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Personal Narratives and Social Constructs through Autoethnography in Performance Studies

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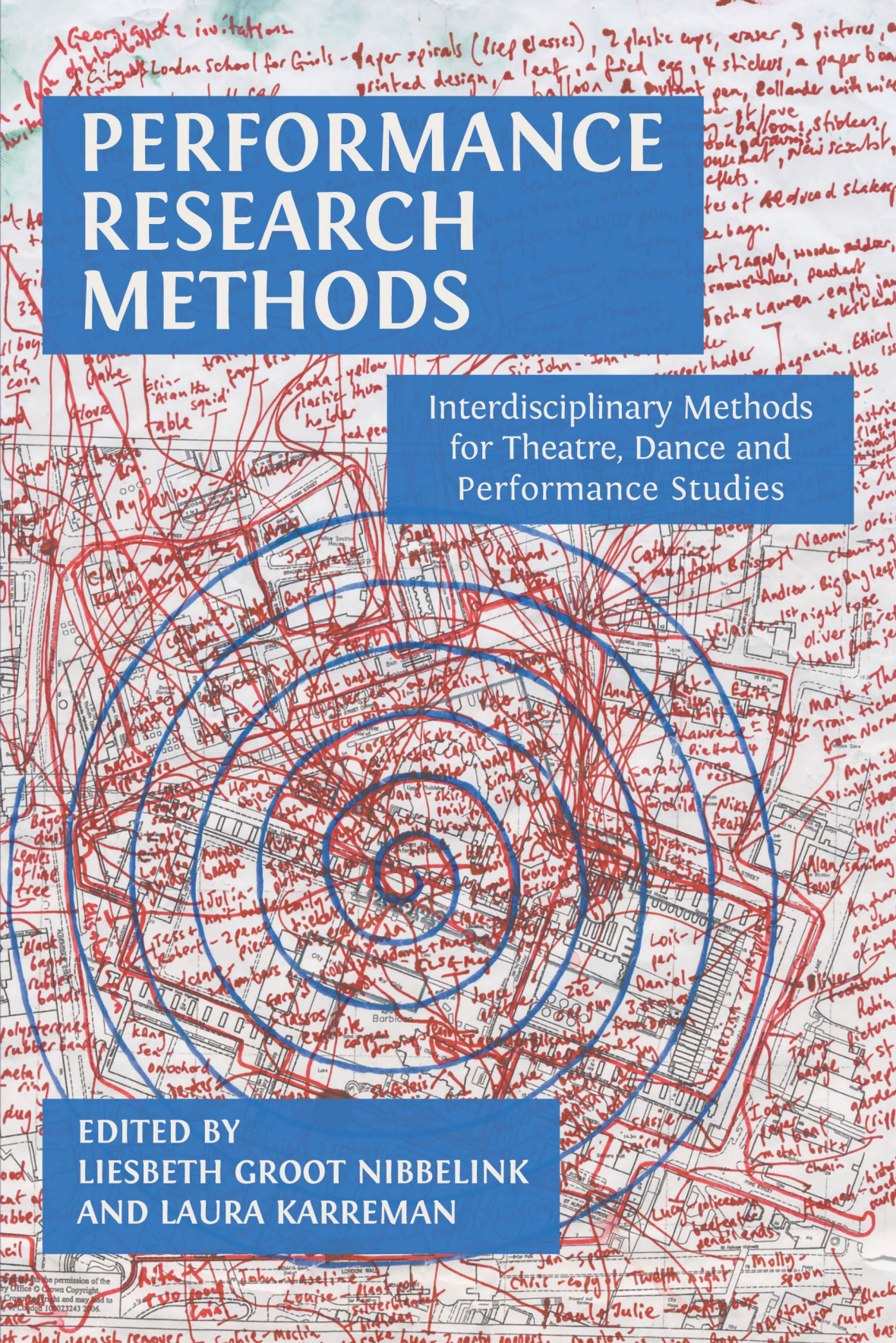

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14. Personal Narratives and Social Constructs through Autoethnography in Performance Studies

