

The Use of Collage in Autoethnography

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Editorial review: This article has been subject to an editorial review process



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Abstract

In this critical reflection, I will explore my use of collage in critical autoethnography. This reflection was prompted by my participation in a seminar that took place in June 2022, entitled 'Being a Researcher'. This seminar was co-organised by the Non-Traditional Research Methods Network (NTRM), of which I am one of three founder members, and the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE). I reflect upon two properties of collage. I suggest that embodiment in the process of making collage, enables researchers to draw upon embodied and affective ways of understanding the world. Furthermore, I propose that the constructive and deconstructive properties of collage enable a critical engagement with one's personal narratives in autoethnography. I conclude that the literally messy aspects of collage pose questions about tidy and messy ways of knowing, and in so doing raise questions what it means to be a researcher in practice.

Keywords: collage; autoethnography; researcher identity; visual research methods

Introduction

In this critical reflection, I will explore my use of collage in critical autoethnography, prompted by participation in a seminar co-organised by the Non-Traditional Research Methods Network (NTRM), of which I am one of three founder members, and the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE).

At this seminar, entitled *Being a Researcher*, I presented a series of collages that I created over a six-month period, from January 2022 - June 2022. The collages enabled me to articulate the contrast between my experiences as a Head of Department in a Faculty of Business and Law during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the 'potentiality' (Gale et al., 2022) that arose from my involvement in establishing the NTRM Network. The collages I presented at the SRHE/NTRM event are part of a wider autoethnographic study that explores my experiences of UK higher education during this period. However, this reflective piece will not present the outcomes of this study, as there are some aspects that I continue to navigate. For example, I continue to explore the ethical issues arising from my public expression of 'the personal troubles of milieu' (Mills, 2000: 2) and the associated challenge of critically situating my personal narratives within a social context. Therefore, this critical reflection will focus on two properties of 'analogue collage' (Hajian, 2022: 101) that I identified at the SRHE/NTRM seminar. The first property of analogue collage is embodiment in the process of making collage, and how this enables a researcher to draw upon embodied and affective ways of understanding the world. The second property is how collage enables critical engagement with one's personal narratives in autoethnography, by 'making the familiar strange' (Culshaw, 2019: 271). I will show how these two properties align with, and enhance, the broad methodological aims of autoethnography, described by Boylorn and Orbe (2016) which aims 'to understand the lived experiences of real people in context', by inviting readers into the 'lived experience of a presumed "Other" and to experience it viscerally' (Ibid: 15).

The NTRM was established by two colleagues and I in 2021. The following informal manifesto, which emerged during the Network's development, best expresses its public narrative:

The Non-Traditional Research Methods Network (NTRM) was launched in 2021 and was borne out of three colleagues talking and observing that, despite the sheer range of research methods available, in practice decisions in this area are often bound by the conventions of different disciplines. Not all research methods suit all contexts, but we decided that we would really welcome the opportunity to be exposed more to innovative research methods and research methods that are not

traditional in the areas in which we work. The purpose of NTRM is, therefore, to provide a space for meaningful cross disciplinary research debate and thereby encourage more creativity in this aspect of research design. (NTRM, 2021)

This public manifesto of the NTRM provides an important focus for event themes, and a rallying point for researchers interested in research methods and researcher development. However, my co-founders and I quickly became aware of an emerging private narrative of our participation in the Network and the SRHE/NTRM seminar provided a timely opportunity for us to reflect on and articulate this narrative.

Specifically, the Network provided each of us with refuge from the various personal and professional pressures we each experienced during the pandemic. As I explained in the opening of this piece, I was a Head of an academic department during this period, working very long hours, managing a large academic team who were themselves experiencing high levels of insecurity, fear, and anxiety in a highly changeable set of circumstances. The pandemic amplified many pre-existing personal and professional challenges, and the NTRM provided relief from this, for the founders of the Network during this difficult period. The public and private discussions that arose from the events we organised for the NTRM, coupled with our shared camaraderie created a hopeful, forward momentum for us all. My experience of our collaborative effort resonates with the reflections of Gale et al. (2022) and their research collaborations:

Every time we stand on the podium, bodies arm and arm and do our thing, something happens, there is a movement towards and, in the frisson of every speculative touch, in the excitement of every 'What-if?', a potent and highly capacious force is unleashed. (Gale et al., 2022: 8)

We embraced the 'What-if' that the NTRM project posed, and we each responded to this potentiality in different ways. As we prepared our joint presentation for the SRHE/NTRM seminar, we rejected text-based ways of presenting our experiences. For example, one of us chose poetry as a means of expression, another chose images. I decided that collage would be the way that I would tell my story of the NTRM.

Collage, Expression & NFTs

I created my first collage in January 2022 and by the time of the seminar in June 2022, I had produced twelve collages. The drive to produce a visual record of the personal and professional incongruities and challenges I experienced during this transition period was both joyful and urgent. Since completing a PhD in Drama at the University of Birmingham in 2019, I had struggled to locate myself, and my research, in a Faculty of Business and Law. I found myself bumping up against what Callagher et al. (2021) refer

to as ‘identity threats’; moments which led me to question whether I belonged within a particular discipline. The SRHE/NTRM seminar was the first time I had shared my collage work in a public forum and doing so assisted in consolidating my identity as a researcher. It also provided a focus for some tentative claims for collage as a method within autoethnography, which I shall now reflect upon in more depth in the next part of this critical reflection.

Hajian (2022) suggests that the origins of collage lie in the Japanese and Chinese tradition of ‘chine collé’, meaning ‘pasted Chinese paper’ in French. However, the word collage, derived from the French verb ‘coller’, or ‘to glue’, was not used to describe artworks until the 20th Century, when this art form was first embraced by Pablo Picasso, George Braque and the Cubists between 1910-1914. At this time, collage was considered ‘folk art’, and engagement with this form marked a radical departure for the Cubists, disrupting an established fine art hierarchy (Leighton & Groom, 2022) as many of this group had trained as professional artists. Collage challenged the notion that the world as we see it no longer has primacy: ‘The picture is no longer an act of perception. It’s an act of imagination, with a life and logic of its own’ (Farago, 2021). Collage embraces a broad range of analogue and digital forms of making. For example, my work includes photomontage, figurative expression, landscapes, and seascapes alongside abstract mosaic paper collage.

Figure 1: ‘Casting Flower Spells’ January 2022. Source: Author created, personal collection.



I intuitively embraced analogue collage, cutting up old magazines and sticking them onto paper, card and board but was only prompted to consider my methods critically when other artists introduced me to the concept of *Non-Fungible Tokens* (NFTs). NFTs are a form of cryptocurrency that can be traded, but unlike cryptocurrency, they can be digitally 'minted' as an original, becoming a unique and collectable digital asset (Wang et al., 2021). Scarcity and uniqueness are the defining qualities of a desirable NFT asset. Learning about NFT's marked a critical turning point for me because I began to consider why the analogue properties of my work were so important to me. I knew that it was important to me that I was engaging with an embodied practice, and it also mattered that the effort produced an artefact that could be experienced in the real world. The NTRM/SRHE seminar provided an opportunity to begin to theorise these experiences, leading to my first tentative claim for analogue collage in autoethnography; that analogue collage is an embodied process that prompts 'enfleshed knowledge' (Spry, 1999: 724). I will illustrate this by posing two questions: Why did embodiment become significant for me professionally during the pandemic; and why does embodiment matter in the context of research (in broad terms), and in autoethnography in particular?

Experiencing the world in an embodied way is fundamental to human experience, shaping one's emotional, cognitive and physical engagement with the world (Durkin, Jackson & Usher, 2021). In the early stages of the pandemic, the ability to touch objects, surfaces and other people, was enmeshed with anxiety and safety concerns. We were distanced from one another and technologies that facilitated our coming together in virtual ways reshaped our relationship with our bodies, because they required the brain 'to process the self as body, and as image' (Abrahams et al., 2020: 3). The experience of disassociation and disembodiment in virtual interactions is prompted by us looking at ourselves in one virtual place, whilst experiencing ourselves in another place. At the start of the pandemic, we saw and heard unexpected things in online meetings. For example, the appearance of pets, family members and sounds we cannot locate the origins of. We also experienced technical glitches, such as frozen bodies and sudden disappearances, that momentarily reminded us that our bodies existed in a slightly different time and space from one another.

