

POINT OF VIEW, NARRATIVE VOICE, AND ETHNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION: WRITING EVERYDAY VIOLENCE IN 2010s MEXICO

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Mum had been phoning all day. She wanted me to pick up the kids and help her put the Christmas decorations away. I hadn't answered. An English woman researching Mexican hip hop had been interviewing me and my darling, JP. She hadn't shut up, although she hardly spoke. Questions, questions, more and more questions.

We were six hours late and it was dark when we got to Mum's house. *Diez-peso*-sized fairy lights flashed blurrily through her curtains, outlining the tree. She came out. Started yakking. It wasn't because of the time: my brother Martin was in trouble.

'Do something. Make Martin leave. What if They come round?' Mum winced, exhaling.

We all went inside. The house was full: my three and the nine other grandkids, aged baby to ten; Martin's wife, Elena; the table and chairs crammed against the kitchen counter and the two sofas squashed together to make room for the sparkling tree; Mum's treasured china plates and figurines moved to accommodate the two nativities, each with Mary, Joseph, donkey, three kings, and baby Jesus. The kids ran to hug us. Mum did niceties with the *güerita*, who perched at the end of the sofa awkwardly. Elena sat at the other end, head down, breast-feeding David, her youngest.

Martin wandered in, off his head as ever. Elena looked up. He hadn't heard, so she told him. His mate had been shot in the head. Revenge killing. The higher ranks had rung the house: they wanted Martin to take over the dealership. He bit his lip and grinned. The English woman twitched. My mum made a drink to calm her: one of the black tea sachets she carried with her with hot water and cold milk. Martin stopped pacing and snuggled on the sofa between the *güera* and his wife, Elena, tenderly stroking their baby's head. My partner JP crouched, wide-eyed, and interrogated him. Martin just smiled, stoned, unwilling to engage in worry. Like his mate had it coming. Like the three people who were shot buying dope at the shop last week were unlucky. That's so scary: it could have been us. Martin was like, everything'll be fine. I wanted to go; take the kids home; get them washed. Mum jiggled nervously. She started nagging about when we'd put away the decorations. The Christmas lights kept flashing.

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Fiction writing often allows readers to make connections, to infer from the implicit. The norms of conventional academic writing (certain famed theorists aside) are to explicitly state the obvious, to attempt to leave no doubt as to how the reader will interpret the text. If the above is sufficient for you to infer, stop here. If you would like to read about narrative voice and point of view, continue.

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A story is usually told, at any one moment, through the narrative voice of one character/actor. While a narrative voice may be written in the first, second, or third person (singular or plural), conventional, polyphonic, and experimental ethnographies all tend to be written in the first person. In ethnographic writing, this is usually the ethnographer or the ethnographic subject: the 'I' of the purportedly authoritative, analytical scholar; the 'I' of the often-privileged disposition of reflexivity (Skeggs 2004: 171); the 'I' critical of and ambivalent about their own society (Chua and Mathur 2018); the 'I' of what Les Back and others refer to as 'me-search' (2014: 767); and the 'I' of research participants in polyphonic ethnographies and *testimonio* where the narrative is often transcribed and/or curated by an academic to foreground different actors' perspectives. In all these 'I's, narrative and authorial voices generally remain undivided.

In the above account, I gave a research participant the first-person narrative voice, rather than myself, the author-researcher. While the separation of authorial and narrative voices is common in fiction, it is almost unheard of in ethnographic writing. It is as if writing from the perspective of anyone but yourself is a betrayal of realism. Who would dare to write from the subject position of another? With what authority? Are the notions of objectivity and subjectivity so strong, even in experimental writing, that playing with narrative voice automatically pushes an account into the fictional realm, making it a non-representation? And what of the ethics of taking an Other's position? Zora Neale Hurston had the courage to write dialogue for her research participants in *Mules and Men*, a project on African American oral history published in 1935 when speech was rarely recorded. Hurston recounted her arrival to the 'field' as follows, for example:

'We heard all about you up North. You back home for good, I hope'.

'Nope, Ah come to collect some old stories and tales and Ah know y'all know a plenty of 'em and that's why Ah headed straight for home'.

'What you mean, Zora, them big old lies we tell when we're jus' sittin' around here on the store porch doin' nothin'?' asked B. Moseley (Hurston 1935: 7-8).

Few scholars have dared to write dialogue for research participants since.

While the first person narrative voice is widespread in academic texts, the second person narrative voice is rare: 'you' references other scholars or students (with a nod to other audiences), but readers of academic texts are seldom explicitly addressed. Back in the eighteenth century, Laurence Sterne dislocated the notion of authorship in *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) by introducing dialogue between the author's ego and a hypothetical reader (referred to sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a man). When re-introducing the character of the midwife, for example, Sterne wrote:

It is so long since the reader of this rhapsodical work has been parted from the midwife, that it is high time to mention her again to him, merely to put him in mind that there is such a body still in the world, and whom, upon the best judgment I can form upon my own plan at present,---I am going to introduce to him for good and all: But as fresh matter may be started, and much unexpected business fall out betwixt the reader and myself, which may require immediate dispatch;---'twas right to take care that the poor woman should not be lost in the mean time;---because when she is wanted we can no way do without her (Sterne 1983: 31).