Wigbertson Julian Isenia

Summary

This chapter combines personal experience and cultural analysis through the method of autoethnography.[1] The author, a Black, non-binary, queer researcher, draws on their fieldwork in Curaçao to examine *Bos di Nos Pueblo*, a 2015 play by Teatro Kadaken. Through a combination of diary entries, observations, interviews, and self-reflection, the chapter explores how issues of sexuality, identity, and belonging are expressed through performance. The author reflects on their own position within the community and recounts moments of closeness and tension, including a public vote on same-sex marriage that highlighted their family's rejection and the resulting emotional distance this created. The chapter concludes by linking these descriptions of autoethnography to other contexts, such as a project in which undocumented migrants

1 A note from the editors: We would like to point out to readers that this book also includes another contribution on autoethnography as a method in performance research, titled "Autoethnography in Performance Studies: The Performativity of Queer Parenting." These contributions are different in subject matter, but they do also contain some overlaps, since they deal with the same methodological approach. We recommend reading these as paired contributions.

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developed a bilingual theatre piece based on their lived experiences. Using these examples, the chapter shows how autoethnography can connect individual stories to broader social and political issues.

Introduction

Autoethnography is a fundamental method within qualitative research because it uniquely combines two methodologies: autobiography, which pertains to the writer's own life, and ethnography, which involves the scientific observation of cultures and people. It gives the researcher a dual role as both a reflective observer, who critically examines and interprets their own experiences, and an engaged participant, who actively takes part in and influences the cultural contexts being studied. Central to this approach is the use of the 'I' voice, which shifts from impersonal observation to research grounded in the author's personal experiences. This method avoids self-indulgence and allows the reader to gain knowledge through the author's insights, mistakes, and encounters with others. Autoethnography centres the author's cultural experience and shows how rituals, ceremonies, theatre productions, everyday interactions, protests, and sports create meaning through the author's experiences. Autoethnography is not a stand-alone method in my research; I combine it with performance analysis and interviews to enrich my findings. My identity as a Black, non-binary, queer individual is a central aspect that inherently shapes my research perspective. This positionality underscores a fundamental practice in autoethnography: all researchers should explicitly acknowledge their personal background and inherent biases. In this chapter, I leverage my fieldwork in Curaçao, focusing specifically on my interactions with the performance of *Bos di Nos Pueblo* (2016) by Teatro Kadaken to examine the recognition and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) sexual rights and identities on the island.

Drawing on my experiences, I can address gaps in research about queer Caribbean people and gain insights that outsiders might not access. As an 'insider', I have access to information and interviews that would otherwise be inaccessible. This role allows a deeper understanding of customs, aided by pre-existing cultural and linguistic knowledge (Hayano 1979). While this stance foregrounds subjectivity

in ethnographic work, it carries significant responsibility in gathering and interpreting information. Additionally, although I belong to the community, I acknowledge that I may not fully identify with every subgroup, and I embrace this productive tension in my research rather than suspending it.

Through a detailed account of my engagement with *Bos di Nos Pueblo*, this chapter underscores the potential of autoethnography as both a methodology and social inquiry. My approach is grounded in ethical commitments specific to autoethnography, including reflexively navigating my dual role as an insider and researcher, thoughtfully determining how much of my personal experience to disclose, and inviting community members to review and comment on my interpretations. I also attend to emotional care by acknowledging the personal risks of deep self-examination and remain sensitive to cultural nuances when representing shared experiences. By weaving these practices into every stage of the research, I demonstrate how autoethnography can be both rigorous and respectful of the community it explores. By applying this method to the study of theatre in Curaçao, I aim to examine how autoethnography can serve as a powerful tool for bridging the gap between individual lived experiences and collective cultural practices.

Context

Historically, the term 'autoethnography' has been applied in four overlapping contexts: a first-person account by a non-academic societal member; an ethnography of one's own culture by either academics or non-academics; an ethnography that incorporates significant autobiographical elements of the author; and a narrative with the researcher as the subject (Reed-Danahay 1997).

