Being and Becoming Human in Higher Education:

A Co-autoethnographic Inquiry

KATHLEEN PITHOUSE-MORGAN, DAISY PILLAY, & INBANATHAN NAICKER

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

We are South African academics in teacher development studies and educational leadership and management. In this chapter, we inquire, what have we learned through our autoethnographic explorations for re/humanizing learning and teaching, academic selves, and academic leadership in higher education? In our co-autoethnography (collaborative autoethnography), our selves and interactions with others provided a lens for examining linkages between human experiences and societal concerns. We studied our selves in the presence of others as a means of better understanding group culture in the context of higher education. Using the creative literary co-autoethnographic modes of personal narrative writing and poetry, we elicited and interpreted lived experiences in dialogic ways. Our inquiry reveals how, through narrative and poetry, evocative expressions of the personal can create connected ways of being and becoming academics. In higher education, the collaborative creative practice of an ethic of relationality and dialogue can make a re/humanizing difference.

Setting the Scene

We are three South African teacher educators who are diverse in cultural heritage, gender, and race. We research and teach in teacher development studies (Daisy and Kathleen) and educational leadership and management (Inbanathan). We have partnered on research inquiries for almost a decade. Our partnership is personally meaningful as we have experienced the dehumanizing fragmentation of apartheid in the separate educational, geographic, and social spaces we were assigned to as people categorized as Indian (Daisy and Inbanathan) and white (Kathleen). In all probability, during apartheid, we would never even have met each other, let alone worked together on educational projects we find gratifying and pleasurable.

Our personal and professional lives are embedded in the indigenous Southern African ethical philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The central tenet of *Ubuntu* is humanness in terms of relational processes of becoming and care for others (Reddy et al., 2014). *Ubuntu* guides our co-autoethnography (collaborative autoethnography) because, in autoethnography, the researcher's selves and relationships with others offer a multifaceted lens for studying interconnections between lived human experiences and sociocultural concerns (Pillay et al., 2016). In this chapter, we ask, *what have we learned through our autoethnographic explorations for re/humanizing learning and teaching, academic selves, and academic leadership in higher education?*

Mode of Inquiry

Our co-autoethnography involved the "study of self…conducted in the company of others [as] a catalyst to understanding group culture" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 17). The group culture we sought to understand was in the milieu of higher education. Our collaborative expression and analysis of personal experience are premised on seeing the self as "complex

and culturally informed" and "dialogical" (Coia & Taylor, 2009, p. 3). Thus, we used personal narrative writing and poetry as "creative literary" co-autoethnographic modes for eliciting and interpreting lived experiences in dialogic ways (Chang et al., 2013, p. 125).

First, each of us wrote a narrative piece exploring the personal impetus for our research interest in higher education—learning and teaching (Kathleen), academic identities (Daisy), and academic leadership (Inbanathan). Then, we shared and discussed these pieces, posing questions and responding to deepen and extend the writing. In the following section, we present excerpts from our narratives.

Narrative Excerpts

Meeting my Child Self in Stories of Other Childhoods – Kathleen

I am a white woman who grew up during apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s. My social and educational life took place in a white middle-class suburb. I did not know any children categorized as other races and did not realize that their schools did not have the libraries, playing fields, and swimming pools that were standard features of white schools. As an adult, I am engaged in the process of coming to terms with myself as a white South African against the backdrop of the immoral system that privileged me (Pithouse-Morgan, 2019; 2020).

I often facilitate autoethnographic reading and writing with my students. My intention is to invite them to expand their professional learning as teachers. The majority of the students at our university would have been racially categorized as African or Indian during apartheid. So, as an historical consequence of the apartheid regime, my sociocultural background is different from most of my students. Thus, through engaging intimately for more than a decade with my students' autoethnographic explorations, my own personal and

professional learning has been unsettled, deepened, and extended (Pithouse-Morgan, 2019; 2020).

To guide my students' autoethnographic encounters, I, too, must engage in autoethnographic inquiry (Alexander, 2016). To illustrate, I have been working on an autoethnographic piece that centres on a childhood diary chronicling my experiences of my father's terminal illness and death in 1984. I am exploring the diary as an autoethnographic artifact with personal and cultural significance (Chang, 2008). As Chang (2008) explains, texts that convey personal accounts of critical human experiences such as illness and death offer material for "cultural analyses beyond self-reflection" (p. 152). Thus, by working with this textual artifact, I am piecing together a personal childhood story and seeking to understand more about the broader sociocultural subject of childhood parental loss.

I have realized that a contributing influence in undertaking this inquiry has been my repeated reading of, and feedback on, drafts of autoethnographic writing by two of my doctoral students about their childhood experiences of parental death. Although their stories took place in different decades and contexts to mine, I recognized my child self in their evocative descriptions of tangled feelings of bewilderment, anxiety, alienation, and loneliness. In asking my students questions such as, "Can you tell us more about this, from the inside?" I realized I held within me a fusion of feelings akin to theirs. It was disorientating and compelling to keep meeting my child self in these stories of other childhoods that were, outwardly, dissimilar to my own.

My schooling was much more advantaged than most of my students in terms of resources and materials. However, looking back, I saw how it lacked psychosocial support. There was no school counselor at my primary school. I do not remember talking with anyone to share my bewildering feelings about my father's illness or death, and there is nothing in

the diary to suggest that I did so. Here, I found resonance with my students' accounts of silences and shadows that marked their childhoods and extended into adulthood.

Reading my diary as an autoethnographic artifact prompted me to read up on the effects on children of parental illness and death. Research from diverse contexts such as Denmark and the United States helped me understand how many bereaved children— particularly those who cannot communicate their complicated feelings to others—experience bewilderment, distress, and loneliness (Lytje, 2018; Werner-Lin & Biank, 2009). I realized that many children who have lost a parent feel they "do not have anybody who they can talk to in any depth about the death" (Holland, 2008, p. 418). Thus, even though these children might outwardly appear composed, they feel profoundly disorientated and anxious. I see my child self in a description of how such "children may be left without an emotional compass" (Werner-Lin & Biank, 2009, p. 364).

As a teacher educator, I sought to move beyond self-reflection to consider how schools and teachers can play a meaningful part in supporting bereaved children and children with terminally ill parents. Teachers who are not trained as counselors need appropriate preparation to feel confident in helping bereaved children and their peers communicate (Jairam, 2009; Lytje, 2018). This means that my colleagues and I need to work with other professionals to prepare preservice, novice, and experienced teachers to support children who experience parental illness and death. This is especially crucial in South Africa. Due to high levels of HIV and AIDS-related illness and death, numerous orphans and vulnerable children require psychosocial support (Heath et al., 2014). Owing to a national shortage of mental health professionals, teacher educators, school managers, teachers, and other school community members must be capacitated to play a crucial part in providing this support (Heath et al., 2014; Jairam, 2009).

Reconsidering my childhood experiences of parental loss in light of the research and my vantage point as a teacher educator has allowed me to better understand the complexities of supporting bereaved children. In addition, the personal story I am piecing together from my diary exemplifies the importance of an educational culture in which children, teachers, and families feel comfortable communicating openly about traumatic life experiences. As such, it reminds me of the necessity of strengthening my own teaching in higher education with humanizing pedagogic strategies inspired by trauma-informed educational practice (Carello & Butler, 2015; Pithouse-Morgan, 2020).

Bringing my Art-Knowing and Research into a Living Relationship – Daisy

I grew up in the 1960s during apartheid in a closely-knit Hindu family. My dad, the third generation of indentured Indian history, owned a small sugar plantation farm. Reflecting on these growing-up years, I cherish memories of drawing and sketching as my most pleasurable and affirming moments. Art-making allowed me to express, connect, imagine, and live fully amid the onslaughts of dehumanization embedded in apartheid.

Recalling and reconstructing my favourite childhood drawing of a leopard (Pillay & Pithouse-Morgan, 2016) deepened my realization of aesthetic education as the most powerful resource I could lay claim to, as a girl child, for a humanized life in the context of oppressive circumstances. However, schooling for black children like me silenced and suppressed my interest in learning to make art and think creatively. Arts education was reserved for the privileged "Whites-only" schools. I felt voiceless and invisible as an experiencing being (Spivak, 2012) and learner, exacerbating my singular story as an "Indian" girl in a school for Indian children with Indian teachers. My desire to live aesthetically provided the impetus for me to take up a university degree, with Visual Art as a major subject. My love for art was my

preoccupation even as I struggled to meet my white lecturers' expectations in the Fine Arts Department.

In 1996, I took a position as a junior lecturer in Arts Education in a transforming black higher education setting. Even after apartheid, schools and universities in South Africa still reflected racialized separations. Reflecting on my experiences as a junior lecturer, I recall the dark, dingy corner in the basement that I took to work with my black and Indian student teachers. Like me, many of the black student teachers had not been exposed to visual and performing arts as schoolchildren because of "decades of deliberate impoverishment of [apartheid's] educational provision" (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019, p. 58). We built a passion for art and aesthetic education for South African schools in this poorly resourced art room. Sharing my deep feelings for art with my students, I was able to release myself from apartheid's "insidious hold on the creative imagination" (Govinden, 1996, p. 221). Although many of my students were not comfortable with art, the educational opportunities ignited in each a desire to uncover their own artistic life, build a love for art as a way of knowing their beliefs, unique interests, and diverse experiences. We explored and learned that our individual visions of ourselves and the world could be expressed through art and teaching.

Exposing student teachers to the power of the arts for their learning and teaching was a way to realize our humanity and cultivate the power of the imagination as a critical resource. We could think freely and see more options and possibilities for enlivening educational experiences against the pervasive residues of oppressive hierarchies, violence, poverty, and alienation.

Unfortunately, in 2000, the university pursued a neoliberal agenda by reinscribing the teacher education curriculum in favour of a more generic teacher – bringing an abrupt end to the preparation of specialist art teachers for schooling in the province. The university culture evolved and shifted to meet the national agendas "of modularisation and courses…within an

outcomes-based framework…and programs [that] had to correspond to employment opportunities" (Ramrathan, 2010, p. 113). The reconstructed curriculum was conceived as an opportunity to achieve efficiency. Academic knowledge for future teachers was "packaged and transmitted as 'commodities'" and "comprised of sets of competencies" (Grant & Radcliffe, 2015, p. 817).

I suffered in silence, filled with fear and shame at being the irrelevant art education lecturer—an inconvenience. This anesthetizing, dehumanizing experience (Eisner, 2002) had a numbing effect on my body and mind. I felt my "suffering was a form of private weakness" (Warren, 2017, p. 127), and guilt replaced my desire for my artistic self. After being told to *reprofessionalize* myself to become viable and responsive to neoliberal changes, I was traumatized for many years by feelings of un-belonging and disembodiment.

Pursuing my doctoral study in 2000 (Pillay, 2003) provided a material, contained, and imaginative space for me to disrupt my coerced entrapment as a disembodied neoliberal subject (Warren, 2017), teaching to prescribed outcomes and institutional expectations. Negotiating my way out of this dehumanizing moral dilemma through my methodological grounding in narrative inquiry offered me hopeful glimpses of aesthetic engagement with my embodied feelings and tacit forms of knowing through visual methods and metaphors. I found a way to heal from the "privatization of systemic pain" (Warren, 2017, p. 127) and to share my love for visual art as research with my audience. Reflecting and expressing my vulnerability through visual art-making has become a powerful way to enflesh my embodied forms of meaning-making (Pillay, 2020).

