Studies in Arts-Based Educational Research 4

Daniel X. Harris
Mary Elizabeth Luka
Annette N. Markham *Editors*

Massive/Micro Autoethnography

Creative Learning in COVID Times

Springer

Studies in Arts-Based Educational Research

Volume 4

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Arts-Based Educational Research continues to garner increased interest and debate among artists, arts writers, researchers, scholars and educators internationally. Further, the methodologies and theoretical articulations associated with Arts-Based Educational Research are increasingly employed across the disciplines of social science, education, humanities, health, media, communications, the creative arts, design, and trans-disciplinary and interdisciplinary research.

This book series offers edited collections and monographs that survey and exemplify Arts-Based Educational Research. The series will take up questions relevant to the diverse range of Arts-Based Educational Research. These questions might include: What can Arts-Based methodologies (such as Arts-Based Research, Arts-Informed Research, a/r/tography, Poetic Inquiry, Performative Inquiry, Arts Practice-Based Research etc.) do as a form of critical qualitative inquiry? How do the Arts (such as literary, visual and performing arts) enable research? What is the purpose of Arts-Based Educational Research? What counts as Arts-Based? What counts as Educational? What counts as Research? How can Arts-Based Educational Research be responsibly performed in communities and institutions, individually or collaboratively? Must Arts-Based Educational Research be public? What ways of knowing and being can be explored with Arts-Based Educational Research? How can Arts-Based Educational Research build upon diverse philosophical, theoretical, historical, political, aesthetic and spiritual approaches to living? What is *not* Arts-Based Educational Research?

The hinge connecting the arts and research in this Arts-Based Educational Research book series is education. Education is understood in its broadest sense as learning/transformation/change that takes place in diverse formal and informal spaces, places and moments. As such, books in this series might take up questions such as: How do perspectives on education, curriculum and pedagogy (such as critical, participatory, liberatory, intercultural and historical) inform Arts-Based inquiries? How do teachers become artists, and how do artists become teachers? How can one be both? What does this look like, in and beyond school environments?

Arts-Based Educational Research will be deeply and broadly explored, represented, questioned and developed in this vital and digitally augmented international publication series. The aesthetic reach of this series will be expanded by a digital online repository where all media pertaining to publications will be held. Queries can be sent via email to Mindy Carter editor.aber.springer@gmail.com.

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Annette N. Markham
Editors

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Series Editor Foreword

I spent the COVID-19 pandemic in Florida grieving, terrified, and free. My best friend died of cancer of the pancreas in May of 2019. When the pandemic shutdowns began in March of 2020, I was still stuck in grief and attending a support group in the chapel of my local Presbyterian church to process his loss. The group was disbanded and we never completed the journey, "from mourning to joy."

In the US, many people died who would not have died if folks had worked together and did simple things like wear a mask, wash their hands, and, eventually, take the shot. In Florida, the experience was especially terrifying because after that first summer, there were no restrictions and folks were free to drink, dance, and die if they chose. In some ways, I was lucky. I had a book to edit for SAGE with Paul Mihas and Johnny Saldaña; the work kept me busy and connected through the months before the vaccines. I was unlucky because my grief for my friend combined with my grief for my family's endless crises to damage almost every personal and professional decision I made outside the book. I spent the pandemic alone, mostly staring at my computer and hiding in my house. At the end of the day, I would cook my food and walk alone past packed bars and restaurants.

Daniel X. Harris spent the Covid-19 pandemic, among other things, leading the team that developed *Massive and Microscopic Sensemaking in Times of COVID-19* (henceforth *Massive/Micro*). Harris is an international expert in creativity and the arts and, in my view, the project might be understood in two dimensions. Massive/Micro exists as an example of an intentionally constructed online creative network pulled together to respond critically and artistically to a major 21st century event. The book thus describes how a creative network in critical qualitative research formed and how it functions. As the editorial team writes in the introduction

> We three editors have our own visual, performance and digital artmaking practices that we turned to at the start of the rolling lockdowns, but setting up this call [the Massive/Micro CFP] and then community of practice via social media meant that we were suddenly connected to dozens of others like us – people who were isolated from family, friends and sometimes home; people who turned to nature and creative practices to ground themselves during the tumult, and people who wanted to connect.

The call was successful. Massive/Micro provides a powerful example of how critical, interpretive social science might communicate a complex event across time and space. Each chapter provides a unique perspective on the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the words of the editors' introduction, Massive/Micro transforms, "personal experiences through the COVID-19 crisis into critical understandings of scale, sense-making, and relationality of humans, nonhumans, and the planet."