Through a detailed study of the Dani people in Irian Jaya, Karl G. Heider first applied the term 'autoethnography' in 1975 to describe a method in which local schoolchildren voiced their own daily activities, thereby providing an insider's perspective on cultural practice. This approach to autoethnography therefore aligns with the initial definition outlined above. Heider's study chose to address a simple question: 'What do people do?' His method involved compiling responses from

60 Dani schoolchildren and documenting 106 verbs reflective of their daily activities. It offered a glimpse into the Dani way of life by valuing mundane practices over sensational or conflict-driven aspects, and thus presenting a fuller representation of their existence. This method is crucial because it provides an insider's perspective on important or customary activities, which may differ from external assumptions.

Autoethnography, rooted in anthropology, prompts us to question our stereotypes of anthropology's early stages, including proto-anthropology and evolutionism, a Darwinian theory that ranks cultures from savagery to civilisation. In these formative years, anthropologists aimed to understand 'the other' by studying different societies and developing theories on the basis of their observations. However, this observational process was inherently unequal, with some findings inadvertently supporting colonial logic. Knowledge became a tool for conquest and subjugation and was used to exploit, manage, and "civilize" populations domestically and in the colonies (Pels and Salemink, 2000).

Building on critiques that emerged in the early twentieth century, Karl G. Heider's 1975 autoethnographic study of the Dani people marked a decisive break from the long-standing evolutionary paradigm. In those formative years, anthropologists sought to understand 'the other' through detached observation, yet their findings often served colonial agendas by casting such societies as inherently inferior.

This historical context highlights anthropology's contentious history and diverse debates, including questions about who writes or conducts research, the nature of knowledge, methods of acquisition, and the study's subjects. Traditional fieldwork, defined as the process of observing and collecting data about people over an extended period, often positions researchers as detached, objective outsiders who never reflect on their role. In response to these debates, anthropology has shifted towards a more inclusive approach, embracing diverse voices and experimental writing forms such as autobiography (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Behar and Gordon 1995; Ellis and Bochner 1996).

However, Heider's ethnographic approach is now relatively standardized and is absorbed into broader ethnographic fieldwork practices. Autoethnography differs by foregrounding the researcher's own cultural experience or by weaving substantial autobiographical elements into the ethnographic account. Autoethnography is not defined

by a single research method or theory; instead, it is a comprehensive approach that shapes all aspects of fieldwork. These aspects of fieldwork include preparation, planning, site selection, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination.

Autoethnography combines autobiographical and ethnographic elements and grants the author a dual role: simultaneously engaging as a participant within the culture and as an observer analysing it. Autoethnography stands apart from autobiography, which typically recounts an individual's life story, centred on personal milestones and obstacles, mostly devoid of cultural or social analysis. In contrast, ethnography is a disciplined anthropological approach focused on the observational study of cultures over an extended period, with ethnographers typically acting as external observers of customs. By merging the introspection of autobiography with the analytical scope of ethnography, it delivers a comprehensive contextualized account. Autoethnography adds introspection to traditional research, blurring the line between researcher and subject. This approach encourages a more engaged stance. By using the 'I' voice, autoethnography moves away from the detached, objective stance of traditional ethnography.

Autoethnography has attracted a range of criticisms, some of which are well-founded and others less so. Critics rightly warn against self-indulgence, narcissism, and ethical pitfalls when personal narratives risk exploiting relationships or compromising confidentiality (Atkinson 2006; Sparkes 2000). Less warranted objections include claims that first-person writing lacks scientific rigour, that its findings cannot be generalised beyond the individual, that its non-replicability renders it unreliable, and that it breaches the necessary detachment of academic inquiry.

Autoethnography embeds personal narrative within systematic analysis, linking individual experience to broader sociocultural frameworks. It aims for analytical transferability rather than statistical generalisation, and ensures reliability through transparent methods, reflexive journals, thick descriptions (a detailed, context-rich account of behaviour), and clear analytic steps. Far from abandoning ethical standards, it governs self-disclosure with informed consent, anonymisation, and boundary-setting, thus maintaining both scholarly integrity and respectful engagement with participants. It is crucial to

remain vigilant against the risk of self-indulgence. Peer review during publication and peer-to-peer discussions are essential to maintain rigor and balance in autoethnographic work.