Thinking creatively repositions what I am and how I do, opening up a deep sense of connectedness in writing and teaching research as a historically marginalised woman, teacher educator, and scholar (Pillay, 2020). Reconsidering my childhood desire to make art, create, and think in complex ways, I continue to engage in "anti-anesthetic" humanizing teaching

and researching (Pillay & Pithouse-Morgan, 2016, p. 4). Recognizing and bringing my art-knowing and research into a living relationship is a risky connectedness and resistance to the neoliberal corporate model of higher education (Pillay et al., 2017). Learning with and through the company of others, I deepen my commitment to embodying teaching and research as aesthetic-ethical work. Practicing care of the self for reawakening the experiencing being (Spivak, 2012), through the imagination and engendering complex, critical thinking, evokes the possibility of care for the other and what might exist.

Building Humanizing Relationships Between Self and Others – Inbanathan

I have been an academic in higher education for 14 years. Drawing on the understanding that professional identity is informed by self-perception (Lieff et al., 2012), my practice as a teacher educator, researcher, and research advisor is deeply embedded in my personal values and beliefs. Growing up in a large extended family steeped in religion, my values and belief system were strongly shaped by my religious identification as a Hindu. In one of my collaborative autoethnographic writings with a colleague, I reflected on how I have been influenced by the teachings of the renowned Hindu guru, the late Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Some of His teachings included "Love all and serve all," "The hands that serve are holier than the lips that pray," and "Service to man is service to God" (Chisanga & Naicker, 2017, p. 198). Inspired by His wisdom, I drew on one of His powerful teachings on leadership as the tagline after my university e-mail signature, namely: "We should always be servants…it is only in servitude lies leadership". The common thread in His teachings is service to humanity and the building of humanizing relationships between self and others.

Drawing on the values and beliefs underpinning Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba's teachings, I anchor my educational leadership work in stewardship and service to others. I strive to adopt a humanitarian and caring approach in my relationships with students and

colleagues. To illustrate the human-centred values that underpin my practice, a comment by a graduate student in a recent course evaluation is apposite: "A warm, compassionate and caring lecturer with his students' best interest at heart. Always willing to go the extra mile to help students". This comment captures the socio-emotional relations that inform my pedagogy and the effort put into *serving* students.

My leadership approach aligns with what Robert Greenleaf termed servant leadership (Russell & Stone, 2002). Servant leadership encompasses behaviors that include valuing and developing people, building a sense of community, displaying authenticity, and sharing leadership so that others have an opportunity to lead (Chisanga & Naicker, 2017). My work with early-career academics bears testimony to my demonstration of some of these behaviors of a servant leader (see Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016). For example, recently, I have been working alongside two early-career academics in putting together a webinar. I provided them with all the data needed to put the webinar together and unobtrusively monitored their progress and provided support when needed.

Juxtaposing my values and beliefs against the organizational values and beliefs of neoliberal corporatized higher education institutions reveals two sets of value and belief systems in tension with each other. In becoming an academic, I was thus thrust into what Honig (1994) called "a dilemmatic space" (p. 568). I had to make a judgment call to either align my practice to the doxa of the neoliberal corporatized academy or choose to resist. I knew I had to find a way of acting "for the best'" (p. 572), which, for me, meant that I must be true to myself personally and professionally. To illustrate, often in conversations with Kathleen and Daisy, we mull over "how and what we want to be as university academics, within and in response to those conditions produced by the design of institutions within which we live and work" (Pillay et al., 2017, p. 3). Our discussions often point us to being true to what we value as academics and productively resisting corporate managerialist ways

of being and becoming. For example, as a research advisor, instead of a narrow focus on quantifying my graduate students' outputs, my attention is on the quality of experiences for my students. As part of the re/humanization project, my focus is on acknowledging my students as critically thinking and creative beings who participate in productive ways with the world. I frequently meet with Kathleen and Daisy to collaborate on our research advisory practices and experiences to improve and deepen the support we provide to students. In our co-autoethnographic writing, we reflect on our lived experience of being research advisors and how the values of care and humaneness underpin our relationships with students (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2017).

