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When Ruth Behar wrote her seminal collection, The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart (1996), she spoke about what it meant to write “vulnerable” scholarship—the kind that “breaks your heart” and makes you want to cry.

Pictured, Left to right: Maritza Quinones, Cynthia B. Dillard, Irma McClaurin, Mary E. Weems, Aisha Durham and Robin Boylorn

Tears were in strong evidence last month at the May 19, 2012 panel on “The Poetics, Politics and Praxis of Producing Black Feminist and Womanist Auto/ethnography” at the International Congress for Qualitative Inquiry held at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. On the panel, I, along with Cynthia B. Dillard, Mary E. Weems, Aisha Durham, Maritza Quinones, and Robin Boylorn, gave testimony to the way in which the form “auto/ethnography” has empowered us to write in our own voices and tell the story of Black women’s lives globally.

In my award-winning book, Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics (Rutgers, 2001), I defined auto/ethnography as a form that enables the writer “…to assemble a portrait that is a combination of personal memories (autobiographical) and general description (ethnography).” (p.66) And so in this panel presentation, using the events and memories of our own personal histories, each of the presenters was able to provide insight into what it means to be a Black woman, and see the world through our life lenses. For me, this means that “I listen to the voices; I listen to my own voice, I listen to the voices of the women I do research

with….and I use that self, community, and writing as a way for people to understand the experiences of people of the African Diaspora."

For another panelist, Robin Boylorn, auto/ethnography is a way of affirming and actually celebrating her identity by writing a different kind of representation of Black women for public consumption. She explains, "I came to auto/ethnography because I needed a space to call out my name. In all of the scholarship that I read as a graduate student, I didn't see myself or representations of myself as a rural, country, southern, brown-skinned beautiful girl. …So auto/ethnography was an entry place for me to call out my name and tell my truth and tell my stories, and to kind of realize the ways that I could own and celebrate where I came from and who I was when nobody else was doing it."

There is a power in being able to write about oneself, one's experience, and one's community and have it validated as scholarship. We admire white male memoirs and autobiographies, as well as those of white women, which are privileged in the reading lists of the American high schools and universities and around the world as "must read." But schools (9-12 and colleges) rarely recommend that students read about and celebrate the lives of Black women as we have written about ourselves, with minor exceptions—Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, but who has read Anne Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi?
To change this trajectory, we need to know more, write more, and hear more of the voices of those of us who usually sit on the margins. For those of us seeking to challenge conventional canons, we need new forms of writing that push our knowledge beyond the traditional boundaries of autobiography and memoir, and their biases. For us, auto/ethnography holds such a promise. This is because our stories as Black women are not just about us. Our lives are experienced both individually and collectively.

Through her tears, Maritza Quinones, an Afro-Latina woman, claimed her auto/ethnographic space:

I come from a region of race and racism denial; I come from Puerto Rico. The issues of race, of saying that we are not identified as Black is being overrated in so many places. One of the issues that I deal [with], and I wanted to step into mine fields, it was for me to interrogate my Blackness, and for me to say 'ok, I see clearly this nationalist view that I am Puerto Rican; but of course I am a Black-Puerto Rican, an Afro-Puerto Rican. And that was the most difficult thing I ever done writing that first auto/ethnography. …The issues…in academic, of course, of race, gender, and language, define me. … Auto/ethnography gave me the liberation of putting into words all those emotions and the issues that were affecting the Black women community in Puerto Rico.

Mary Weems kept us grounded with her spoken word commentaries and observations:

Find somebody who remembers the signifying monkey
Go dancing, sweatin' until my feet hurt
and I smell like cheap wine.
Listen to B.B. King, Miles, and the tempting Temptations
singin' ALL the words off key.
Forget about everything else
except about how GOOD it is
to be Black.

However, not all panelists embraced the idea of auto/ethnography equally. Cynthia B. Dillard was "troubled" by it, and gave the panelists a series of questions to ponder about the relationship between the individual and the community:

…One of the things that is a challenge for me, you notice that I didn't talk about auto/ethnography, because I don't consider myself an auto/ethnographer, and here's why. It's not that I have an issue with the notion of auto/ethnography, but if we look at the etymology, the words, "auto" means one. I never work by myself; Ever. Even if I am the only person in the room, I never work alone. So what I am curious about is how does the way that we are spiritually, how does community, live in the work? How is that we honor in the process the notion that we are not alone? And we don't come out here doing this work alone? We stand with people All the time. We stand with Spirit. We stand with traditions. We stand All the time socially. We exist because of other people. … I wonder, where does Spirit live in this auto/ethnography?

As the panel grappled with these and other questions, exchanged emotionally-charged experiences, and engaged in dialogues with each other about their relationship to terms like "Black Feminism" and "auto/ethnography," all were united in thanking Aisha Durham who organized the panel, and provided us the collective opportunity to meet other kindred souls, and tell our life stories.

In her own words, Aisha Durham answered one of Dillard's questions in the following way: *"…And I do think that when we say 'I,' especially within an African Diaspora and African centered, … the 'I' is never this individualized; …it's everybody who came before us, and everybody before …. So in some ways if we want to think about a distinction in Black Feminist or Black Womanist*

auto/ethnography, I think it is that the "auto" itself is a collective 'I' right, and so it/s not necessarily the 'I' in the way that others may define auto/ethnography."

'Nuff said.

For More:

http://www.ruthbehar.com/Anthropology.htm

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsCm9oiOEBs

http://uncrownedcommunitybuilders.com/person/mary-e-weems

http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/meridians/v007/7.1rivera.html

http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/1869/

http://crunkfeministcollective.wordpress.com/

http://tamu.academia.edu/AishaDurham/Papers/1375842/Hip_Hop_Feminist_Media_Studies

http://wsm.wsu.edu/mystory/index.php/2011/04/ohio-state-educator-cynthia-dillard-named-ugas-first-mary-frances-early-professor/

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