Chapter 1, by Wakana Tsuji, and Chapter 2, by Alison Shields, begin with overviews of the Massive/Micro experiment. These narratives help readers imagine how the project began and how the work was experienced by participants. When I turned to Chapters 3 & 4, what I had learned about the project from these early chapters helped me connect with the urgency of Dawne Fahey's artmaking and the terror and loss that drive Fiona J. Stirling's writing.

> *The woman next to me begins to cry. Fuck it. I reach across the gap, the-in between, the gutter.*
>
> *I whisper: 'Would you like to hold my hand?'*
>
> *She grips my palm.*
>
> *I feel the shake of each sob run through her body, down her arm, and into my own. It is the first time I have touched someone who is not my family in half a year. I had forgotten what it was like - why we might even want to do it - making that physical connection with others. (Sitrling, p. __)*

As I traveled through the pages, I would stop and breathe as I experienced the next perfect paragraph.

> I am concerned about the touches. Lysol, bleach, hand sanitizer - constantly used after every touch. Shopping has become an awareness of potential droplets on groceries, my handbag, my credit card - that touched the machine that other people touched. What cannot be easily washed is kept on the balcony until whatever they might have picked up has worn off.

My favorite piece is Louise Gwenneth Phillips' description of the Singapore lockdown. Philips describes the rules, regulations, corruption, and inequality that shaped almost every minute of life in the city state.

In Florida, during the first and second waves of the pandemic, we dreamed of Singapore. My friends and I hoped for some type of rescue from days flush with 70 deaths and 20,000 positive COVID-19 test results. We hoped for some type a collective response that would pull us together and lead us away from isolated sickness and death. Phillips' chapter makes me ask whether such a life—life in Singapore—is desirable. Singapore will never happen here in Florida, but the Massive/Micro experiment helped me imagine it.

Charles Vanover
Associate Professor
University of South Florida

Foreword

By Mood, by Atmosphere, by Feelings: Massive/Micro-Sensemaking in the Time of COVID

Living in and through the era wrought by COVID has taught us many things, including the deep need we have for the arts in times of trouble as well as in times of plenty; the ways in which we are, all of us, lifelong learners who can and do learn and adapt to a succession of "next normal" and perhaps most importantly, the sustaining power of connection and feeling of being in "it" together. The importance of the relational, the intersectional and of narrative cuts across all these lessons and this collection, which so deftly demonstrates the power of autoethnography and other personal arts-based practices that bridge story, action and analysis in creative and powerful ways.

Autoethnography offers a ready framework and form for bringing together modes of critique and story within cultural context. We find our way in to experiencing and understanding the pandemic—whether grounded in a philosophical/theoretical, political and/or arts practice—by linking those embodied-thinking-acting practices with the particular details of daily life (Holman Jones, 2016). And like experiments in "autotheory", which bring together personal narrative, embodied experience and theory to analyse the political dynamics of selves and worlds, the work in this collection is decidedly partisan and partial. Borrowing from Arianne Zwartjes (2019), this work "strips the pretension of neutrality, of objectivity, away from the theorizing voice" and is "unafraid to mix theory with creativity and lyricism, and with the graphic details of one's very specific physical experience".

In the *21-day Massive/Micro-Sensemaking* project, participants took up a number of autoethnographic techniques and strategies for the theory-story-action exchange, creating space for modes of sensemaking that defy logic or sit outside language and conscious awareness. This is especially true in how the collection gives a sense of the effect of COVID, through the sensations, forces and encounters that seemed to wash over, or hit, or exert a pull on us. Affects are visceral, non-conscious (autonomic) responses that move us to feel, think and relate in new

and different ways. Affect theory is an attempt to synthesize these bodily, "felt experiences" in terms of the social—in other words, to feel and explore "what happens to people, how force hits bodies, how sensibilities circulate and become . . . collective" (Stewart, 2013, p. 661). Affective autoethnographers, which is a name I might give to many of the authors in this collection, seek to understand the world as shaped not by numbers or arguments or even—only—narratives, but also "by nonlinguistic effects—by mood, by atmosphere, by feelings" (Hsu, 2019). Their work is a "critical mode of affirmation" that asks readers to pay attention to "the forms and forces of moving bodies and events"; it "invites experiments with description and with the conceptual" and offers a "mode of thought that tries to describe the things that also propel it" (Stewart, 2017, p. 197). Further, the affective works in this collection help us explore and understand how change and movement come together in ways that defy the logics of rationality and how activism can centre around energy that is collectively shared and spread.

In today's world, when so much is changing and moving, we desperately need scholarship that defies the old logics of rationality, of capital and of human exceptionalism and sparks new ways of being and working together. We need works like this—works that generate energy, creativity, critique and beauty that can—and must—be collectively shared and spread. Enjoy.

