Mystories: Connecting the Personal and the Political

Norman Denzin

I entered graduate school in 1963. C. Wright Mills was my hero. His *Sociological Imagination* (1959) was  my bible. Mills exhorted sociologists to write from their biographies into the spaces of history and culture.  He urged  writers with the sociological imagination to  connect biography and history, to join the personal with the public. I have lived with Mills’s message for 45 years, and struggle to this day to implement it  in my writing. When I was in graduate school we were not taught to write this way. It has only been in the last decade that qualitative researchers have taken up the  first-person narratives, or the autoethnographic as a legitimate writing form.

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I have attempted to translate Mills’  message into a simple set of rules. Always write out of those spaces  and experiences that carry the sting of memory, those epiphanies, and turning point moments that leave a mark on you. These are moments when history goes on behind my back.  Marx  and Mills direct me to interrupt my own history, to bring my epiphanies out into the open, in front of the rear-view mirror.

In bringing the past into the autobiographical present,  I insert myself into the past and create the conditions for rewriting and hence re-experiencing it. History becomes a  montage, moments quoted out of context. I am now experimenting with and moving across several writing styles,  genres, and representational-performative forms. I seek a dramatic, performative poetic, a form of performance writing that includes  excerpts from personal histories,  official and unofficial government documents, scholarly articles and popular culture texts (see Denzin, 2008).

**AN EXCERPT**  
Here is an example. The mystory at hand is the history  of  Native Americans in two cultural and symbolic landscapes, mid-central Iowa in the 1940s and 1950s, and  Yellowstone Park in the 1870s. My intent is to create a chorus of discordant voices  (and images) concerning Native Americans and their place in Yellowstone Park, as well as  in our individual and  collective white  imaginations.

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As a child I lived inside this white imaginary. I  played dress-up games called “Cowboys and Indians.” I watched  “Red Rider and Little Beaver” and  “Lone Ranger and Tonto” on Saturday morning American television. On Saturday nights my grandfather took me to, Western movies—-*Shane*,  *Stagecoach*, *Broken Arrow*, *The Searchers* -- at the Strand Theatre in Iowa City, Iowa.

**Voice 1**: **Narrator-as-young-boy**:  
When I was not yet 10

one Sunday mother and dad

took my brother and me to Tama,

to the Mesquaki Reservation,

to see a Pow Wow.

It was raining,

The sky was dark gray.

The road  was muddy.

We drove down a lane

to a large fair ground

and parked

in a back row with other cars.

We walked through the mud,

past teepees

to the center of a big field.

Indians in costumes

with paint on their faces,

and long braids of hair

were singing, and dancing.

Some were drumming

and singing.

At the edge of the field

tables under canvas tents were set up.

You could buy trinkets,

moccasins,

beaded purses,

and belts and wooden flutes.

In another area a family

was making and selling Indian fry bread.

Dad bought some fry bread

for all of us,

and bottles of cold Root Beer.

We took the fry bread

and pop

back to the dance area

and watched the dancers.

Then it rained,

some more

and the dancing stopped,

and we got in the car and

drove home.  
  
Today I want to write my way out this history, and this is why I write my version of autoethnography. I am coming full-circle, back to 1963 and C. Wright Mills, fighting  still to find my voice in my version of the sociological imagination.

**REFERENCES**  
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