Further, I have chosen to venture outside the comfort zone of my disciplinary boundaries and collaborate with colleagues from other disciplines to resist being limited by an academy that values working in disciplinary silos for surveillance and control purposes. Nevertheless, "transcending the well-established and familiar boundaries" of the discipline of education leadership to engage in multidisciplinary collaborative work was, at first, emotionally challenging (Gray, 2008, p. 2). Feelings of discomfort and apprehension initially overwhelmed me because I was leaving a space where I felt secure and in control of my disciplinary knowing and venturing into a zone that could leave me vulnerable as an academic stranger. However, my feelings transformed into contentment and enthusiasm because of the collegial space my colleagues and I created to share mutual learning of epistemologies and methodologies that inform our collaborative research work. In our collective development as academics, we gave expression to the African adage, *I am because we are.*

My experiences as a teacher educator and researcher in a managerialist academy resonate with aspects of the autoethnographic accounts of scholars such as Warren (2017). In noting that autoethnographies are personalized and revealing texts (Chang, 2008), I have

disclosed some facets of my personal and professional being and becoming in this short piece. Autoethnography has helped me take stock of who I am in a particular organizational context and how I respond to a corporate culture that is often antithetical to my deeply held beliefs.

Closing

To close, mindful of our *Ubuntu* stance, we circle back to our research question, *"what have we learned through our autoethnographic explorations for re/humanizing learning and teaching, academic selves, and academic leadership in higher education?"* In response, we offer a poem as creative literary analysis of the autoethnographic data – our narratives (Furman et al., 2010). The poem, 'Risky re/humanizing,' is in the concise Japanese poetic format of a Tanka, generally used to express human emotion and personal experience (Breckenridge, 2016). We created the Tanka by choosing powerful words from our narratives and arranging these into poetic form. The dense structure allowed us to distill and express commonalities across our diverse histories (Furman & Dill, 2015).

Risky re/humanizing

Fragmented spaces
Anesthetizing silence
The self as a lens

      Glimpses, ambiguity
      Being, becoming human

Our co-autoethnographic inquiry was about witnessing shared humanity against a backdrop of a national history of disconnectedness. Evocative expression of the personal through narrative and poetry can foster relational ways of becoming and being academics.

The collaborative creative practice of an ethic of relationality and dialogue in higher education can make a *re/humanizing* difference to learning and teaching, academic selves, and academic leadership.

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About the Authors

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan is a Professor of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her scholarship is in professional learning, focusing on better understanding and supporting teachers as self-directed and self-developing learners. Through the self-reflexive methodologies of self-study research, narrative inquiry, and autoethnography, her work documents and theorises how teachers can gain vital insights into their professional selves and practices, with critical implications for personal-professional growth and social transformation. Recent publications include *Memory Mosaics: Researching teacher professional learning through artful memory-work* (Pithouse-Morgan, Pillay, & Mitchell [Eds.], 2019) and "Opening a poetic container: Educative learning from a painful poetry performance" (Pithouse-Morgan, 2020).

Daisy Pillay is a Professor of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her scholarship is in identity studies, focusing on teachers' personal-professional lives as the source and site for their learning, revising, and self-transformation. Her creative methodological approaches for studying lives include narrative inquiry, self-study research, autoethnography, and other self-reflexive methodologies. Her recent publications include an edited book, *Memory Memory Mosaics: Researching teacher professional learning through artful memory-work* (Pithouse-Morgan, Pillay. & Mitchell, 2019) and a Special Issue for the *Journal of Education*, "Exploring possibilities through methodological inventiveness in self-reflexive educational research."

Inbanathan Naicker is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and is a National Research Foundation rated researcher. He has published journal articles and book chapters, has presented papers at national and international conferences, and has guest-edited several journal special issues. He is currently co-editing a special edition of the journal *Alternation* titled, *Narratives of social cohesion and academic identities in higher education*. He recently co-edited the book, *Object medleys: Interpretive possibilities for educational research* (Pillay, Pithouse-Morgan, & Naicker, 2017) and is presently working on a co-edited book, *Working between the folds: School leaders reimagining school life.*

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