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The original version of the book was revised: Author provided belated corrections have been updated in chapters 2, 5, 9, 11, 13, and 14. The correction to the book is available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-8305-3_15

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We acknowledge and thank the frontline workers who continue to fight at their own risk in order to keep others safe and attended during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and to our family, friends and colleagues who did the same as well as supporting us through the online project and its many arts-based educative outputs.

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Introduction: Art, Autoethnography and Public Pedagogies in Lockdown

Daniel X. Harris, Mary Elizabeth Luka, and Annette N. Markham

Abstract This book sits in the transdisciplinary space between digital ethnography, autoethnography, arts-based research and creative pedagogies. It contributes to the growing body of literature responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mathiyazhagan in Overcome COVID-19: Creative expressions of young people 2020), and centres around a 21-day digital autoethnographic collaborative online experiment in which over 165 participants from 26 countries responded to daily prompts in a range of affective and creative modalities, to express our experiences of isolation, community, sense-making, and life as it changed under the first few weeks of COVID. Teachers, artists, academics, philosophers and makers all drew from our own practices and geo-political perspectives to collectively find commonality in exploring the macro conditions through to the microscopic and granular experiences of our culturally diverse lives.

Keywords Critical qualitative research · Visual methods · Sense-making · Affect · Non-representation · Performance pedagogy

This book sits in the transdisciplinary space between digital autoethnography, arts-based research and creative pedagogies. It contributes to the growing body of literature responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mathiyazhagan, 2020), and centres around a 21-day digital autoethnographic collaborative online experiment in which over 165 participants from 26 countries responded to daily prompts in a range of affective and creative modalities, to express our experiences of isolation, community, sense-making, and life as it changed under the first few weeks of

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COVID. Participants were emailed (or viewed in the closed Facebook group) a new prompt each day for 21 days and had 24 h to complete the task. Teachers, artists, academics, philosophers and makers all drew from our own practices and geo-political perspectives to find commonality in grappling to understand the macro conditions of the pandemic, through the microscopic and granular experiences of our culturally diverse everyday lives.

The COVID pandemic is a once-in-a-generation experience that foregrounds the pain of separation between families, the interruption of work and schooling, the loss of careers and sudden decimation of entire industries. The creative, cultural, digital and political aspects of this book come together to function as a tool for extending arts based autoethnography, and as an artefact of innovative educational and social science scholarship at a critical point in world history. The *Massive and Microscopic Sensemaking in Times of COVID-19* (henceforth *Massive/Micro)* project, through its autoethnographic commitments, explicitly but intimately facilitates a rich cultural analysis of the global impact of the pandemic. Autoethnography is a particularly agile approach for communicating the lived experience of culture-through-self, as they are encountered within systems and discourses of power, oppression, and privilege, systems which persist even (or more particularly) in times of global pandemics, climate change, and political and religious unrest.

For those not in Wuhan, we watched it sprout, spread and catch fire around the globe. Like the bushfires that devastated Australia once again in 2020, the epidemic swept through our lives more quickly than we realized it would. Work connections between the three editors of this volume brought us into conversation, but quickly the conversation—like the virus—spread rhizomatically. In April 2020, Annette and Dan reached out online, and the response was overwhelming: people wanted to come together for a creative and autoethnographic collective experiment, to collectively try and make sense of what was happening.

Leading such a creative effort during the pandemic was an amazing experience, and one that sustained us even as we jointly created (or sourced, for many of them are sourced from elsewhere, as noted) the prompts. We three editors have our own visual, performance and digital artmaking practices that we turned to at the start of the rolling lockdowns, but setting up this call and then a community of practice via social media meant that we were suddenly connected to dozens of others like us—people who were isolated from family, friends and sometimes home; people who turned to nature and creative practices to ground themselves during the tumult, and people who wanted to connect.

Creating the collaborative spaces was easy: most connected through FaceBook, but there were those who choose not to be on social media, and those who could not for a variety of reasons. So our primary engagement was initially through FaceBook, but then we set up a smaller cohort who communicated by email, and gathered for other reasons on Google Docs (those who are not boycotting these platforms). This need for multiple modes of communication was at times unwieldy, but also instructive. For example, those who connected via email were not as ready to share their works-in-progress as those who did on FaceBook. It was harder,

through the mechanics of email, but the visuality of the FaceBook platform was conducive to a rolling round of comments and interaction around and including the visuals that were rapidly emerging.