Finally, I demonstrate how anthropology and performance studies approaches to autoethnography complement rather than conflict with each other. Anthropology has played a crucial role in developing the theoretical tools needed for autoethnographic work in performance studies. Anthropologists such as Dwight Conquergood and Victor Turner were instrumental in this development. Conquergood's integration of ethnographic methods with performance theory introduced the idea that culture is something people do, not just possess (1985; 1986). This performative turn allows for the study of individuals and their actions as performers and cultural performances. Turner's reframing of ethnography as a performance further expanded this approach (1986). He argued that ethnographers actively participate in the rituals and social interactions they study, paving the way for a more reflexive, self-aware practice.

This shift enabled autoethnography to foreground researchers' perspectives, as seen in the work of artist Michael Sakamoto and cultural studies scholar John Freeman. Sakamoto uses autoethnography to explore his performances, blending his Japanese heritage with his American upbringing and connecting with his cultural past through self-analysis (2022). Similarly, Freeman emphasized the importance of reflexivity and challenged the notion of a single authoritative voice (2015). This means that the way a person interprets their life story is influenced by a larger, shared sense of time and experience that exists beyond just the individual. In other words, while each person has a unique perspective, this perspective is shaped by broader, collective experiences and histories.

How to

Unlike other practice-based or ethnographic methods in performance studies, autoethnography foregrounds the researcher's own story as a site of analysis. It documents performances external to the self and interrogates how the act of 'performing' one's life, through a reflexive narrative, generates analytical insights. Although autoethnography

does not adhere to a singular methodology, several essential aspects and considerations are crucial. Before beginning the study, the researcher should choose a topic, formulate a clear research question, and articulate the aims and relevance of the study. With these foundational elements in place, the first step is to explore a mix of qualitative methodologies to build a robust methodological framework. These methodologies could include journaling (keeping a daily journal throughout the fieldwork process), participant observation (immersing oneself in the community being studied, observing and participating in daily activities), and in-depth interviews (open-ended, conversational interviews with participants).

A literature review is conducted to identify key authors, understand the differences between these methodologies, and find research similar to yours in terms of topic, geography, experience level, or allocated time. This review will help you choose the best methods for your study and create an effective research design. Secondly, choose a study site or phenomenon that offers rich insights and personal interests.

Next, when you are in the field, embracing dual roles as both an observer and participant is crucial to capture detailed experiences and reflect on your role in the context. Focus on documenting personal experiences that stand out as significant, puzzling, or transformative, even if their full importance is not immediately apparent (Johnson 2021). This documentation is vital for later analysis and helps connect one's personal experiences to broader cultural contexts. By doing so, you will see individual stories as part of larger systems of power, revealing the political dimensions within personal narratives.

Fourthly, it is vital to reflect on your background and positionality during your fieldwork to understand the perspective you bring to your research, acknowledging biases and leveraging your skills to enrich your approach. Engage in systematic introspection and reflexivity to examine how your background influences your research and analysis. It is crucial to document your identities and others. Publicly declaring privilege can serve as a form of absolution that reifies hierarchies by centring, for example, whiteness, redeeming guilt and covertly asserting authority, thus underlining the need for reparative scholarship (Gani and Khan, 2024). This approach commences with recognising the complex nature of individual identities and understanding how race, gender, class,

and sexuality, among other factors, shape experiences (Johnson 2021). These identities should not merely be listed but instead reflected upon to discern how the intersection of these identities influences your interactions with interlocutors and, consequently, your fieldwork. For example, by reflecting on moments of confusion, clarity, joy, and discomfort, researchers show readers how they arrived at insights and how specific interactions shaped their fieldwork.

Fifthly, ethical integrity should be ensured by prioritising consent, anonymity, and the careful handling of information, always considering the impact of your research. Ethical considerations are crucial in all forms of autoethnography, with a focus on respecting the autonomy, dignity, and privacy of everyone involved. This ethical approach should guide how you document and share your research journey, encouraging ongoing dialogue and reflection. Crafting effective autoethnography involves producing work that exemplifies high standards and demonstrating a deep understanding of autoethnographic practices that others can learn from or emulate (Salvo 2021). Additionally, good autoethnography should engage with and address injustices, acting as a form of storytelling that inspires change or raises awareness.

Sixthly, writing should be treated as a recursive process of inquiry and presentation, involving continuous reflection and revising to deepen analysis. Seventhly, ground your study in relevant scholarly works to add depth and situate your narrative within theoretical frameworks, while integrating your work into academic dialogues through a focused literature review and positioning your narrative within broader debates to address gaps. Consider how each theoretical framework aligns with your research objectives, aims, and questions.

Eighthly, share your findings with academic and broader audiences, articulating the significance of your work even for those unfamiliar with autoethnography. This is a formality, a responsibility, and a commitment that comes with conducting autoethnographic research. Sharing your findings can be accomplished through various means. Typically, academic findings are shared via conferences and academic publications. For junior researchers and Master's students, consider submitting to graduate-level journals with your supervisor's approval. Throughout the writing process, you can share your work with colleagues in peer groups and with your supervisor during meetings. It is beneficial to have

a clear sense of your main observations, arguments, and conclusions, even if they are not perfect or are still half-baked, during these peer group meetings so that you can work them out together. Reviewing your 'raw' data together might be beneficial if you encounter difficulties. Be mindful that this process can consume a significant amount of meeting time, so reserve it for addressing particularly challenging issues.

Demonstration

This segment of autoethnography stems from my fieldwork in Curaçao, where I attended the performance of *Bos di Nos Pueblo* by Teatro Kadaken approximately eight times in 2016 and 2017. My repeated visits were motivated by a fictional segment of the performance in which, after a brief discussion, the audience voted on the legalisation of same-sex marriage, an issue that was not under consideration at that time. However, in 2024, the Dutch Supreme Court ruled that Curaçao, Aruba, and Sint Maarten must allow same-sex marriage. This ruling aligns Curaçao with other Dutch Caribbean islands such as Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba, where same-sex marriage has been legal since 2012, because they are Dutch municipalities and follow Dutch laws. Same-sex marriage was thus not legal in Curaçao in 2016, and the discourse surrounding same-sex marriage gained momentum, especially since Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius legalized same-sex marriage. This discussion proved crucial to my PhD research on sexual citizenship, highlighting how LGBTQ individuals claim rights through cultural practices and revealing which rights remain denied to them. I chose this example for this chapter despite its imperfections and my own mistakes, hoping it will serve as a valuable learning model for the reader.

For the first step, the methodological framework, I chose archival research to connect contemporary events with historical events and to relate them to my experiences growing up on the island. Building on archive autoethnography (Escalante et al. 2025), walking dramaturg (Garcia 2018), and performative autoethnography (Radwan & Kariotis 2025), I adopted a reflexive, narrative-driven method that treats personal experience, by journaling (Hertoghs et al. 2024), observation, and interviews, as primary data rather than privileging staged events. I frame *Bos di Nos Pueblo* as both performance and rights-claiming. A

focused keyword search ('autoethnography' × 'performance studies'; 'sexual citizenship' × 'Caribbean') yielded multiple results, from which I selected the most relevant. For the second step, a site of study or phenomenon, as a Black, non-binary, queer person from Curaçao, is chosen, and discussions about the LGBTQ community resonate with me on a personal level. Thus, when, during fieldwork, I encounter the all-too-common assertion, 'I have nothing against homosexuals, as long as they stay away from children'—a conflation of homosexuality with paedophilia—it becomes my task to explore my astonishment and hurt and to understand the 'other side.' I question what motivates someone to hold and express such a belief, and I contextualize both my response and that of others.

Other aspects of my life also proved relevant during my research. My relocation from Curaçao to the Netherlands, which occurred over 15 years ago, significantly influenced my perspective. It is also vital to acknowledge that I grew up in a middle-class environment. Returning as a PhD student only highlighted my middle-class background further, positioning me as a 'respected' individual approaching the topic of homosexuality with a so-called objective perspective. This position facilitated my research, granting me easier access at times due to my status as a respected PhD student, sometimes because of my Afro-Curaçaoan background, and at other times because I was part of the LGBTQ community. At other times, a white straight American female friend and colleague would gain access to information that I could not, likely because she was perceived as an outsider. This perception may have made it easier for individuals to share information anonymously or because they were not seen as having so-called insider bias. During fieldwork, I embraced dual roles as both an observer and participant (step 3), documenting significant moments.

Bos di Nos Pueblo is a production that explores the island's political culture, and the challenge young people face in balancing passive observation of party politics with developing their viewpoints. Following its premiere, the play was performed in secondary schools, accompanied by an educational program. It challenges the audience to express their thoughts, preferences, and beliefs, and to contemplate the changes they would make if they were politicians for a day. Through interactive engagement with the actors, the audience forms a new

political party, *Bos di Nos Pueblo* (BDNP, The Voice of Our People), reflecting on difficult choices between reality and ideals, rules and freedom, and the tension between self-interest and the common good. The play features Christopher Barrow, Donovan Benett, Norma Cova, and Albert Schoobaar, with the script by Schoobaar and the direction by Silvia Andringa. Het Fonds Podiumkunsten, Stichting Doen, and the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Nederland supported the production.

Teatro Kadaken, under Albert Schoobaar's artistic direction, uses theatre to discuss complex themes in an accessible manner, encouraging young people and adults to engage with everyday dilemmas. The play, which premiered in November 2015, was performed in community centres and secondary schools, tackling the island's political culture and young people's political engagement through a narrative section, participatory segments, and a chorus alternating throughout the performance. It focuses on the populist politician Lucius Gomes Sr. and his party, Kòrsou Uni Emansipá (Curaçao United Emancipated), and humorously plays with the acronym 'KUE' for its double meaning in Papiamentu, the creole language of the island: it means 'to grab power', and it is also a vulgar expression with another meaning.

I first encountered this performance at a public show in Punda, the city centre of Curaçao. Despite the area's usual evening quietness, Casa Moderna, a temporary art space, was lively. While attending a meeting with my family, who reside in Curaçao, I was particularly interested in the pre-vote discussion on same-sex marriage. During the presentation, viewers collaborate to establish a new party platform for BDNP in response to or in alignment with the more conservative KUE. Topics vary, including the legalisation of soft drugs and lowering the voting age. These party positions are determined after a brief discussion, allowing viewers to present their arguments for or against each issue. A vote is subsequently conducted, and the option that receives the most votes secures its place in the party program.

Unexpectedly, my father and sister voted against same-sex marriage legalisation, provoking my astonishment and discomfort. My father and sister offered an uneasy laugh as they raised their hands, with my sister also shrugging her shoulders. I had never discussed this specific moment—the performance and the way they voted—with them

afterward, likely because I had never openly shared it with anyone before. In this instance, my experience and autoethnography could have been effectively complemented by interviews to better and more accurately illustrate their perspectives. Interestingly, when I asked my sister about this moment nearly eight years later, an event that was vivid in my memory, she could not recall it. However, she mentioned that, given the opportunity today, she would vote in favour of same-sex marriage. This reflection over time, a crucial aspect of ethnography, also reveals how perspectives can change, both for my sister and myself.

This experience led me to view the performance several more times in various school settings, observing diverse student reactions. I observed the theatrical performance at a secondary school during the other seven instances. An unexpected yet significant issue was the dilapidated state of the gymnasium where the event occurred. The 2011 census revealed that the average monthly gross household income in that neighbourhood was below the island's average (3814 ANG versus 5332 ANG), with 11.6 percent of the housing in the area described as being in a poor to deplorable condition. Additionally, the school's proximity downwind from the local oil refinery necessitated frequent closure due to overpowering odours.

Moreover, 26.5 percent of households in the neighbourhood reported experiencing discomfort from air pollution in 2011—nearly double the island-wide average of 14.5 percent. This discrepancy starkly contrasted with the middle-class environment of the school I had attended, underlining the socioeconomic disparities encountered in my fieldwork. Be mindful, as self-indulgence is a potential risk here. While I continuously reflect on my background and positionality (step 4), I do so to clarify the context of my fieldwork and to ensure that readers understand the differences between myself as a researcher and my interlocutors, as well as the perspective from which I am writing.

In these sessions, the question of legalising same-sex marriage in Curaçao was revisited, with students often using graphic language to express their disapproval. Sexual metaphors were prevalent; for example, the saying 'a sword does not fit with another sword' implied the belief that compatibility requires opposites, echoing the concept of yin and yang or a man and a woman. The most common argument against same-sex marriage stemmed from biblical interpretation, suggesting

that God created a man and a woman for each other, immutable and complementary. This argument underscores the conflation of sexuality and gender in the discourse, where a homosexual man is perceived as effeminate, and the roles of men and women are seen as fixed and divinely ordained.

A particularly distressing incident occurred during a discussion when a teacher singled out a timid, quiet schoolkid of ten who slouched and looked down. The teacher asked provocatively if this student would like to comment, insinuating his homosexuality by calling him 'mariku' (a derogatory term comparable to 'faggot'). My heart sank as the student stiffened, and neighbouring schoolchildren erupted in laughter, including from the teacher, unnoticed by other faculty members and performers. This moment could have been an opportunity to expand the scope of autoethnography by incorporating my own experiences as a queer person from Curaçao, combining my reaction (or lack thereof) and a subsequent conversation with the teacher. However, any potential discussion with the student was foreclosed by ethical considerations, as obtaining consent from the parents of a minor for research purposes was not feasible (step 5).

If I expand this autoethnography, I might explore the bystander effect further—the phenomenon where individuals freeze or refrain from acting upon witnessing harassment, an attack, or, in this case, bullying. Alternatively, I might examine how others behave within a classroom environment or during publicly accessible evening events, especially when they are part of a minority or hold minority viewpoints. Finally, I examined how the dynamics between the pupils and this teacher unfold in the classroom over an extended period beyond this single incident, which is characteristic of ethnographic research. Writing was a recursive process involving continuous reflection and revision to deepen my analysis and enhance the clarity of my narrative (step 6). I selected one or a combination of these focal points as my starting point and then proceed with steps 7 and 8.

In step 7, I positioned Curaçao as a bridge between North American/European sexual-citizenship models and Caribbean LGBTQ scholarship, treating *Bos di Nos Pueblo* as a live rehearsal of rights-claiming and filling the empirical void on postcolonial theatre as sexual-citizenship practice.

In step 8, I convened peer-review loops, and the polished chapter appeared in this edited volume.

Expanding the method

In *Decolonizing Ethnography*, the authors Carolina Alonso Bejarano, Mirian A. Mijangos García, Daniel M. Goldstein, and Lucia López Juárez proposed an approach to social science research, especially with marginalized communities (Bejarano et al. 2019). Their research began in August 2011 with Bejarano and Goldstein's involvement at a New Jersey migrant worker centre, emphasising community engagement and volunteerism. The inclusion of Mijangos García and López Juárez, two immigrant workers from Latin America, in 2013 transformed the research into a collaborative project where autoethnography and activism became inseparable.

The authors gathered insights and embarked on a mission of empowerment by immersing themselves in the undocumented immigrant community. They informed participants of their legal rights and guided them to defend these rights in various contexts. Importantly, as indicated, two of the researchers were community members. This approach was a deliberate effort to address the challenges faced by individuals, who are often relegated to the shadows of society owing to their undocumented status. This approach expanded autoethnography by integrating the creation and performance of a play with a strong social justice component. The method employed created a bilingual play, *Sin Papeles, Sin Miedo* (Undocumented, Unafraid), following an autoethnographic study, documenting the challenges faced by undocumented individuals.

Fieldnotes acted as records of observations and were integrated as evocative narratives aimed at a wider audience. Through storytelling and song, these narratives sought to educate people about their rights, organise communities, and underscore the shared humanity of undocumented individuals. The authors also combined their observations with songwriting. This creative output was a strategic move to extend their research's impact beyond academic circles, engaging the public in a dialogue about the political and social issues immigrant workers face.

Suggestions for further reading

For a more extensive overview of the relationship between performance and autoethnography, see Norman Kent Denzin's *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (2003). The book provides a guide to performance autoethnography, covering its foundations, methods, and ethical considerations. For works that employ performance autoethnography in marginalized contexts, see Santhosh Chandrashekar (2017) for a decolonial perspective; Shelby Swafford (2022) for a feminist perspective; Julie-Ann Scott-Pollock, Frank Trimble, and Evan Scott-Pollock (2022) for a disability perspective; and Tony Adams and Stacy Holman Jones (2011) for queer perspectives.

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