During this period, I experienced an unusual disassociation from my body, only becoming aware of it when I experienced stiffness after sitting in the same position for long periods. Tsakiris, Prabhu and Haggard (2006: 424) suggest that embodiment can be experienced in three ways; self-location (where am I), body ownership (my body/not my body) and agency (both actual and imagined). The process of collage making enabled me to locate my body in the same time/space as the artefact. Analogue collage is

unmediated because it does not employ digital tools in making, and so the ownership and engagement of the body in the making process is central. During this period, doing collage felt like an assertion of my agency, and form of resistance, by reclaiming the private space of my home from the demands of work. The collages held and contained my experiences as I actively deposited my memories into them, creating biographical artefacts that contain temporal simultaneity, bringing the past experience into the present moment (**Beckstead et al., 2011**). My observation is that the quality of temporal simultaneity in the collage artefact means that the affective dimensions of an experience are experienced ‘viscerally’ (**Boylorn & Orbe, 2016: 15**) when returning to a collage, compared to reading written accounts of an experience.

The second aspect of embodiment in collage is concerned with knowledge production. The notion of ‘enfleshed knowledge’ (**Spry, 1999: 724**) is the knowledge produced by, and through the sensing body. By embracing the somatic, there is potential to move beyond the experience of the body as a foundation for knowledge, challenging the universalising tendency of written language. The linguistic patterns of positivist dualism of mind/body or objective/subjective risk fixing the body as ‘an entity incapable of literacy’ or as Merleau-Ponty (**2012**) suggests, we do not *have* bodies, we *are* bodies; ‘the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception’ (**Ibid: 206**).

Collage, Defamiliarisation & Deconstruction

Now, I will explain and expand upon a further property of analogue collage, and one which I first identified within the NTRM/SRHE seminar. It was during this seminar, that it became apparent to me how by ‘dismantling and overlaying, by destroying and assembling’ collage enables a critical and deconstructing stance towards one’s own personal narratives, and the realities implied by them.

Collage reuses the fragments and refuse of visual culture (**Hajian, 2022: 100**), embracing and drawing attention to cracks and imperfections by ‘letting the seams show’ (**Farago, 2021**). In so doing, collage embraces failure. Rather like Kintsugi, the Japanese tradition of mending broken pottery by repairing the areas of breakage with gold, we are reminded that failure is something to be valued and celebrated, that the ‘pristine is less beautiful than the broken’ (**Price, 2021: 1**). The visible damage is integral to the history of the pot, and a potential source of new knowledge:

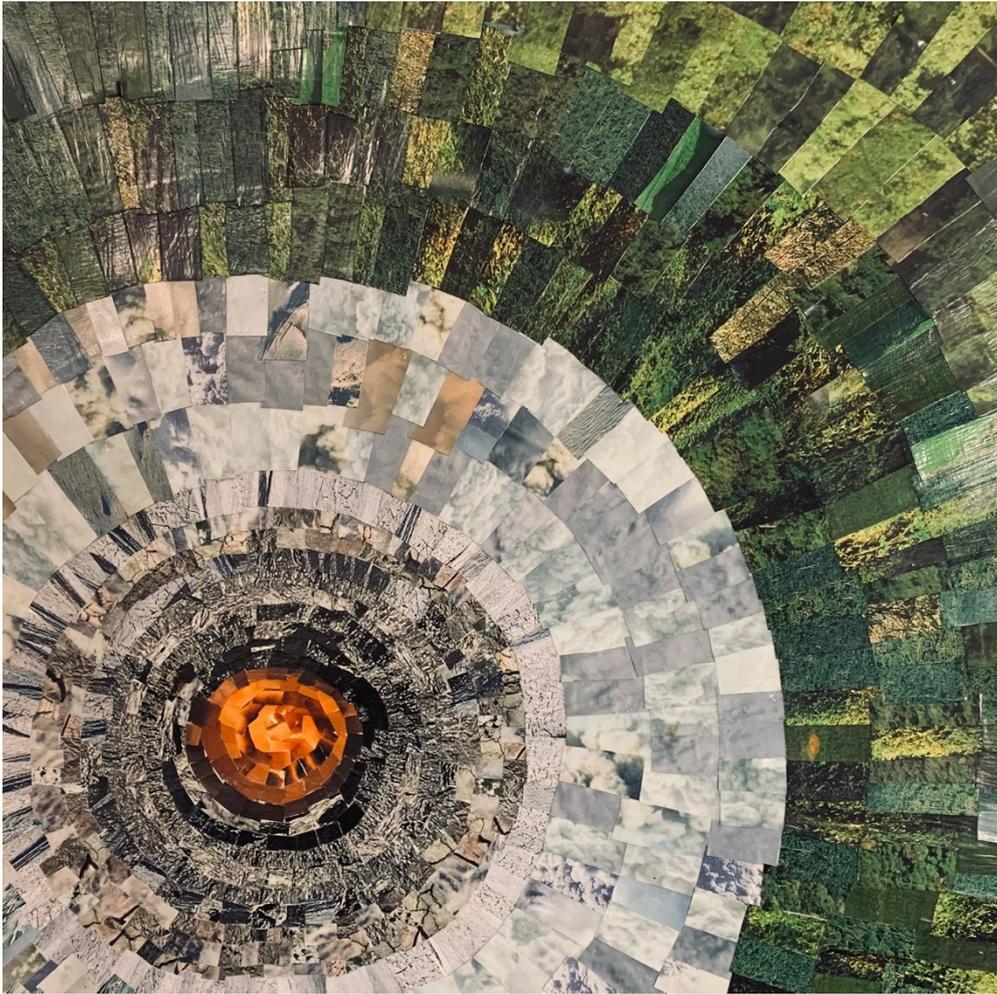
...failure itself is also perhaps an interesting (dare we say necessary) space...to dwell. It is in the broken spaces, in the silences, in the messy moments that perhaps new knowledges arise. (Schultz and Legg, 2020: 250)

Collage uses the materials associated with the symbolic real (such as photographs) and by clashing and contrasting this imagery, foregrounds the symbolic real, revealing the constructed nature of the actual and its depiction as image. Collage is 'tantamount to a bug in a system of a superficial truth - it taints' (Hajian, 2022: 99). It is a reminder that reality is changeable, complex, and contextual, rather than fixed, stable, and singular. Collage forces an engagement with the constructed nature of reality, making the familiar strange, enabling the expression of experiences that are 'beyond the spoken word' (Culshaw, 2019: 271). Whereas verbal and written language seeks to contain and classify, collage expresses through metaphor and metonymy enabling researchers 'to perceive the world "freshly," and to look for complexity' (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005: 902). These forms of expression are not in conflict with one another. For example, the written form of this critical reflection, and the verbal form of the NTRM/SRHE seminar that prompted it, has both contained and clarified my experience of engaging with collage in autoethnography. Therefore, art and writing are in conversation with one another, 'complementing and extending' one another, rather than 'one extracting meaning from the other' (Schultz & Legg, 2020: 245).

Conclusion

Through this critical reflection I have explored how my preparation and subsequent reflections upon the NTRM/SRHE seminar 'Being a Researcher' has prompted a deeper understanding of two properties of analogue collage and the methodological aims of autoethnography; a method that uses a 'critical lens...to make sense of 'messy and complex' lived experience' (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016: 16). As I reflect on these properties, I am reminded of a line in the song 'Anthem' by Leonard Cohen, where he sings 'Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in' (Cohen, 1992). Collage celebrates the cracks and brings light into understanding. The literally messy and embodied dimensions of collage pose questions about 'tidy' and 'messy' ways of knowing and the conversational nature of embodied, verbal, written and visual forms of understanding. My engagement in collage has also caused me to reflect upon what 'being a researcher' means in practice, am I a researcher or an artist? Neither or both? These are the new questions that I will explore as I continue with the wider autoethnographic study.

Figure 2: 'An Ember in the Ash' June 2022. Source: Author created, personal collection.



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List of Figures

Figure 1: 'Casting Flower Spells' January 2022. Source: Author created, personal collection.	148
Figure 2: 'An Ember in the Ash' June 2022. Source: Author created, personal collection.	152

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To cite this article:

Richmond, H., 2022. The Use of Collage in Autoethnography. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 10(1), 145-154. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v10i1.1218>.