

Chapter 14

A MORAL DISCOURSE: WHAT NORMAN K. DENZIN DOES OR SIMPLY A LOVE LETTER TO MY DEAR BOSS

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ABSTRACT

In this performance autoethnography, through a layered text with a blurred aesthetic format, which mixes life stories and academic scholarship, the author offers visceral knowledge of his encounters with Professor Denzin the person, as well as his scholarly work. How the author leaned from Denzin the possibilities to try to advance decolonizing discourses that may lead to more inclusive notions of social justice questioning the uncontrolled desire to categorize and control the Other. It is a personal narrative full of hope and love, where the author tries to demonstrate, from his arrival at the University of Illinois in August of 1999 to the present day, his deepest gratitude to his advisor, his muse. The blessing of having Denzin in his life.

Keywords: Autoethnography; performance studies; critical pedagogy; performance autoethnography; decolonizing inquiry; personal narrative

I'll lay my cards on the table. We need a performance studies paradigm that understands performance simultaneously as a form of inquiry and as a form of activism, as critique, as critical citizenship. I seek a critical sociological imagination that inspires and empowers persons to act on their utopian impulses. These moments and their performances are etched in history, memory, dreams, hope, pain, resistance, and joy. (Norman Denzin, 2010, p. 18)

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As my muse keep reminding me
 We resist because we must, there are no other options!
 He thinks and writes
 He teaches and guides
 He opens doors
 He builds worlds
 “writing creates the worlds we inhabit” (Denzin, 2003, p. xii)
 He resists because he must, there are no other options

I arrived at the University of Illinois in August of 1999 with my partner Dani and two suitcases.

I arrived without any English. I was a janitor at that university for two years. No need to speak to clean bathrooms. Before that, My Brother Marcelo talked to me about this professor he had, this Norman Denzin guy...I arrived at that university having no idea of who he really was....

My first encounter with Denzin was in August of 2001. I was a Master's student. I had an appointment with him in his office, just after lunch. I got there early and walked by his office to see if the professor was there. I saw this older white man in shorts walking around. Okay, my fellow janitor is there, I thought. Janitors in the day shift could wear shorts for work. I went a bit past the door and decided to wait for the professor there. A few minutes later, the janitor got to the door and back inside the office. He was shoeless. We janitors were not allowed to work shoeless. We couldn't even work in sandals. My thoughts were racing in my head, can that guy be Norman Denzin?

A voice from Norman Denzin:

“But, what is the core question your dissertation addresses? Like an onion, when we keep peeling off one layer after another, what is the core of your dissertation?”

The critical imagination is radically democratic, pedagogical, and interventionist. To build in the arguments made by Freire (1998, p. 91), this imagination dialogically inserts itself into the world, provoking conflict, curiosity, criticism, and reflection. It advocates a “rigorous ethical grounding in a commitment to combat racial, sexual and class discrimination.” (Aronowitz, 1998, p. 12) It aspires to radical social change in such areas as “economics, human relations, property, the right to employment, to land, to education, and to health.” (Freire, 1998, p. 99) Its ethics challenge the ethics of the marketplace; it seeks utopian transformations committed to radical democratic ideals. (Denzin, 2003, p. 226)

Norman Denzin asked. Norman Denzin answered.

Norman Denzin Builds Worlds

I, and probably many others, wouldn't be able to have a career in academia without the structure he built, especially in his work with Yvonna Lincoln. The many editions of the Handbook of Qualitative Research, the journals, the book series, and the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry that affectionately many of us call QI.

Together with Tami Spry and Jonathan Wyatt, we once wrote, in the abstract of an article about our experiences at QI that we “...understand QI as a space of compassionate scholarship. In their text, they allude to Norman Denzin’s performance of compassion and his intellectual dream that, accurately, has generated not only the beginning but, more importantly, the continuation and development of such a space. The authors understand their work at QI as personally and politically transformational, allowing a continual critical engagement of how meaning is made in contexts with others.” (2013, p. 149) QI, that house Norman Denzin built, a place for communion, a place I have to gosh, to be there, to be sane, to not feel alone. And it also gave me a place (since grad school) to perform my work, to encounter professors, mentors and peers, and lately to bring my own grad students.

Professor Denzin has done way more than only develop and teach cutting-edge theoretical modes in academic research. One can’t succeed in the academic world without outlets for their research and conference spaces to create communities.

To be clear, Norman Denzin is my advisor. Always, even now, years after I left Illinois.

At the beginning, Professor Denzin asked me to call him Norman, and I just couldn’t...I starting calling him Boss. Very early too, I realized how blessed I was for having him in my life. I couldn’t understand why this famous professor would work with me, me the academic fraud. From my histories and geographies, from childhood poverty to a beautiful campus, carrying my bad English and the open wounds in my body, from the immense feeling of not belonging to the impossibility of existing and yet, Boss created a space for me – and many others – to inhabit.

Boss taught me to embrace the fraud and write!

Typing these words is an exercise in memory. It is a never-ending looking back. It is the certainty that I would not be here without him...For a person like me, to survive academia was much more than just finish a degree. Paraphrasing [Butler \(2004\)](#), Boss taught how to perform an academic without making life unlivable. His own performance, his actions showed me possibilities of being and doing

Of existing

His scholarship/work and life have been my major ‘guide.’ I keep trying and retrying to “emulate,” learn from and dialogue with him and his body of work. In reading his works and writing my own, I hope I am also exploring the possibilities of my own scholarship, creating the worlds I want to inhabit...the scholarship I want to embodied.

I always have more questions than...answers.

And yes, He taught me how to live with that in a universe of experts...

Once a very good friend wrote this for me and about me:

“...and I don’t

Think I am nearly as threatening as a Brazilian with a chip on his shoulder.”

Yes, I am a Brazilian but I do not have
A chip on my shoulder...
I have many!

And I feel the burden
From their weight on my shoulders, fighting hard not to get smashed and
getting them

Smashed along with me...them, the persons I love most in the world
Dani, Analua and Francisco

A way back in Brazil, before I even thought to immigrate to the United States,
Marcelo told me that he had this professor who would honor my knowledge. My
“street knowledge” while trying to convince me about applying to grad school.

Professor Denzin honored the whole me, chips on my shoulders and all...

...difficulty lies in the pressing need for scholars to decolonize and deconstruct those structures
[of power] within the Western academy that privilege Western knowledge systems and their
epistemologies...The decolonizing project reverses this equation, making Western systems of
knowledge the object of inquiry. (Denzin, 2005, p. 936)

I remember the days before my dissertation defense
When I played and re-played this plot in my head many times
The day I plead my case in front of you...
And it always went wrong...

And I remember His words
“Claudio, you know when you do things that

Very few could replace you
Because you survived

And you learned from Audre Lorde that
“Survival is not an academic skill” (1984, p. 112)

Very few would be here, standing still, as you are on the eve of defending
Your dissertation.”

And I would say to Him

“Yes, I know this shit, but...don’t you see

do I really know this? If I KNOW, from where does this knowledge come
from?

Power and/is knowledge...experience...maybe?”

And this plot still plays in my life many years after the defense

Because I learned from my Boss

How to be vulnerable; to expose my body. To take risks.

These risks are predicated on a simple proposition: This writer’s personal experiences are worth
sharing with others. Messy texts make the writer a part of the writing project. These texts,
however, are not just subjective accounts of experience; they attempt to reflexively map the
multiple discourses that occur in a given social space. (Denzin, 1997, p. 225)

How to try to answer Anzaldua’s call.
To be at the border of what I know.

To create an epistemology from and for the borders I have crossed and places I've lived and labored.

Denzin always has pushed me to take risks in a quest for other ways of knowing, and surviving.

To rethink, re-invent my masculinity and whiteness, expanding my capacity of imagining the human.

Capacity to imagine the human, and doing so, the capacity to imagine myself as a being more than the fraud, to imagine myself as a full human.

Ethnopoetics and narratives of the self are messy texts: They always return to the writerly self – a self that spills over into the world being inscribed. This is a writerly self with a particular hubris that is neither insolent nor arrogant. The poetic self is simply willing to put itself on the line to take risks. (Denzin, 1997, p. 225)

Because of

What We do, what my Boss taught me:

Performance autoethnography, inhabits the between space of what Foucault coined as

“subjugated knowledges” to include all the local, regional vernacular, naïve knowledges at the bottom of the hierarchy – the low Other science” (1980, pp. 81–84). These are nonserious ways of knowing that the dominant culture *neglects, excludes, represses, or simply fails to recognize*” (Conquergood, 2002, *Italics added*). Physically expressed, among other things, in my ‘inadequate’ written and spoken English

And

The effort to produce, again, an embodied epistemology, feeling that what I am doing as an ontoepistemological endeavor – as a being-in-knowing, and a being-in-doing (Barad, 2003).

And

The attempt to construct a strong theoretical knowledge committed with the right to fight for/to imagine creating a more just world.

And

...I couldn't do it alone...and that is the beauty of it. I never had to.

From the start, I never felt alone. It always been a collaborative project, Our project.

This project anchors itself in the worlds of pain and lived experience and is accountable to these worlds. It enacts an ethic of respect. It rejects traditional denial by the West and Western scholars of respect, humanity, self-determination, citizenship, and human rights to indigenous peoples. (Denzin, 2003, p. 237)

Otherwise, how could a person who don't, can't, who is not able to, or simply refuse to write complete sentences to be in academia?

Never alone, always writing

During the years I attend Professor Denzin's grad seminar, I used the same yellow pad for note-taking. It was always the same yellow pad. Three things

never changed in the 7 years I took that seminar, the yellow pad, Professor Denzin, and me.

Around the time I was writing the theoretical section of my dissertation, I went to Denzin's office to talk with him. I showed him my yellow pad and said: "Boss, since I started taking your seminar, I took all my notes here...and please remember that my English was much worse in the first few years...I wrote a lot in these pages. The problem is that I don't know any more what words are yours and what are mine. Like here – I pointed – I don't remember if you said that or if this is my own interpretation of what you were saying. The problem is that I don't know what to do. I don't want to misquote you or writing something that belongs to you as if it were mine..." At this moment Denzin interrupted me saying: "These words are not mine, they are ours. This is a collaborative project. You go back to your office and write. Don't worry about any of this, these words are ours."

To My Boss

Never alone, always writing

And probably my writing, with His blessing, is full of His words

Or should I say Ours

More than 10 years later I still have that yellow pad

Words written in pencil fading in the pages

Fragmented writing in two languages; sentences changing from Portuguese to English and vice versa, often mixed in the two languages; a word in Portuguese followed by one in English

Fragmented words and memories

Seven years

Seven autumns

Two bodies

One yellow pad and He offered me his words

I still have that yellow pad. The tactile sensation of remembering. The reassurance of not being alone, of belonging, of having the right to be here writing and there at the university teaching, of legitimacy. And some of the time, holding the pages where the words written with pencil by my hand, that are now fading, just to remember

You

Never alone, always writing

Fragments for us

Trying to move from theory to body, body to theory to this (no) space

From personal trouble to public issues (Mills, 1959)

Fragments as skill for survival

Mobility

Historical geopolitics of border crossing

Oppositional/differential consciousness (Sandoval, 2000)

Situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991)

Self-consciously grounded through the racialized, gendered, political, and historical body

To act on the methodology of the oppressed

Creating/inventing roots
Performing
Co-performing
Community
Using life as source (Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 2000)
As in this paper/space
Where differences are being negotiated
Power in many ways is re-constructed, re-presented
As it has been through my work
By me and you...as collective
By me and you as different individuals moving toward a shared goal that does
not mean without conflict and differences
And joy and victories and suffering and injustices and frustrations and
resistance
What kind of knowledge is and will be the outcome at the partial stages of this
project
Of these lives, ours
As performers and co-performers
What will be the unknown consequences/precedents/open doors of this
legitimation
What we are asking however,
Must be grounded in Cornel West and bell hooks' ethical 'pragmatism'
Embodied, performative writing
In how it would affect me and also you
This sense of the collective Us
But also, the sense of me and you without exclusion and everyone else
My work, ours, cannot be disembodied
Live/living in how it would affect
Lived experience, lives, and actions
My knowledge
As scholar, father, Latino, husband, straight, male, student, and teacher
Professor, whatever
Where does my bad English come from?
How would it implicate in our lives?
Need and desire to eat, keeping us together
We all
You all
People who touched our lives
With me and you and not about me or you
Gut feelings being theorized
Multiple identities shifting as "I" in our collective we
In my and your need to survive/to succeed in the many/multiple relationships
that are being created by us in relation
To different subjectivism(s)
In the places where we all live and labor

“Caminante no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar (Voyager there are no bridges, one makes them as one walks)” (Anzaldúa, 1983, p. v)

This, among other things, is what we do

Our writing beings out there into the world

“This is a personal social science, a moral ethnography that reads repression and pain biographically, existentially. It knows that behind every act of institutional repression lurks a flesh-and-blood human being who can be held accountable, at a deep level, for his or her actions. The new writing asks only that we all conduct our own ground-level criticism aimed at the repressive structures in our everyday lives.” (Denzin, 2003, p. 142)

It is necessary to hope. To dream. My dream? The dream we share? That I learned from you?

Is to be able to BE

Community anywhere in this place we call Earth

To invent our roots, shared roots that unify different

Economically, racialized, gendered bodies they become a

Different, more inclusionary Us

And then

The different, inclusionary We

Identify

And define our needs

And desires and then We start to explore

Possibilities

The possibility

Of us

Together

Creating performances for us

The possibility

Of us

Together

Creating performances for the colonizer Other,

For us, together, improving our lives

And then, consequently improving yes together

The lives of the Colonizer OTHER

Remember Freire

Only the oppressed can liberate the oppressor

The performances we created to hold our places here

Wherever here may be

While these performances hold ours over there, wherever over there be

And then

Hoping, trying to have the same process of liberation over and over

Wherever this here be for me and you

And our bunch, and for everyone else who want to share invented roots

Opening the doors

For Other bunches

Who come in peace, who have hope, love and dreams

And yes,
For you and I

He thinks and writes
He teaches and guides
He opens doors
He builds worlds
Thank you, Boss,
I miss you
Until next May in the Pine Lounge!

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