Sterne urged the reader to conspire with him in producing the work while also questioning it, foreshadowing Barthes' *Death of the Author*, published almost two centuries later in 1968. Such an explicit move remains rare in academic writing.

Use of the third person is common in ethnographies: the she/he/they of other scholars and research participants, depicted from the narrative voice of the author and Othered to varying degrees. Representations of research participants in the limited third person are pervasive, and sometimes occur in framed, cited speech, wrenched out of the context of past conversations (I have been culprit of this, e.g. Malcomson 2014, 2019). Blatant Otherings are often enveloped in the plural, in 'we/us', 'they/them', 'people'; terms that denote who are understood, imagined as similar, as complicit, and who are not; terms which enable racism and other oppressions, as well as generalizations without nuance (as Alcida Rita Ramos 2012 documents in her critique of theories of Amerindian perspectivism). The use of an omniscient third person narrator became unfashionable from the 1980s, that is, taking the stance of an objectivist, all-knowing, god-like narrator able to document the actions, thoughts, and feelings of all actors. Feminist standpoint theorists Nancy Hartsock (1983) and Patricia Hill Collins (1986), for example, argued that there are several points of view, including those of people who had been marginalized and oppressed. Donna Haraway proposed that the 'view of infinite vision is an illusion, a god trick' (1988: 582): instead of all-encompassing knowledge, 'feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see' (1988, 583). While the 'I' of a first person narrative may not detract from the oppressions of a privileged narrator, it does emphasize that knowledge is situated.

It was in a creative writing class taught by Jo Browning Wroe that I learned about the opportunities and challenges afforded by distinct forms of narrative voice. For example, a first person narrative voice enables the reader to be told what a character/actor thinks and knows, but makes it difficult to recount what said character/actor is not conscious of. The reliability of the first person narrator depends upon their presence. If an ethnographer or other first person narrator was not present at events depicted, these events tend to be considered unconvincing in both fiction and ethnographic writing. This is also the case for accounts written in the (limited) third person, where the narrator describes the position of a protagonist. I was present at the events in the above story, but chose to finally write the account in the first person from the point of view of the protagonist. Does this make the story unconvincing, unauthoritative, or unethical? Does it make me an unreliable narrator?

Let me tell you how this story emerged. I was working on a project exploring empirically how disenfranchised young people living in Mexican cities experience, promote, and critique the intense violence and criminality they are subject to through hip-hop music. In violent contexts, the difficulties of capturing the complexity of people's lives ethnographically are intensified, and experimental writing is an important resource for representation (as Ghassem-Fachandi 2009; Isbell 2010; Hage 2011 exemplify). Additionally, I have found experimental ethnography helpful in processing some of the vicarious trauma I experienced in this project, and often drew on the hours of interviews I had recorded and other ethnographic data in my writing for the class.

For one exercise, I drafted the above account in the first person with myself as the narrator. My partner read it and rightly reprimanded me for my colonial gaze and for foregrounding my own experience. I accepted the critique, aware that as a white, British, middle-class, middle-aged woman, I was brought up to be liberal, colonial, racist, (hetero)sexist, and so forth, and that my attempts to be otherwise are often clumsy, condescending failures. First, I changed the language of my text, employing the vernacular 'Them' in place of the all-encompassing, stigmatizing, outsider term 'narco'. Then I tried to address the colonial charge. I drew on a technique that Wroe had taught us in the class that was exemplified by Carol Ann Duffy's feminist retelling of famous men's stories in *The World's Wife* (1999).

Duffy portrayed the wife of Sisyphus (king of Ephyra in Greek mythology), for example, as a woman who bemoaned the antics of her workaholic husband: 'That's him pushing the stone up the hill, the jerk' (Duffy 1999: 21). Duffy puts us, the reader, in the moment of the action with 'That's him pushing the stone up the hill'; she establishes that she thinks her husband is a 'jerk'; and she goes on to narrate the poem in the first person to emphasize that this is Mrs Sisyphus' point of view. Taking inspiration from Duffy, I shifted the narrative voice from myself to the protagonist in the above story, to the person who was at the centre of my understanding of this world. I also tried to change the point of view, that is, how the narrated actors experience what was going on; their gendered, classed, racialized, age-related, sexualized, embodied, moral, religious, emotional, temporal, spatial, aural, and other positionalities. In other words, while I remain the author, I drew on information that the protagonist subsequently told me to replace the 'I' of my outsider gaze, clouded by fear and reeking of colonialism, with the 'I' of my protagonist, a more reliable narrator, able to comment on others and on myself.

If ethnographers already assume the voice of others in writing about them, rather than enabling them to speak for themselves, then taking the narrative voice could be read as a double appropriation. To be clear, I have not 'given voice' to the protagonist in this piece, and my authorial voice remains. But my hopes are threefold: first, that the fear (of being in a volatile fieldwork situation), colonial gaze (that could translate into patronizing Othering), and dominance of the ethnographer's narrative voice are slightly defused by my changing the point of view and maintaining a first person narrative voice for the research participant in this story. Second, that I am decentring the story away from myself whilst simultaneously highlighting to you, the reader, that what is being written is a point of view, one perspective amongst others, a perspective that is inherently problematic, a skewed form of extractivism. And third, the lessons to be learned from fiction writing about narrative voice and point of view have yet to be fully explored, and I hope this experiment serves as an invitation for you to experiment further.

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