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Borges & Bikes Riders: Toward an Understanding of Autoethnography

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Borges & Bike Rides: Toward an Understanding of Autoethnography

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Abstract

In this article the author—a full-time high school mathematics teacher and concurrent doctoral candidate in Department of Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology at Georgia State University—will make a case for the use of an autoethnographic methodological tool he is calling *narrative mining*. He will begin by briefly summarizing his experiences attempting to write and publish autoethnography; a short story by Argentine mystery writer Jorge Luis Borges will serve as a frame to provide three examples of barriers the author believes lie between a writer and any attempt at self-knowledge. A partial solution to these barriers is proposed in the form of an examination of the personal stories a writer has told over time. An example is then shown, and a call made for a deeper look into the possible spaces opened up in a continued examination of the personal story.

Keywords: autoethnography, identity, narrative mining, storytelling

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Borges y los Paseos en Bicicleta: Hacia un Entendimiento de la Autoetnografía

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Resumen

En este artículo el autor, profesor de matemáticas de Educación Secundaria a tiempo completo y candidato doctoral concurrente en el Departamento de Educación Secundaria y de Tecnología Educativa de la Universidad pública de Georgia, presentará un ejemplo para el uso de una herramienta metodológica autoetnográfica que él denomina *minería narrativa*. Comenzará con un breve resumen de sus experiencias al intentar escribir y publicar sobre autoetnografía; un breve cuento del autor argentino de obras de misterio, Jorge Luis Borges, servirá de marco para proporcionar tres muestras de las barreras que el autor cree que se encuentran entre el escritor y cualquier pretensión de auto-conocimiento. Se propone una solución parcial a estos obstáculos que consiste en el análisis de las historias personales que el escritor haya plasmado a lo largo de su carrera. A continuación, se muestra un ejemplo y se hace un llamamiento hacia una mirada más profunda de los posibles espacios generados por el examen continuo de la experiencia vital.

Palabras claves: autoetnografía, identidad, profundidad narrativa, relatos

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Having a rather active imagination, I am going to invite my reader into a recurring daydream of mine. A couple of times a year, after my children settle down to sleep, I leave my wife at home and head out on my bicycle for a kind of mini-adventure. I ride somewhere for dinner, which I eat alone while reading bits and pieces of several books, and I then make my way to the movie theater near my house. In a previous life — sometime after college but before marriage — I would typically go by myself to see one or two movies a week; it remains one of my all-time guilty pleasures. It is entirely possible that the audiovisual and narrative stimulation I experience from the movie itself is primarily responsible for my recurring fantasy — soon to arrest my imagination on the ride home — but I can certainly isolate some other factors. Riding the empty roads back from the movie close to midnight is a stark contrast to my daily commute (also by bicycle), and the sidewalks splashed with silent lamplight probably evoke a certain amount of nostalgia in me for a time long past, when as a boy I used to race home in an effort to make curfew. I still sip soda and consume candy during these late-night films, as if I were a much younger man, and the now atypically large amount of sugar might interact ill with the adrenaline of the ride; probably this effect contributes to my mind racing wildly. Whatever the exact causes, these mental and physical contributions culminate in the same waking dream, every time, at the same point of my ride: the old covered bridge.

I am alone, racing across a converted bike and foot path used to traverse the massive interstate perimeter of my hometown, so high above the occasional cars below that I feel not only alone on my bike, but also in the world. It is here that my brain always skips a beat, and all the science-fiction and fantasy movies and novels I have consumed in my life assault me in a moment, and I find my mind wandering, wondering: “Probably this is where I will travel back in time. Probably I will emerge on the other side of this bridge at some point in my distant past. Probably I will not be able to go home tonight. Probably I will have to solve this puzzle instead and figure out a way to return to my own time. Probably my life will turn suddenly into the plot of a fantastic book.” Ridiculous as this sounds, rest assured that it all makes perfect sense in the slipstream calm of the moment.