Dan and Annette spent many, many hours on web conferencing working out the structure and content of the 21 prompts. As a performance writer and scholar, Dan was familiar with a wide range of improvisation provocations, and as a digital media scholar Annette was connected to a different, but equally wide range of tech-related prompts. With Annette stuck in Denmark for several months, and Dan locked down in Australia, these ongoing video calls were themselves a means of connecting, debriefing, but also presented practical challenges. When M. E. became involved (from Canada), the time zone-coordinating became even more challenging—as the world was also finding out through the 'pivot' to online working across the globe. In addition, the pace of posting 21 coherent and provocative prompts daily for three weeks brought its own pressures, but initiated its own meditative rhythm for the three of us as well.

We had a great time thinking up, scavenging, and posting the prompts. We were amazed at how these artists, scholars, students, and citizens from around the globe took to the call, and mostly stuck with the call. When the Black Lives Matters protests erupted in the United States (and elsewhere), some of our collaborators made the decision to leave in order to devote their available energies and time to that urgent call. The BLM movement made its way into the prompts (Prompt 18) and invited important conversations across the group. Our individual and collective feelings of helplessness multiplied, but the collective held our grief and gave us somewhere to 'take it'.

1 Autoethnography for Contemporary Times

Autoethnography is entering a new era, taking its place more centrally among other arts-based and creative research approaches. Many of those who work in arts-based education research, like the editors of this series, have known for a long time the power of including narrative, performative, and visual methods in a range of disciplines within and beyond our own fields. From autoethnographic beginnings with the narrative work of Richardson (2003), the dialogic work of Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2016), and the performance work of Spry (2016) and Holman Jones (2016), autoethnography has continued to make inroads into arts-based research and to expand its public pedagogical potential. Autoethnography's 'suspicious' beginnings as a 'soft' methodology that has been derogatorily dismissed as 'me-search' is now coming of age, through a critical theoretical attention to formations of the 'we'.

Globally, the rise of practice-led doctorates, research-creation as an arts-based but highly theorized approach, and diverse geopolitical critical autoethnographic communities (Iosefo et al., 2020) are demonstrating how arts-based methods do not need 'companion' scholarly texts to help legitimize them, but constitute research

themselves. Education as a field, and our professional organisations and international conferences, have changed accordingly. We are more comfortable recognizing and celebrating the artistry of teaching, but also the pedagogical function of creative work, and the reciprocal power of considering these flows together.

For Adams and Holman Jones, "Autoethnography is an inherently critical project—the research and creative work we do as autoethnographers questions how the personal and the cultural intersect and provides a story…" (2017, p. 153). Harris (2017) has documented the ways in which social media and digital autoethnographic methods can democratise and de-centralise the research process, even when it's collaborative. Wyatt et al. (2020) explore the ways in which material makings can be collaborative efforts and represent proximities, even from a distance.

Manning (2015) tells us that what is now known as research creation is also known as arts-based research. Manning has extended this Canadian research category into an onto-epistemological consideration of.

> How art itself activates and constitutes new forms of knowledge *in its own right* but also, perhaps most importantly, incites us to inquire into the very question of how practices produce knowledge, and whether those forms of knowledge can engagingly be captured within the strictures of methodological ordering. (p. 52)

To do this work, she asserts, "it generates new forms of experience; it situates what often seem like disparate practices, giving them a conduit for collective expression" (p. 53), and indeed this is what autoethnography and the *Massive/Micro Sensemaking* experiment show so well.

Methodologist and sociologist Patricia Leavy has asserted this relationship between autoethnography and/as arts-based research, including education-focused work, in her many handbooks and publications that include autoethnography as central to the project of arts based—and arts-informed-research (2017). Autoethnography now sits at the centre of a revolution in research that draws together artists, DIY makers, those with lived experience, sociologists, ethnographers from many fields (not just anthropology), cultural studies, narrative researchers, co-designers, participatory researchers, and those whose work can be called creative nonfiction, memoir and autotheory in a rich tapestry of difference and similarity, all with a project of social change at heart. Into this maelstrom came COVID-19.

2 The Power of Affect and the Creative-Relational During COVID

Considerations of aloneness and togetherness, and individuality and collectivity, have taken life in new ways during this pandemic. People were caught off guard: under-prepared and over-extended. Anthropologist and affect scholar Kathleen Stewart reminds us of the affective power of 'ordinary objects', doing naturally what she calls "snapping into place, if only for a minute" (Stewart, 2008, p. 82). The *Massive/Micro* experiment allowed strangers from around the globe to connect in and

share our experiences of our own ordinary objects, our human and non-human familiars during this strange and challenging time, through attending to our affective responses to sharing time with them, and each other. Affect, as Stewart shows us, is a pre-acceleration that precedes action, even emotion. It is a gathering, inchoate sensation, a vibration that tells us something is happening, if only for a minute.

