

Searching Inside a Cut

Ethnography as a Lens to Examine Emergent Relationalities

Ariadni Kertsikof

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her essay, Ariadni Kertsikof weaves together **evidence** from several ethnographic works to argue that ethnography allows us to discover truths about the world through attending to relationships. The following excerpt focuses on the importance of relationships in Savannah Shange's ethnography *Progressive Dystopia*. Through exceptional **source orientation**, Ariadni contextualizes her evidence in light of Shange's argument. She then **selects** and **summarizes** a specific example from Shange's work, effectively illustrating not only the author's point but her own.*

Excerpt

In her ethnography *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco* (2019), Savannah Shange shows us how the aftermath of slavery, the continuing inequality in which black students' lives take shape, is perpetuated through the dynamics of everyday encounters. Her ethnography takes place in Robeson, a San Francisco high school founded upon a social justice mission. On the surface, the school is in line with its mission, since no student has ever been arrested on school grounds. Nonetheless, Shange notices that “while only one in four Robeson students were black” during her research, “80% of suspensions that year went to black students,” who also regularly have the highest rates of expulsion. How is it possible that criminalization of black bodies is so pervasive at a school with a social justice mission? In her ethnography, she zooms in on the relationships between students and school staff to show that violence and racism exist not as extraordinary events, but as the stuff of everyday encounter.

Shange's argument is best illustrated through the example of Cyarea. During her first theater class, Cyarea “jumped out of her seat to do a quick 8-count-footwork-and-gyration combination, announcing, ‘Duh, it's pronounced... [*chest pop, chest pop*] Ciara!’” -only one example of the kinesthetic and auditory ways in which she makes her presence felt in hallways and classrooms. Shange tells us that this rowdy behavior is ordinary for black girls and can, in fact, explain why they are “disproportionately disciplined”: their characteristic “loudness” positions them against “white-middle-class feminine gender norms of docility, agreeability, and the desire to please,” considered to be the standard for how all girls should behave. But white girls' names are not systematically mispronounced, and their existence is not routinely

marginalized. In automatically policing black girl loudness, according to Shange, educators are missing a more subtle reading of their behavior: Cyarea's "loudness" "invokes Aimee Cox's (2015) notion of social choreography" which is enacted to "disrupt the inherited rhythms of captivity, progressive or not." Under this light, Cyarea's choreography is an externalization of her energy of defiance towards a system that routinely mispronounces her name and otherwise marginalizes her presence. It does comprise a form of disruption--but rightfully so. And, therefore, it deserves to be addressed, rather than policed. It follows that educators' automatic policing of behavior that does not align with whiteness is exactly what inhibits the social justice mission of the school from being realized. The automatic policing of black girl loudness further marginalizes their presence, rather than addressing their rightful defiance. According to Shange, then, in order for the school to properly embody its mission it must uproot norms of policing embedded in the relationships between school staff and black students. The staff must stop systematically depoliticizing and criminalizing the anger of black students. Shange's ethnography shows us that racism can exist despite the absence of racist policies. In fact, it can exist even in institutions that aspire to be overtly anti-racist. Thus, in order to uproot the afterlife of slavery, we must attend to the norms of social relationships, rather than attempt to change policies alone.

Author Commentary

Ariadni Kertsikof

Ethnographic works are known for their attention to detail and their extraction of knowledge through encounter. Therefore, in an essay dedicated to explaining my understanding of ethnographic practice, I felt compelled to use the kinds of details that comprise the essence of these texts to illustrate my own points. I chose to focus on one specific example when trying to illustrate Shange's argument because I wanted my style of writing to mirror both the content of her writing and her approach to analysis.

I started selecting evidence to support Shange's argument in light of my paper's thesis before writing a single word on her work. I combed the pages of the ethnography in search of a single example that would speak to the core of her argument. I selected the specific one for a few reasons. Firstly, I found that Shange's translation of Cyarea's choreography jumped through the page with its liveliness. It clearly illustrated Shange's point, that black girls' bodies are associated with loudness. Secondly, having myself hesitated to pronounce Cyarea's name when first reading it, I felt her defiant choreography directly addressing me as a reader. This was a powerful moment because it reinforced the idea that black names are routinely mispronounced, and that the loudness of black girls is, therefore, justified. I felt that this example might bring Shange's argument closer to home for my readers as well. In all, I chose this example because it offered a very tangible way to convey a message that is conceptually dense: behavior that is disruptive should not be policed.

I chose to share these paragraphs of my essay because the method I followed in writing them speaks to my writing process more broadly. In my first encounter with *Progressive Dystopia*, I faced difficulty following Shange's conceptual leaps. Under this light, the process of selecting and analyzing evidence from the ethnography became a process for me to disentangle the nuances of the text. While writing this paragraph I often erased and rewrote sentences and rearranged their order. As soon as I spilled some quotes and their explanations on the page, most of my time was spent weaving the connections between them. As I did so, Shange's argument became clearer in my own head. While I usually have a better grasp of why I am selecting evidence, writing these specific paragraphs was a venture into writing as a means of thinking.

The stakes of writing these paragraphs cohesively and clearly were higher than usual. In light of the current historical moment in the United States, and as an international student with few lived experiences of racial dynamics in the U.S., it was important for me to understand all

the steps of Shange's thinking. More importantly, I felt that I could not afford to mistell Cyarea's story or distort Shange's finely tuned argument.

Editor Commentary

Natalia Zorrilla

On my first reading of Ariadni’s paper, I was struck by the sheer diversity of her evidence. It isn’t often that a single essay discusses COVID-19, Maya Angelou, matsutake mushrooms, and racism in the classroom. What unifies these topics is the care with which Ariadni selects evidence from her sources. She is equally careful to analyze each source in light of her broader thesis. Although pandemics, poetry, fungi, and anti-Blackness do not initially have much in common, Ariadni shows us what each of her sources reveals about the anthropological method of ethnography. Through Ariadni’s analysis, we learn that ethnography lets us comprehend our world by helping us attend to the relationships that connect us. In large part, this argument succeeds because of the attention that Ariadni pays to her use of evidence.

Ariadni’s treatment of evidence is exemplary in many regards, but a few strengths are especially clear in this excerpt. The excerpt’s first paragraph demonstrates the importance of source orientation. Writers—especially student writers—sometimes assume that readers are already familiar with the sources in their paper. However, this is often not the case; writers must therefore clarify the core arguments of sources important to their analysis. When Ariadni introduces Shange’s ethnography *Progressive Dystopia*, she provides context for the example in her second paragraph, allowing us to see how her evidence relates to Shange’s thesis.

Even as Ariadni contextualizes Shange’s argument, though, she also connects her orientation to her own argument about ethnography. Another common orientation mistake is to explain too much about another author’s argument and, in the process, neglect one’s own analysis. To orient effectively, writers must both introduce a source and explain why it matters to the argument in their paper. By framing Shange’s argument in terms of the “relationships between students and school staff,” Ariadni does exactly this. She shows us that the evidence in the excerpt’s second paragraph, even as it supports Shange’s thesis, is important because of what it shows us about ethnography and relationships.

To advance her particular argument, however, Ariadni must be intentional in her choice of evidence. In the second paragraph, she selects a single piece of evidence—the example of Cyarea—to illustrate Shange’s point. *Progressive Dystopia* is doubtless full of examples that support Shange’s thesis, but Ariadni’s argument is largely successful because she chooses just one. Instead of shallowly summarizing multiple pieces of evidence, Ariadni provides a deep and sustained discussion of Cyarea’s choreography. This decision allows her to present Shange’s argument with the nuance it deserves. By calling attention to the specific, obvious “disruption”

of Cyarea's choreography, Ariadni illustrates Shange's broader point: that a subtle net of policing relationships governs Cyarea's school.

However, Ariadni does not stop at summarizing Shange's argument. Instead, she focuses on what Shange's ethnography shows us about ethnography in general. Here, we see the importance of the carefully chosen Cyarea example. Had Ariadni chosen a piece of evidence that did not so clearly encapsulate Shange's argument, then she could not make claims about what the ethnography as a whole reveals. Because Ariadni's evidence is so moored in Shange's argument, however, she is able to show us the ways in which Shange's ethnography attends to relationships between students and staff. When Ariadni tells us that ethnography is valuable precisely *for* this focus on relationships, her careful use of evidence gives us every reason to believe her.

Professor Commentary

Mark Drury, Department of Anthropology

Ariadni's writing often invites the reader to think along with her through encounter. The encounter may be with new readings, concepts, and theories, or with experiences that produce further reflection. Her writing demonstrates the capacity to synthesize new material with impressive depth and clarity, and what strikes me about this particular passage is the deftness of Ariadni's synopsis. Reading a summary can feel like the recapitulation of someone else's ideas, but not in this case. Ariadni makes judicious use of the space she devotes to summarizing a book-length study by foregrounding its animating tension, then elaborates on this tension by recounting a particularly illustrative ethnographic example. This summary is compelling not simply because it is succinct but because Ariadni's writing imparts a sense of encounter. In tacking between the general and the particular, we encounter Shange's ethnography, *Progressive Dystopia*; Shange's encounter during her fieldwork research with a student, Cyarea; Cyarea's encounter with punitive, racialized disciplining in a progressive school in San Francisco; and Ariadni's encounter with the idea that such disciplining occurs through everyday encounters. Her lucid summary of Shange's study foregrounds, as well, another aspect of Ariadni's writing: an openness to a shift in perspective, and an ability to convey this shift. In writing about and through encounter as a way of conveying a shift in perspective, Ariadni writes not only about ethnography but with an ethnographic sensibility. My encounters with her writing have been full of both insight from, and appreciation for, this sensibility.

Works Cited

Shange, Savannah. *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness and Schooling in San Francisco*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019.

Bios

Ariadni Kertsikof, '22 is majoring in Social and Cultural Anthropology and pursuing a certificate in Cognitive Science. Her time is best spent in the company of close friends, and listening to the stories of callers to a local hotline. She is always one way or another focusing her attention on the dynamics of everyday encounters, which is why this essay is so dear to her. She wrote this essay as a junior.

Natalia Zorrilla, '23 is a prospective Politics or Philosophy major from San Diego, California. Outside of the Writing Center, she serves as co-president for the Princeton College Democrats, competes on the Princeton Debate Panel, and writes puzzles for the annual Princeton Puzzle Hunt. She also advises college applicants with the non-profits Matriculate and HomeFront NJ. In her free time, she winds down by solving crosswords and watching cheesy rom-coms. She wrote this as a sophomore.