I always imagine myself in the same time—fifteen years ago, 1997—though I have no idea why. I usually picture myself riding my bicycle 90 miles in the middle of the night to where I was in college at the time, accosting my 20 year old self and his friends, pleading for help in finding a way back to my present life. I picture the conversations I would have with these boys: what I would or would not share, what advice I would give, on which matters I must remain silent. I envision myself sitting in all our old haunts with them, marveling at the situation at hand, them trying to get me to tell them everything and me demurring in the interest of the pseudo-canonical rules of time travel. I think this through every time I cross this bridge, wonder anew at what I would do were such a thing to occur, how I would convince them to help me escape the trap of the past. Oftentimes the spell continues for the remainder of the ride home, breaking only after I creep quietly into my children's rooms to tuck them under covers they are still asleep beneath and slip silently next to my wife who still shares our bed. It is a powerful fantasy, one which has an unexplainable hold on me. At risk of offending the Freudians, I will not really attempt to explain it; rather I will merely move on to state what I think all of this has to do with autoethnography.

Autoethnography: A Bit of Background

> "Who are *you*?" said the Caterpillar.
> This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."
> "What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar, sternly. "Explain yourself!"
> "I ca'n't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, Sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."
> "I don't see," said the Caterpillar.
> "I'm afraid I ca'n't put it more clearly," Alice replied…
> —Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
> (Carroll, 1865/1992, p. 35, emphasis in original text)

> I am faces. I walk the lines of their assemblages, existing in multiple bodies at once. I fold my bodies within a singular face. (Kaufmann, 2011, p. 916)

I have taught primarily 9th grade mathematics at Benjamin E. Mays High School in Atlanta, Georgia for six full school years now. I did my pre-service student teaching here in the spring of 2006, so in actuality I have just watched my seventh graduating class walk across the stage; my time at this school represents the overwhelming lion's share of my time as a professional educator. Mays is an "urban" high school, and I follow Derrida (1966/1978) here in placing quotation marks around this *loaded word* in order "to serve as a precaution" (p. 278). "Urban" in the argot of American education is not merely an indicator of geographic location; rather it is code for a school that is largely non-White, poor, and academically struggling (Duncan, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to the district, Mays is 99% Black with 75% of those students eligible for free or reduced lunches under the federal guidelines for poverty; we also have an unofficial graduation rate hovering around 50%, calculated anecdotally by noticing that the senior class is always about half as large as the freshman class. Researchers call schools like mine *apartheid schools* (Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006), and I like this term because it forces to the surface not only the fact that I am White, but also that I am a member of "the most invisible sector of the center…not only white but also male, heterosexual, Christian, and from privileged classes" (Nakayama, & Krizek, 1995, p. 306). It is this thought that I have been born into this invisible sector of the center of American society that contrasts so heavily in my mind with my school environment.

This joining of apartheid school and invisible center is the fuel of my writing; in addition to being a full-time classroom teacher, I am also a junior academic. I have been enrolled in a doctoral program at Georgia State University for four years, and I am now finished with coursework and officially writing my dissertation. I returned to higher education in pursuit of my degree curious about aspects of my school and my pedagogy, and for my dissertation work I am writing an autoethnography on my experience as a White teacher of almost exclusively Black students. At least, that is what I would have said my

writing was about when I started this process. I think at the time I saw the autoethnographic process as being rather akin to my recurring fantasy of accidental time-travel: I would have to make some sort of effort and some sort of journey to find some sort of version of my past self, and I would engage him in conversation. He would, of course, not be able to grasp everything I might have to say to him, but I could of course observe him in his native environment and in that process most certainly would find much to glean for my current thought and writing. In short, I could better experience my todays through a critical participation with an easily identifiable yesterday. This article is about my stumbling attempt to write autoethnography along these naïve time-travel lines.

An Attempt at Autoethnography: Strike One

The caterpillar's question used to seem so simple: Who are you? This simplicity, however, is belied already even in this brief writing. I am an educator and a researcher, a mathematician and a writer, a husband, a father. If I chance to meet the caterpillar at some point in some other daydream, I might find myself as confused as Alice in attempting to answer—I might know who I was when I got up this morning, but most certainly I will have changed several times already by the time of our talking. There was a point in the past, though, when I fell headfirst into this oversimplification, when I believed that autoethnography consisted of nothing more than one part of me—the writer—telling a story about another part of me—the teacher. At that point in time I would have defined autoethnography largely along the lines of a quote by Ellis (2007)—"autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining…and observing and revealing" (p.13); in the fall of 2009 I eagerly attempted to follow this definition in my first effort to write a publication worthy article.

I started with one of my all-time favorite stories, a tale that never failed as a race-and-schooling conversation starter, and I began writing about it with no plan or purpose—only a vague sense of being guided by Richardson (2000): "I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote

it" (p. 924). In the attempted article I first (re)told the story of how a Black colleague said to a student, in reference to and in front of me, "That man is White! He could never understand you!" I analyzed this statement from multiple academic angles; I followed Ellis (2007) by examining my experience in order to make observations worthy of revelation; I believed that, like Richardson (2000), I had managed to write something I did not know before I wrote it. I was pretty proud of the whole thing—that is, until it was rejected over the course of a little more than a year by three top-tier education journals. Two of these journals provided rather extensive feedback—for which, though the anonymous readers will never know it, I am very grateful—both centered on the same theme: this work is about your colleague, not you. In fact, you as a teacher, an academic, an author, and a White man are entirely under-theorized. I was shocked to suddenly realize that I had not written an autoethnography.

I had told a personal story, to be sure. I had referenced many, many authors in the autoethnographic field, yes. I had massaged and managed the language, and felt sure I had made the words fairly hum. What I had done, though, was to write for pages on end solely about my colleague—hypothesizing what she was or was not thinking and what she meant or did not mean by her comment. What I failed to do, however, was to talk truthfully about how I felt at the time about her words; I similarly failed to write about how those words made me feel at the later time of my writing about them. I had refused, in short, to surrender myself to the epigraph of the autobiographical *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes: "It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel*." (Barthes, 1975/2010, p. 1, emphasis in original text). My (re)telling of what happened that day in the hallway is my story, and my colleague's involvement in the tale is relevant only insomuch as her words resonate with my own thoughts, my own feelings. In that sense, it is useless to wonder at what she may have been thinking or feeling, as the story in actuality has nothing whatsoever to do with her; it only exists in my mind because it caused me to think and feel enough to continue to (re)tell it in social situations. My colleague is, for all intents and purposes at this point and in this respect, merely a character in the novel I am telling about my own life—a character far

beyond my ability to theorize as an independent being. In attempting to so explain her, and in failing to interrogate my own thoughts and feelings, I had failed to write an autoethnography.

Autoethnography: Strike Two

A clarifying definition of autoethnography intended to support that provided by Ellis (2007) might be this one by Rambo (2007a):

> Autoethnography is a postmodern method of producing an account of personal experience; a particular style of accounting for particular pasts from which readers *may* generalize. Autoethnographers … [seek] to defy and blur the boundaries between the arts and the social sciences. Autoethnography…does not speak to 'capital T' truth but instead seeks to turn the gaze inward…and both deconstruct and reconstruct 'small t,' local truths.... (p. 364)

This definition advises autoethnographers to pull away from the others in their stories and push into the individual experiences of the writer, claiming validity only in the kind of "local truths" that can be known by an author telling his or her own story. It is truth of this type that I used in my second attempt at an article—an examination of the ways in which we reify racial boundaries in our daily interactions (Wamsted, 2011). I still told stories—many of them, in fact, vignettes in the style of Rambo's (2007b) autoethnographic sketching—but this time the tales were limited to being about me, my thoughts, my feelings. I used these stories in an attempt to grapple with a larger idea—the concept of the Deluzoguattarian (1987) trace which reproduces race and racialization; what I call the *t/racing*—but ultimately my first published autoethnography comes out of my own, local experience. I followed Rambo's (2007a) advice and turned my gaze inward, followed Barthes (1975/2010) epigraph and let the others in my stories exist only as characters in my necessarily central personal narrative.

I was pleased with this work upon completion; doubly pleased when it was published. I thought I had figured out autoethnography, stumbled upon a sort of template that I could follow for the rest of my dissertation

work. After writing my prospectus under this assumption, I felt tremendously prepared the day I defended. I was a little shocked, consequently, when during the defense my professors had a not insignificant problem with my failure to trouble the very nature of the verbs used in Ellis' (2007) and Rambo's (2007a) definitions: experiencing, examining, accounting. Their worry about my work to date might best be summarized by Gannon (2006) and what she calls "the paradox of poststructural autoethnography" (p. 474-475): "Although autoethnographic research seems to presume that the subjects can speak (for) themselves, poststructural theories disrupt this presumption and stress the (im)possibilities of writing the self from a fractured and fragmented subject position" (p. 475). In other words, I had until that time operated under the assumption that, though I was unable to delve into the experience of others, I was completely capable of telling my own stories. Reading Gannon forces me to ask: what if this belief is simply untrue?

Meeting the Other

I have previously used a short story by Argentine mystery writer Jorge Luis Borges in my work; at the risk of typecasting myself I will return to his rich vein of fantastical fiction. In the short story "The Other" (1975/1998), Borges tells an ostensibly autobiographical tale that I believe resonates with Gannon's (2006) paradox. I will first briefly summarize the story before noting what I believe is an interesting aspect that sets it apart from other, similar work. I will then tease out three thoughts—difficulties, in fact—that might prove useful for me to consider in my own efforts at autobiographical writing. In the end I will allow Borges (1975/1998) the opportunity to suggest a way out of these potential problems.

The story is a rather simple one, almost slight in plot and action. A 73 year old Borges is claiming to be writing of an event he experienced three years previous, but that he has chosen to suppress on account of its unbelievable qualities. In his telling of that time, he sits down on a park bench in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a moment of contemplation only to have his attention drawn to a person who takes the seat right

next to him, whistling. Hearing this man suddenly sing the words to the Argentinian tune engenders the realization that this is in fact no stranger—rather, it is a 19 year-old version of Borges himself who has filled this empty seat. The older man is at first horrified at this revelation, but then seems to recover by immersing himself in the academic task of trying to convince the younger that they are, in fact, both Borges. The matter is complicated by the fact that the younger man claims to be sitting on a bench in Geneva, Switzerland; it seems that space as well as time has in some way been bent. They converse for a short while, the younger man comes to realize that what should be impossible appears to be true, the older tells the younger some future facts from their shared life, and they part ways after agreeing to meet again the next day at the same time on the same bench. Despite the incredible fantasy of the premise, nothing remarkable happens; the entire story takes up less than seven pages in my Borges anthology.

I want to begin my analysis of this story by noting that there is nothing unusual—from a narrative point of view—about the younger Borges failing to recognize his older self. Rather, it is to be expected that upon first being confronted by this unbelievable circumstance, the younger would say something like, “It is odd that we look so much alike, but you are much older than I, and you have gray hair” (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 412, emphasis in original text). This failure of recognition is in keeping with a long line of time-travel tropes. These “rules” could be the subject of an article all their own, but I mention briefly the movie *Back to the Future, Part II* (Canton, Gale, & Zemeckis, 1989) because, though a far cry from Borges in artistic sensibility, it is in my opinion one of the genre’s seminal films. At some point in the action a character travels from 2015 to 1955 in order to give his much younger self some information intended to make them both rich; they have a rather long conversation during which the younger never gets beyond a glimmer of a realization that he is talking to his future self. This sentiment might be more poetically expressed in the lyrics of a song by singer Bill Mallonee (1999): “Desperate times, you know everybody’s part / It’s your own lines you’d like to forget / Till what you were meets what you’ve now become / And grins and says ‘Hey, haven’t we met?’” (Track 3). No, I am not surprised to find the younger Borges needing significant

convincing of the fact that he is speaking to his much older self. What I find unusual, though—and more applicable to my task as autoethnographer—is the more subtle inability the older Borges seems to have in recognizing the younger. It is this seemingly paradoxical piece of misunderstanding that I would like to briefly push into over the next few paragraphs.

Three Barriers to Autoethnography

When the younger man first sits down on the bench, he is described by the older only as "someone" and "the other man" (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 411). Even after the older man experiences the unpleasant shock of finding the younger man's voice familiar—"I recognized it with horror" (p. 412)—he proceeds to ask the younger man several questions, seemingly attempting to convince himself that this bizarre situation is actually occurring. What is important from my point of view as an autoethnographer is that there appears to be some sort of veil between the two versions of Borges; it is the uniqueness of this veil in the time-travel canon that makes this story so interesting to me. This difficulty of initial recognition continues to show itself in three distinct ways throughout the story—I will call these subtle problems of recognition *barriers*—and I contend that these barriers are important to me not only as a reader of Borges but also as an autoethnographer. These problems are: (a) the barrier of memory and knowledge, (b) the barrier of understanding and interpretation, and (c) the barrier of communication. I will briefly discuss each in turn.

The barrier of memory and knowledge appears in two separate places in the story. First, when the older Borges is attempting to convince the younger that they are in fact both Borges, he goes through a litany of facts about their shared experience intended to demonstrate the fact of their overlapping identities; however, toward the end of this rather long speech he makes a small mistake about a street name, a mistake which the younger man quickly corrects. In the second instance, the conversation moves on and the older Borges begins to make small talk with his younger self. The older asks the younger what he is reading, the younger replies Dostoyevsky, and the older inquires, "It's a bit hazy to

me now. Is it any good?" (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 414). This question in and of itself is not surprising; I am sure all of my readers can relate to a certain haziness in attempting to remember details of a book read some years past. What is important to note, however, in regards to my work at autoethnography, is that this barrier of memory and knowledge between who we are and who we were exists in far more important aspects than just the books we once read or the streets we used to walk. As an autoethnographer, I am in a near-constant battle with my memory, and to trust it fully—as at one point on my academic journey I rather blindly did—would be a mistake which, though certainly common, could only serve to undermine the work I hope to do.

The barrier of understanding and interpretation is brought to light only after the younger Borges is able to come to terms with their situation. A conversation ensues, described by the older Borges:

> A half century does not pass without leaving its mark. Beneath our conversation, the conversation of two men of miscellaneous readings and diverse tastes, I realized that we would not find common ground. We were too different, yet too alike. We could not deceive one another, and that makes conversation hard. Each of us was almost a caricature of the other. (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 416)

They fully know each other here—this problem is not one of knowledge or memory. Rather, what I see here is the language of drift: Borges' tastes have changed, the years have left their inevitable mark, the older Borges cannot quite find common ground with this man he used to be. It is worth noting, also, that it seems the older is genuinely surprised by all of these things. This paragraph is haunting to my work as an autoethnographer, in that it appears that even if I remember something correctly, even if I know the facts of the past with something approaching full veracity, my interpretation of that event will necessarily change over the years. Perhaps how I see a scene could even change so drastically that my much younger self, the self who in fact underwent the event, would fail to find common ground with me in simple discussion of it. Perhaps also I would find myself surprised at this drift, in some sort of denial that it has, in fact, happened to me.

The final barrier I see in this story—that of communication—is similar to the barrier of understanding and interpretation, but is in a rather insidious way subtly different. This difficulty in communication is demonstrated in a passage toward the end of the story which takes place immediately after the older Borges suggests the two men's meeting again the following day: "He immediately agreed, then said, without looking at his watch, that it was getting late, he had to be going. Both of us were lying, and each of us knew that the other one was lying (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 417). This quick exchange goes beyond a mere problem of understanding or interpretation; the two men in fact seem to understand each other quite well: they understand that they are both liars. I find this deliberate obfuscation to be especially poignant in the case of the older Borges—it seems unsurprising to me that a younger self would out of ignorance or bravado speak untruths to the older, but for an older man to lie to his younger self smacks more of sadness and regret than hope and expectation. Meaning, I make promises all the time in regards to what I am going to do in order to make the future different than the present; this is natural, and equally natural that some of these promises I make to my future self will go unfilled, even as I know at the time that I might be overreaching my ability to make good on what I say I want. It is somewhat pitiful, though, to consider that in looking back upon my life—in undertaking the examination of the past that is autoethnography—I may speak untruths into that very past, that in some vain effort to protect my ego I might purposefully lie to myself about who I once was or what I once did. It is one thing to consider the barriers of knowledge, memory, interpretation, communication; I find the fact that I need to consider these obstacles to my autoethnography manageable. I find it chilling, however, to consider that I might have to deal with more than just these natural veils that shield my sight from the past, that I might be capable of this sort of deliberate misdirection.

What Now?: Or, A Possible Path

Let me recap, for myself as much as for my reader. I have described my thoughts about what autoethnography entailed at the time I began my research process, and walked through my first failed attempt and subsequent successful publication of autoethnographic writing. This

victory was short lived, however, as I immediately began grappling with the problem of self-knowledge, Gannon's (2006) "paradox of poststructural autoethnography" (p. 474-475). I have tried to demonstrate this paradox by teasing out three barriers to self-knowledge which I believe show themselves in a short story by Borges (1975/1998): the barrier of memory and knowledge, the barrier of understanding and interpretation, and the barrier of communication. Meaning, I cannot trust myself to remember things as they might have occurred, I cannot believe that I interpret things the same way now as I might have then, and I cannot even trust myself to tell the truth about what I actually do remember and understand. I ended the last section in a rather low place, having backed myself into a kind of corner from which my entire autoethnographic project appears somewhat suspect. It is time to attempt to climb out of this low place—a place where the barriers may intimidate me to the point that I decide not to write at all—and look forward to some sort of a solution. After all, no less a skeptic of self-knowledge than Butler (1999) tells me that "I do not believe that poststructuralism entails the death of autobiographical writing" (p. xxv).

Borges (1975/1998) led me into this mess; let me see if he provides a thread that might be able to guide me out. I find my first clue in a comment the older man makes to the younger during his initial attempts to convince that young man of the stark reality of their situation, however fantastical: "Perhaps our dream will end, perhaps it won't. Meanwhile, our clear obligation is to accept the dream, as we have accepted the universe and our having been brought into it and the fact that we see with our eyes and that we breathe" (p. 413). Butler (1993) reminds me that "none of [what she writes] is meant to suggest that identity is to be denied, overcome, erased" (p. 117), and I take this charge to mean that I must not let the barriers to self-knowledge that I have exposed cause me to despair—that, in fact, my "clear obligation is to accept the dream, as [I] have accepted the universe..." (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 413). To despair at autoethnography might lead me to give up on self-representation and existence altogether, but if as eminent a poststructuralist as Barthes (1975/2010) can be tempted to write about himself, I must not allow this defeat to occur. The dream might be existentially fantastic; I still need embrace it.

Later in the story the older Borges (1975/1998) adds a bit of clarification in a comment directed to the younger man, words leading perhaps from vague philosophic encouragement to a more concrete advice: "Individuals exist—if, in fact, anyone does. *Yesterday's man is not today's*, as some Greek said. We two, here on this bench in Geneva or in Cambridge, are perhaps proof of that" (p. 414, emphasis in original text). Here, I believe, is my second clue toward some sort of action: so long as I can keep constantly in mind the fact that "yesterday's man is not today's" I may have a hope at getting to know that man I used to be. I misunderstand and misinterpret him because he is in fact a different man, and this thought that I am not he is "perhaps proof" of some sort of path. In other words, I need to let go of this wrong-headed notion that when I undertake autoethnographic work I am in some way describing myself; in fact, I am describing an entirely different person. If I can somehow accept that claim, perhaps I can then begin to describe that person with some sort of authenticity.

What Now, Again: Or, So What?

"*Yesterday's man is not today's*" (Borges, 1975/1998, p. 414, emphasis in original text). A critical reader is most likely rolling his or her eyes at this point—what do I do with this sort of vague philosophy? I have experienced this eye-rolling feeling many a time in reading various academic texts, finding myself left with hazy admonition as my only takeaway. I have no wish to leave my reader similarly dismayed, however, and I would now like to add a gloss of my own on top of this story. Meaning, I would like to answer the assumed question in the mind of my reader: How, exactly, would you advise me to try to get to know this entirely different man I used to be? It is all well and good to accept that he is wholly different than me; how, though, do I push through these barriers of memory, knowledge, understanding, interpretation, and communication in order to speak to him at all? What action step might I be able to attempt to take at this project of autoethnography?