Stewart's work is an instantiation of affect theory, a *doing* of affect more than a *telling* of it. Like the *Massive/Micro* project, Stewart shows readers how writing affectively can convey the experience of attending to everyday affects, as do the authors in this volume. The entire 21-day cycle of prompts was constructed with this in mind: to elicit in our collaborators a sense of something, to seek a humble way of communicating what they were experiencing, even when those experiences were not narratable in language.

Like Stewart's foundational affect work *Ordinary Affects* (2007), we pushed our participants to think-with different modalities: storytelling, close ethnographic description, critical analysis, graphic novelling, drawing, painting, photographing, dancing. Affect theory and its attendant methodological offspring are powerful tools across a range of different disciplines and paradigms. These do not simply add affective resonance to critical social science research, but offer speculative methods to post-qualitative and research-creation approaches, so that affect and arts based perspectives maintain a robust engagement with both criticality and relational co-creation.

Affect, proximity, virtuality, and embodiment took on new meanings. The pandemic accelerated what some scholars were already turning to in seeking a creative-relational approach to socio-cultural, educational and creativity studies scholarship (Wyatt, 2018; Glaveanu et al., 2019; Harris, 2021). For Jonathan Wyatt, creative-relational work is inherently more-than-human. Following Massumi, Wyatt is interested not only in the relational labour of creativity-as-event, but equally interested in the interstitial work of the hyphen in creative-relational enquiry.

This book claims to make a major contribution to critical interpretive social science—as well as arts-based education and research—in the buoyant use and commitment to creative-relational enquiry at a time of global crisis. The ways in which these chapters embody and perform creative-relational community can in themselves be a focus of methodological and ontological inquiry, in a range of disciplines. As Wyatt argues, there is a heart to creative-relational inquiry, a heart that is beating collectively in the pages of this book.

3 What is the 'Massive/Micro Sensemaking' Experiment, Anyway?

COVID-19 has informed—if not irrevocably changed—how education, digital and arts-based research is conducted. The pandemic has provided some unique opportunities for large-scale collaborative, creative, digital projects like this, even

ephemeral or spontaneous ones. The idea of doing a self-guided series of prompts as a large-scale project in the midst of a global pandemic was, in hindsight, perhaps a bit Quixotic: to transform personal experiences through the COVID-19 crisis into critical understandings of scale, sense-making, and relationality of humans, non-humans, and the planet. In between buying toilet paper and adopting new pets.

This volume showcases a small but powerfully aesthetic, affective and resonant sample of responses to the prompts that illustrate the diverse methods, geopolitical contexts, and theoretical engagements brought to the project. It is meant to be read in conjunction with (or cross-referenced with) our special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* (Markham et al., 2020) and our special issue of *Imaginations* (Luka et al., 2021). Of the 165 participants, this book draws from the work of twenty-four, across nine countries, through a range of modalities, and critical and disciplinary perspectives.

For each chapter, the particular prompt or prompts referenced in the chapter is identified on the title page of the chapter, but not all twenty-one prompts are reflected in these pages. Instead, our focus in curating this particular sample of diverse and artful autoethnographic responses to this collective experience pivots on the breadth of arts-based methods, geographical diversity, and theoretical engagement. For readers who are keen to know all 21 prompts, they are included later in this introduction, but also in full in the special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* featuring other contributions to the *Massive/Micro* project.

The authors here orient their chapters toward at least one of the 21 prompts (usually more), and share their visual, audio, and creative writing (narrative, poetic) responses. The experiment and the book both employ a guiding methodological framework of critical autoethnography (Holman Jones & Harris, 2018) and critical pedagogy (Markham, 2019), narrating the macro and micro experiences of COVID-19 from a first-person, critically- and culturally-informed perspective. It simultaneously uses arts-based methods to advance learnings from a range of COVID-suffused perspectives, and its impacts on teachers, scholars, artists and activists. It also extends contemporary ethnographic, digital, creativity and cultural scholarship, by incorporating global reflections on the Black Lives Matter (e.g. Rachel Cargill's "Great Unlearn" project) and other concurrent geo-political crises that have accompanied the pandemic's social impact and political awakenings.

4 Days/21 Prompts (from Markham & Harris, 2020)

We decided to send out one prompt daily via social media or email to activate participants in each 24 h period. The prompts focused on how the pandemic situation could be framed simultaneously as 'macro' and 'micro'. As we repeated in the prompts every day like a mantra: