
SCHOLARLY ARTICLES

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Cultivating *Communitas*: Autoethnography, Reflexivity, and New Directions for Sport History

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What we need is not the will to believe, but the wish to find out.

William Wordsworth

A Contemplative Intro(spection)

How does one encapsulate the wisdom contained within a lifetime of memories and meaning? From my experiences in autoethnographic writing processes, the best answer I have now to this inquiry is this: To unveil the layers of insights within the experiences, open the heart, and write. Write from the mind; write from the body; write from the soul. Write until the words come alive on the blank page and resonate within your Self – then you know there is Truth within the text. Write for the spaces where evocative prose and poetic representation are appreciated; write into the walls that resist these insights, for one’s persistence may transform them into doors towards the future; and, most importantly, write with the knowing that the journey into the search for meaning will reveal secrets and mysteries of the lived experiences that dance onto the next rungs of the spiral of knowledge, understanding, and imagination.

The idea for this special issue began at a sociology of sport conference in San Diego several years ago. Russell Field and I knew each other throughout graduate school (at the University of Toronto and the University of Western Ontario, respectively) and our social circles often overlapped during these scholarly gatherings. He heard about the overwhelmingly positive response I received after my performative autoethnographic presentation and shared that he too was exploring autobiographical sport history in his research path. In many ways, this conversation felt like validation of my pursuit to carve out my identity as a scholar, after many doubt-filled months of questioning the “fit” of this interdisciplinary methodology into sport history. Our chat soon shifted from casual dialogue to “let’s do something to bring this type of research forward in sport history.” We were fortunate to find overwhelming

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support from *Sport History Review*'s editor, Don Morrow, to co-create this Special Issue. Thus, the project birthed an opportunity for Russell and me to connect with a yearning we feel is being called forth in the field of sport history at this time.

(Re)Flexing in the Mirror

The interdisciplinary nature of self-reflexive research through autoethnography and autobiography fosters an openness of mind to contemplate the processes of retro- and introspection within scholarly practices. Writings of lived experience offer glimpses into the values, meanings, relationships, beliefs, and practices entailed in a particular culture, allowing the reader to witness an embodied, subjective interpretation with intimate details that “touch readers where they live.”¹ These works contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation about the multiplicity of life experiences by relating the personal to the historical and cultural in ways that guide the reader through the processes of understanding. However, there is much debate over the place for and value of reflexive research within scholarly spaces—including sport history.

Reading and learning with these alternative ways to *do* and *be* sport history research challenge more traditional approaches to scholarship. Many scholars who criticize autoethnographic and autobiographic research consider it to be navel-gazing, narcissistic, self-indulgent, and solipsistic.² Conversely, those who appreciate this research dismiss these charges of illegitimacy as unproductive, suggesting that there is an incorrect perception of a lack of theoretical and critical analysis, and that the criticisms reveal limited foresight into the potential for these texts to expand and challenge current understanding and knowledge.³ In her seminal text, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*, Ellis states: “it’s self-absorbed to pretend that you are somehow outside of what you study and not impacted by the same forces as others. It’s self-absorbed to mistakenly think that your actions and relationships need no reflexive thought.”⁴ Rather than being defensive about and reactive to these critiques, she encourages scholars to create works that move towards *communitas*, to inspire collective conversations about experiences, to find commonality in the spirit of dialogic interaction while celebrating differences, to heal wounds, to support individuals in need and those within professional spaces, and to become increasingly aware of the permeable boundaries between academic disciplines.⁵ Many who choose self-reflective work believe that to express vulnerably one’s feelings, passions, and emotions invites others into conversations about social problems, trauma, loss, and experiences in the world, with the hope that the text inspires readers to feel, care, empathize, communicate, and act.⁶

Writing Through Walls

Each article in this issue connects to an overarching theme: an exploration of the author’s position in the investigation of socio-historical studies of sport and physical activity. Using various approaches to writing, research, and critical engagement, the contributors explicate how they came to their research paths; how their self(hood) impacts their choices of topics, methods, and analysis; what they learn