to new ways of being (Campbell, 1988 cited in Beglau, 2012).

It is important for South Africans to get back the dignity that was stripped away from them in apartheid times and the way in which this can be done needs to be explored by using drama. I believe so much in autoethnography because it starts by affecting the individual and then society and then it moves on to affect the whole world. The beauty of drama is that it uses techniques that allow one to enter those very spaces that are personally daunting. Techniques such as role play allow for spontaneity, expression, the assimilating of reality, the exploring of problems and the discovering of solutions (Emunah, 1994). I began to hope that the powerful effect which my experience had had on me could be changed. Emunah (2009) explains that drama can offer a journey of gradual blossoming in which risk-taking, resistance and fears are present but within levels of trust.

South African Context

This research is important in South Africa because so many people have been dehumanized. South African history is one long story of legalised dehumanisation.

I am interested in how the personal story can reveal the political acts of dehumanisation**.** The process of humanising can manifest in the people becoming more hopeful; in their letting go of shame and gaining confidence. We are needing now, more than ever, to find ways, through performance, to tell the stories of people's authentic, heroic journeys of liberation. The Performance as Research study showed that performance can be a powerful revelatory and therapeutic tool. I believe that through the re-humanising experience of an autoethnographic performance intervention people will be helped to look back and face their fears.

The work done in Applied Theatre educates people and helps them to move beyond their obstacles and towards their desired goals. This art form is about the practitioner helping the people they work with to make the necessary changes in their lives, their thinking and in their being, and thus to attain their end goal. The change could be in behaviour, in understanding, thinking, or in their emotions. It can manifest in the people becoming more hopeful or in their letting go of shame and gaining confidence. Landy points out that the change concerns what the person has identified as the main area in which they, as their own hero, need assistance (Landy, 2012). So it is all about the politically responsible individual and how they see or come across change.

Autoethnography as a research method

Autoethnography, as a method, is interesting in that it gives an individual a voice and the opportunity to tell their personal stories. The people who have explored it explain

it in different ways because it is the emerging way of doing research. Auto-ethnographers vary in their emphasis on auto-(self), ethno-(the sociocultural connection), and -graphy (the application of the research process) (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Although some consider a personal narrative to be the same thing as auto-ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), others use autoethnography as a means of explicitly linking concepts from the literature to the narrated personal experience (Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996) and, as Duncan said, they support the approach as rigorously and justifiably as any other form of inquiry (Duncan, 2004). The underlying assumption of qualitative research is that reality and truth are constructed and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which they live (Silverman, 2000; Freebody, 2003). I hear all these voices but I think that the one that is most clear to me is that of Silverman and Freebody because, to me, auto-ethnography is about two things: the reality and the honesty of the story. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) "...qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (2000, 3). Although a qualitative approach opposes the positivist standpoint that assumes that reality is objective and independent from the researcher, it has been accepted as a valuable practice of research. Qualitative Research employs a variety of methods which imply a humanistic stance in which the phenomena under investigation, are examined through the eyes and experiences of individual participants (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). This particular approach ensures that personal narratives, experiences and opinions become valuable data which provide researchers with tools to find those tentative answers they are looking for (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Advantages of Autoethnography

The advantage I see in autoethnography is the freedom it creates to place life-studies in academia. An important advantage, I believe, is the potential that it has to contribute to others lives by making them reflect on and empathise with the narratives presented.

One of the main advantages of personal narratives is that they give us access to an individual's private world and provide rich data (Pavlenko, 2002, 2007). Another advantage is the ease of access to data since the researcher calls on his or her own experiences as the base from which to investigate a particular phenomenon. This also has its limitations as, by subjecting a personal narrative to analysis, the research also becomes limited in its conclusions. However, Bochner and Ellis (1996) consider that this limitation on the self is not valid since, "If culture circulates through all of us, how can auto-ethnography be free of connection to a world beyond the self?" (1996, 24).

Another advantage is acknowledged by Richards (2008), who sees auto-ethnography as an emancipatory discourse since …those being emancipated are representing themselves, instead of being colonized by others and subjected to their agendas or relegated to the role of second-class citizens. Thus, autoethnography represents for many the right to tell their truth as experienced, without waiting for others to express what they really want to be known and understood.

Bochner and Ellis pointed out that despite the advantages of autoethnography as a method of research, as mentioned above, there are also some limitations which need to be borne in mind. For example, the feelings evoked in readers may be unpleasant since the connections readers make to narratives cannot be predicted (Bochner and Ellis, 1996). Another limitation is the exposure of the researcher's inner

feelings and thoughts which require honesty and a willingness to self-disclose. This limitation also entails many ethical questions which sometimes may be very difficult for the researcher to answer, making autoethnography a complicated method to follow.

Performance

My performance takes the form of the hero's journey. All stories have a starting point, a middle and an ending. In addition, every individual in life has their own story and they are the hero in that story. Every hero has obstacles, inner conflicts and fears (Bronzite, 2017). The hero is the one who is on a journey towards self-attainment. The goal is connected to the process towards the desired outcome. Like all journeys, there are challenges and obstacles that threaten the arrival at the desired destination.

The performance will start at the parking lot of Wit's school of Art. The parking lot is between the Digital Arts and Wit's school of Arts. It is a small space with cars and we used it for playing ground soccer. The place needs you to act responsibly because there are cars. The performance will move into the school of Art building, around the corridors and a selected section in the building.

The Performance

The performance starts with a young man playing soccer and his game is disrupted by an invisible jacket. The jacket is the symbol of taking on responsibilities for providing for the family and the soccer ball represents innocence. A symbol is a literary device that gives an object, place, or person a deeper meaning. A symbol is

a tangible object that represents an idea. Symbols are based on the setting in which they occur, but some symbols can be common across cultures and time (Belknap, 2017*).*

The performance moves to the phase of doing *diketjhe* and playing the drums. This was something that I loved to do. Then it goes to my home, to the time when my mother fell and I had to take on the challenge of being a provider. It moves to the period when I was working as a handyman and moves to the theatre space at Wits. It ends up at the computer lab.

I start the journey, by sharing my story in order to activate memories. Slade argued that drama is not just about the performance, but about the personal growth and expression of everyone from childhood to adulthood (Slade 1954). Grotowski (1968) clarifies that drama can help remove inherent psychic resistance and allow inner impulses and outer reactions to meet in such a way that they come through as one and are expressed through outer reactions.

I use the sharing of a story to activate the memory of that, time and place. And I use dance as a release from the anxiety, hurt and shame of that time. Through this, I seek to emancipate my body and, hopefully, to overcome the unwanted triggers of the memories of my past. The act of taking my audience through the journey and asking them to travel with me while I tell my story plays its part as a tool for engaging them.

How does this translate into the work of an applied student?

In theatre and education, the work is about guiding and helping the other heroes to move beyond their obstacles and towards their desired goal. The art form is about the practitioner helping the people they work with to make the necessary changes in their life, in their thinking and being, and so to finally attain their end goal. The change could be in behaviour, understanding, thinking or emotional. It can manifest in the people becoming more hopeful or in their letting go of shame and gaining confidence. The change is about what the person has identified as the main area in which they as their own hero need assistance (Landy, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

One of the main features of autoethnography is its emphasis on the self and it is this specific feature that raises the problematic ethical considerations of the method (Ellis, 2007). As a personal narrative is developed, the context and the people interacting with the subject start to emerge in the reflexive practice (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). It is at this point that the problem of obtaining or not obtaining consent to be included in the narrative has to be considered (Miller and Bell, 2002). Evocative autoethnography includes the description of periods that may involve sensitive issues with regard to the researcher and the people around him or her (Wall, 2008). Due to this, special consideration has to be taken into account when referring to loved ones such as family members, partners or close friends. Evocative autoethnographies may be written in the first or third person. For some, using the third person gives a sense of distance from the events and the people being referred to. As explained in Ellis et al. (2007), Denzin (1997) in a statement

said, "I was just going to disguise myself because I still didn't have the freedom to - I hadn't given myself the freedom to - write that narrative in the first person" (1997, 317). For others, the first person seems to be the only way to be completely explicit about the events being analysed. In a reflection on a narrative he wrote, Wyatt (2006) admits changing some parts of his narrative from the first to the third person because it gave him a certain sense of distance.

Performance as Research (PAR)

In my PAR, I explored my personal story, using the hero's journey to look at my personal pain and the hindrances and limitations caused by my childhood pain. The hero exists in an ordinary world, this is where the story starts (Bronzite, 2017). He plays with other children, has a deep love for soccer. He dreams about being a professional soccer player, practising and playing hard for long hours. My story takes the form of a hero's journey. All stories have a starting point, a middle and an ending. In addition, every individual in life has their own story and they are the hero in that story. Every hero has obstacles, inner conflicts and fears (Bronzite, 2017). The hero is the one who is on a journey towards self-attainment. As an ordinary human, being from an ordinary town called Parys Tumahole , the hero exists in an ordinary world; this is where his story starts (Bronzite, 2017). The goal is connected to a process which leads towards a desired outcome. Like all journeys, there are challenges and obstacles that threaten the arrival at the desired destination. My world centered on playing soccer, my school and my family. My mother was the centre of my world, she worked hard to provide for us till she was unable to work anymore. Finding work was the only option for me I started working for the old white couple with 5 dogs. They gave me food on the same kind of plate that they used to feed their dogs. This act of

dehumanisation affected me badly until I faced up to it. The feeling made me numb. Brene Brown said, in one of the Ted Ex talks, "You cannot selectively numb the bad stuff. When we are numb, we numb everything; we numb joy, gratitude and happiness, then we are miserable and we go looking for things that will make us feel better so we drink and eat."

Slade argues that drama is not just about the performance, but about expression and the personal growth of everyone from childhood to adulthood (Slade 1954). Grotowski (1968) clarifies this by stating that drama can help remove inherent psychic resistance and allow the inner impulse and outer reactions to meet in such a way that they come through as one and are expressed through an outer reaction.

What I have discovered through PAR

The power of the story.

Telling the story and being able to go to the dark spaces of my life affected me powerfully. The experience of sharing the story helped me to feel that I am not alone.

The layers of discrimination.

Reflection on, and the observation of the many acts of discrimination which, in so many ways have filled my life, made me realise why, at times, I react to things in my life the way that I do.

The power of the site

This too can influence the work we do. I realised that the site is powerful because it can break with the traditional form of theatre and make the audience to be participants.

The power to adapt

PAR is being able to adapt, when necessary at the click of a finger. It is a performance which mirrors the past, present or future.

Qualitative research through autoethnography

Methodology: The performance laboratory process included site exploration. During December, I moved around my home town looking at what is happening there. I saw the origins of the powerful stories that I had forgotten. I collected pictures of myself and went through a process of looking at the pictures and narrating the story behind the picture. The process of analyzation started, and I used the idea of multivocality to get to the story of myself. My understanding of multivocality is that it gives all the voices that are located in the researcher a chance to be represented in the autoethnography. Robert (2010) says that these narrative voices are a means of provoking a deeper understanding of the often silent tension that lies underneath observable behaviour in a story. While a story could be multivocal, as in focusing on the interaction going on among the researcher and the participants (Ellis, 2009), for this project, multivocality was for the researcher.

A combination of Performance as Research (PAR) and of story telling arises out of the photos. I put photos down on the ground and moved among them to find the feelings that relate to the photo and its texture. I will looked at the photo during the PAR visiting all the stories of my life. My observations were mainly on the stories and moments which have dehumanized me. I checked on how I feel now and how I felt back then. Then I acted out the reflection of the moment by applying multiple voices, checking on how I reacted then and what I should have done to humanize myself. I grouped the moments portrayed, together, then I chose the one I wanted to share. Ethically that is correct because I exercised the power of choice. I used the hero's journey to help me to give the structure of the story a clear beginning, middle and ending. When I had put down the story on the ground, I started to work on finding the

aesthetics of the performance. It went to rehearsal but the rehearsal was not like the well-known format of rehearsal. Usually the rehearsal is based on empowering the actor who embodies the story to be ready to relive the story again. The process followed here was based on the personal data and the choice of that part of the story which the actor wanted to explore with the idea of getting the power and strength to re-humanise himself.

Literature review

Autoethnography

This is a form of qualitative research in which an author uses anecdotal and personal experience to connect the autobiographical story to a wider cultural, political, and social meaning and understanding (Carolyn Ellis, 2004).

Qualitative research employs a variety of methods and takes a humanistic stance in which the phenomena under investigation are examined through the eyes and experiences of individual participants (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Personal narratives, experiences and opinions provide researchers with valuable data and the tools to find those tentative answers they are looking for (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

A well-known autoethnographer, Carolyn Ellis (2004), defines it as "research, writing, story, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political." Autoethnography helps me to make the connection between a personal story and the social context. Autoethnography allows me to draw on personal experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture of dehumanisation. My Performance as Research was the first step to understanding my personal narrative

of dehumanisation. Autoethnography can be explored in different ways and I have chosen to perform in a production based on my story. Durham states that autoethnography is an embodied method and writing practice (Durham, 2017).

Dehumanisation

Dehumanization can be defined as a situation in which the human ability to flourish is severely restricted and impaired. In such a situation, people are not treated as equals, as subjects whose needs matter, but [they] are removed from the moral protection of being humans by words and the use of images (Brown, 2017). This section will act as a torch to help me to recognise the dehumanisation that one comes across every day in the media, and in our daily lives and in the opinions exchanged on Tweeter and Facebook. The young find out that there are two groups of people on the social media, those people that agree with each other confirming their shared belief and those who put you aside by using words that are dehumanising if you disagree with them (Brown 2017).

Liberation

The black youth, in particular, have to undergo a liberating process in order to get back their identity and dignity as black youth. It is important that I, as a researcher, understand the concept of liberty because it will help me to rate and analyse the outcome of this project. The exploration of the liberation process may help people to be re-humanised. Seamus Heaney states that:

> The Liberation Cycle starts, very often, when a group becomes aware that what it took for granted or thought of as natural is, in fact, a reflection of a system based on prejudice and discrimination. Their

> reaction is to become rebellious. Where initially their attitude to themselves was negative and to the dominant group positive (I U) they now begin to question this (I U). While this might have the appearance of throwing off the shackles of oppression it is clear that, at this stage, people are still acting from within the constraints of internalized oppression. They have begun to identify some of the ways in which they are systematically mistreated by the dominant group but they have still not become aware of how this has been internalized and how it affects their behaviour. Their strategies for liberation at this stage, therefore, are heavily influenced by a victim-type approach to the problem (1988).

The hero's journey

As a guide to exploring and finding my personal place in society, I take on the role of a navigator who keeps in mind the objective. Putting my narrative together helps me to discover what I should use to navigate my way through auto-ethnography.

It is interesting to explore the hero's journey as a means of putting together the story as a whole. It has helped me to create an interesting story which explores aesthetics. I believe we are our hero's in our stories. The hero's journey guided me to find the beginning, middle and ending of my story. Exploring the use of the different elements in theatre helped a lot in dealing with the issue of dehumanisation. Distancing and taking the audience into the journey is what was important in my PAR exploration and I will do the same thing again but explore more deeply the abstract concepts.

Images and symbols

For this research I focused on the significance of symbols and interesting signs in order to carry the story forward. It might also help the story to attain some of the functions that Schechner speaks about and to answer the question of this research project. A symbol is not literal and it can be simple or complex. Symbols are often multi-layered and can be developed using words, sounds, objects and lights, characters, customs, movements, gestures and images. They are used to represent something else by association, relationship or meaning (Cash, 2015).

Body and impulsive reaction in performance

In this research I explore how the body and voice can be used to convey the narrative. This is very important in creative work. The body is holding a lot of information/messages that sometimes come from the reaction to the moment. This kind of work is not predictable so it gives the body a space to react, in that moment, and includes the audience reactions. All of these reactions work together to compliment the story. The body is flexible because we all have different things that make us to react or that make us tap into some of the info that is sitting in the body. Grotowski says that the voice and the actor's body become central to the performance. This integration comes from the total physical and mental reactions of the actor. This integration must be treated in a disciplined manner and is only used after intensive training (Grotowski, 1967, 61).



Conclusion

The research will be helpful to individuals and society. There is an ' I ' before all of us so we all need to allow the personal stories to come out because they do influence society. The research will take the form of a lab process, a performance then reflection. It is based on Qualitative Research. The video is holding the experience of a dehumanised young man from a family that needs him to step up and become a bread winner.

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