I have been struggling with these questions of late—not just in relation to Borges (1975/1998) but also as pertains to the whole scope of my dissertation work. I believe I might have stumbled upon a thread of

an answer in some reading and writing I did recently in an attempt to push into Gannon's (2006) "paradox of poststructural autoethnography" (p. 474-475). Following the advice of my dissertation committee, I first read Scott (1991), who reassured me that the aim of this kind of existential work is not "to deprive subjects of agency. It is to refuse a separation between 'experience' and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse. Subjects are constituted discursively" (p. 730). Space will not permit me to write about this here in as much detail as I have in my dissertation, but the core idea is present in these four words—"subjects are constituted discursively"—especially when combined with Brown, Jones, and Bibby (2004), who tell me that "identity is a form of argument" (p. 167). They go on: "Identity should not be seen as a stable entity—something that people *have*—but as something that they use, to justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate" (Brown, et al, 2004, p. 167). In trying to get at that man I used to be, I followed McAdams' (1996, 2001) integration of these ideas—that I am constituted through discourse, that my identity is a form of argument, that my identity is not something I have but something I use—and became interested in his *life story model of identity*. In other words, my identity is wrapped up in the stories that I tell.

Here I think I have a glimpse of a plan as to how to follow Borges' (1975/1998) vague admonitory advice. I find this potential clue in a rather simple delineation between story and event. An event is synchronic, existing in a moment and just as quickly gone again; as Borges and his barriers showed, efforts at interacting with the events of my past self are doomed to a multitude of problems. A story, however, is necessarily diachronic, existing across time as it is told and (re)told over days and months and years; it is, essentially, a thread that directly connects me to any number of my past selves. In a manner of speaking, it is rather poetic piece of time-travelling. The mistake I made in previous autoethnographic efforts was in treating these stories as if they were merely descriptions of events, when in fact these stories I tell—the very stories I have as a precondition been telling for years, else I would be unable to tell them today—are best treated not as some sort of history

but rather as a window into my identity at the time I began telling the story. A looking through this window might just be autoethnographic action step I have been looking for.

Let me clarify, and provide an example. In my dissertation I attempt to apply this idea by following Tatum's (1997) advice to interrogate my early memories of race (p. 31ff). I tell stories about my life that have race as a component—my first memory of a Black person, my first Black friend—and subsequently try to tease out what these stories might say about me as a younger man. The action of the stories is treated as rather inconsequential; rather, the fact that I have diachronically (re)told these stories over the years grounds my assumption that the details are relevant only insomuch as they open that window into who I used to be. In other words, I am in no way claiming that these stories made me who I am; rather I maintain that who I already was at the time shaped these stories into what they now happen to be. For instance, in my dissertation I tell the story of the time a Black classmate rescued me from a bullying I was being given by another boy. We were all on the football field, and an older student had his knees pinning me to the ground while he was punching me. Kevin—of course, not his real name—raced across the playground and knocked the larger boy down, glaring at him as if daring him to retaliate while I managed to scramble to my feet. The older boy held back, we all separated, and this ends the brief story—I literally remember nothing else about the event.

I am calling my proposed autoethnographic method *narrative mining*. In the mining process, details from my story will be interpreted as markers of the man—or, in this case, the boy—I might once have been. Mining this narrative gives me a picture of a nine year old boy who may have already housed several nascent racist stereotypes; namely, Black people are superior athletes and Black boys are intimidating in appearance alone. I find there to be power in this narrative mining—looking at what Bamberg (2011), following McAdams' (1996, 2001) work, calls small stories—because it allows me to bypass Borges' (1975/1998) barriers to self-knowledge; specifically, I am positive that in a self-conscious description of the larger story of "what I was like as a child" I would never have claimed these proto-racisms. My method is a possible step toward fixing the problems of memory, reinterpretation,

and/or self-deception: in a sense I have managed to paint a picture of what I might have been like beneath the surface of retrospective self-presentation. In addition to such a picture, this effort at self-discovery might also be able to glean another glimpse of my former self from those aspects of the tale that go unsaid: in this case, it is notable that my (re)telling includes absolutely no conversation with Calvin, not even so much as a thanks to the child who saved me from a potentially embarrassing situation. I am not sure this directly reveals racism, but it hints at a boy who might not have been comfortable in conversation with the few Black students in his class—else I might have been (re)telling that part of the story all of these years.

These potential revelations of a past that might have been are powerful to me as an educator today—doubly so because it pains me so much to admit their possible existence. I have been raised in a society which on the surface actively repudiates racism; moreover, I have been taught that we as post-racial 21st century citizens need to take the further step of divesting ourselves of all race talk whatsoever, led to believe that the mere mention of the color of one's skin is divisive. What I never learned—what I think the overwhelming majority of White people never think about—is the nature of racism to move backstage (Hughey, 2011) in such a simultaneously proactive and repressive society, the tendency for typical liberal multiculturalism (Ladson-Billings, 1996) to slide smoothly into color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), the continued damage that a systemically racist society (Feagin, 2000; Wildman & Davis, 1995/2008) necessarily does to Blacks and Whites alike. Narrative mining has, in a way, allowed me to burrow through these protective layers I have set up around myself—protective layers which would in all good faith deny any possible personal existence of racism—and get at what I really might have felt at the time of this story. I am not pleased to have discovered these possible racisms dwelling in my past; I do, however, think that an identification of such is a powerful aid to my pedagogy and practice as a White teacher of Black children. If I may be so bold, I might suggest that other White teachers in situations similar to mine could also find benefit in the process of narrative mining. The first step toward overcoming the backstage racisms of today may be to identify the backstage racisms of yesterday. This process needs be personal, even if painful.

I can anticipate two possible objections here. First, the thought that I am not remembering this story correctly, as it occurred close to thirty years ago. This objection forgets, though, that the veracity of the details of my story are entirely inconsequential to the narrative mining process; in fact, what I believe I remember is far more powerful an indicator of who I might have been than any hypothetical listing of the "true" details. A second objection, one I find more interesting to consider, rests in the wondering of how much this story might have changed over the years. I am claiming that my narrative mining provides a window into who I was at nine years old—the time when my story occurred—but of course it is entirely possible that my nine year old version of the tale would bear little to no resemblance to the version I am (re)telling today. This claim is entirely true, of course, and I can assent that this is an imperfection to the method. At some point in my past this story took on its current form; at this unknown point I am claiming to have discovered buried racisms through my process of narrative mining. I may be in error in placing it at the origin of the story itself, but given that I need place it somewhere I find this to be an acceptable error to make. Perhaps in the further mining of other narratives I will find reason to place this story elsewhere; perhaps I will never know for sure. It remains, however, that the discovery is there in fact, even if I cannot locate it precisely in time.

In Conclusion: Toward an Autoethnography

I re-read the Borges (1975/1998) story one final time the other day, and I was surprised to see that he had beat me to my idea. Toward the end of the story—in an atypically unmarked quadrant of the page in my Borges anthology—the younger man seems finally to come to grips with the anomaly of what is occurring:

> "This, all this, is a miracle," he managed to say. "And the miraculous inspires fear. Those who witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus must have been similarly terrified."
> We haven't changed a bit, I thought. Always referring back to books.
> ...

> I replied that the supernatural, if it happens twice, is no longer terrifying…. (p. 416)

Always referring back to books. The story is the common argot between the younger and the older Borges, just as the story is the common thread between me and my past self. It is not a perfect analogy, to be sure; still, I was surprised to see a glimmer of my idea of narrative mining in this tale I thought I had wrung dry for meaning. Probably I should have known that Borges would beat me to the punch—possibly his story was precipitated by many a midnight daydream of his own; certainly he was as interested as I am in these barriers to our past.

If the supernatural happens once, it would be rather terrifying. If it happens twice, we would cease calling it "super" anything, and begin to refer to it merely as "natural"—at that point all terror would be lost. I believe that this is what has happened with that thing we call memory. I am thinking about my bike ride here, wondering about just how truly terrifying it would be if I were to suddenly find myself catapulted back in time, just how frightened I would be by this supernatural scenario. And yet, is there not a similar piece of prestidigitation taking place every time I (re)tell a story? Every time I picture a scene anew in my mind, put thought to word enough to draw others into my memory, am I not doing a kind of time-travel? Rudimentary, one-way time travel, to be sure; however, communication between past and present nonetheless. The next time I find myself crossing that lonely bridge, the midnight silence all but overpowering me in its uncommon stillness, I believe I just might have a different sort of daydream. Perhaps instead of picturing myself thrown back in time, seeking out a past self in an effort both to amaze him with my knowledge and to press him for his; perhaps instead of wanting to be amazed by the supernatural ability to come face to face with who I used to be; perhaps I will be able in some small way to see the (super)natural power I possess every time I tell a story about this man. In this respect, maybe, despite Borges and his barriers, I can learn just a little bit more about who I am today.

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