

(I)dentities: Considering Accountability, Reflexivity, and Intersectionality in the I and the We

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Privileged people need not attend to an imperializing aesthetic, as their words are framed by power. It is ethically imperative then, that the autoethnographer, who may certainly carry privilege into the research context be acutely aware of the power dynamics involved in the aesthetics of performative autoethnography....Aesthetics are not ideologically benign.

— Tami Spry

In a conference panel exploring personal narrative and autoethnography I am getting ready to present what I now realize to be a rather controversial, perhaps some might call adversarial stance. I scan the room looking for familiar faces. I don't see many. I also don't have the comfort of having my co-author next to me. He is at another panel.

I read the critique aloud. The "we" our paper interpellates the audience into is that of a queer Latina/o subjectivity. Part of that subjectivity includes taking some autoethnography to task for its lack of critical attention to whiteness, or what we deem a new method for some white people to uncritically re-center their whiteness. I feel the tension in the room. The moment I'm done and the question and answer period begins a white woman in the audience launches into her critique. She reflects that the "we" in our paper is not her experience. She seems a bit unnerved. The white man in the audience next to her joins in her critique, arguing that critical attention to whiteness is not a fair expectation or critique of work that is not about race. I respond that it is unrealistic to use a critical method (i.e., autoethnography) and then pick and choose which aspects of identity matter as critical or worthy of exploration. In my mind it is ridiculous to use a method that assumes a critical posturing and then ignore a large part of what the method might critically reveal.

Even after all this time, almost five years later, I continue to return to this panel and these interactions, eventually realizing that perhaps the lack of agreement came because we weren't speaking the same language. In my mind reflexivity referred to an

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intersectional critique, an illumination of power, and acknowledging one's relationality to all of this. For the scholars in the audience, perhaps reflexivity had more to do with skillfully and artfully recreating the details of lived experience and one's space or implication in it. Perhaps revealing some contradictions and gesturing toward power was also part of the goal. Was the dissonance we experienced not simply a result of the fact that the "we" in the narratives were queer Latina/os, but also informed by different perspectives toward reflexivity?

Warren writes, "Reflexivity cannot be done alone" (141). In the spirit of his assertion, and of love for the potential our academic communities could be, I offer these reflections. I outline a preliminary sketch for a feminist of color approach to performative automethodologies as they connect to ethnography. In doing this work I hope to suggest some starting points to consider privilege and accountability, accentuating the critical, while problematizing understandings of "reflexivity" across paradigms. Building off the work of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, D. Soyini Madison, Patricia Hill Collins, Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Cathy Cohen, and Richard G. Jones Jr., I argue for a more nuanced and power laden consideration of reflexivity. As Kent Ono writes, "At this particular moment in the field of communication, putting a finer edge on the word 'critical' seems like a good idea" (93).

My entrance into discussions of ethnography comes through my training in performance studies and critical rhetoric, specifically performance ethnography and vernacular discourse. However, it is also informed by a woman of color feminist ethic guided by the work of Moraga, Anzaldúa, Hill Collins, and Madison. It is a perspective that places power and the raced, classed, and gendered body at the center. I understand lived experience through what Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, terms the matrix of domination that guides us to consider how we might simultaneously exist in spaces of privilege and disadvantage. These spaces, in their complexity and multiplicity, call us to be accountable to others and to ourselves in marking the workings of power. Scholars such as Carrillo Rowe have articulated similar positions by calling us to consider a politics of belonging, asking how might we shift our priorities or be accountable to one another politically through an acknowledgment of relationality. Carrillo Rowe argues that who we love is political and this union of politics and love should enable accountability. Taking her work a step further I argue that these points of relationality could allow us to complicate the matrix of domination, as Cathy Cohen suggests, linking across affects of Otherness, regardless of our various positionalities. For example, Cohen asks us to consider how individuals whose sexuality is stigmatized by hegemonic cultures might have spaces for connection across their differences. All of these postures require a privileging of the body as a way of knowing, or what Anzaldúa and Moraga term a theory of the flesh. We theorize not simply through experience, but through histories, and I would argue, the relations, that are written in and through our bodies.

Like Dwight Conquergood, I desire to be in dialogue with others rather than speak for them. As a queer Chicana I also embrace the Otherness in myself. In defin-

ing dialogical performance Conquergood writes, “The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so they can question, debate, and challenge one another. It is a kind of performance that resists conclusions, it is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between performer and text open and ongoing” (“Performing as a Moral Act” 9). In further describing a performance perspective for ethnography, Conquergood challenges ethnographers to move against the textualism of experience, instead asking what it would mean to place a performance paradigm alongside a textual paradigm in the academy (“Rethinking Ethnography”). He pushes for rhetorical reflexivity, which he describes as the “task of rhetorical critics to seek out these sites of tension, displacement, and contradiction between Being There of performed experience and the Being Here of written texts” (“Rethinking Ethnography” 193).

In revisiting Conquergood’s work it is clear how we can connect his aims to the works of scholars such as Hill Collins, Moraga, and Anzaldúa. These scholars are not only concerned with issues of voice, in this case privileging and learning from the lived experiences of women of color, but also speaking against the bias of textuality which serves to de-legitimate the knowledges produced in the everyday intellectualizing and performances of many women of color (for further elaboration see Calafell “Rhetorics of Possibility”). Given that historically our access to reading and writing was limited, we found multiple ways to make do and theorize.

Heeding Conquergood’s call, in my own work I have turned to performative writing, which, though bound to the text in the written word, attempts to affectively create spaces of resonance, possibility, and activation for the reader. I am further concerned with acknowledging the spaces of my own privilege, disempowerment, and accountability as I come to a research project. I have struggled with this in several of my projects. For example, as I critically unpacked the requirements or necessary performances to enable sponsorship and citizenship for my then Egyptian partner after 9/11, I understood that these performances were tied to a certain level of class privilege and an ability to access and perform heterosexual privilege (Calafell “Performing”). Simultaneously, I negotiated my family’s history of immigration in this country as a Chicana; my multiple histories of immigration colliding.

Though it does not feel like a privilege we must acknowledge the privilege our class status affords us being able to hire a lawyer and pay expensive immigration fees for every form. Privilege in the sense that we have the ability to afford to go through this process of documentation, a process that is not cheap and because of this it is not privy to everyone. I consider histories of undocumented migration in my family, illegal immigration to the north that now generations later affords me the luxury of a documented entry and “responsible sponsorship.” (Calafell “Performing” 78-79)

In another project I, as a queer bisexual woman of color, negotiated my identities in the queer club Manzone, while noting how routinely heterosexual brides to-be came to the space to receive lap dances from the queer go-go boyz, flaunting privileges queer patrons of the club were not afforded (Calafell “She Ain’t No Diva”). As a bisexual person I can choose to perform in ways consistent with heteronormativity; however, I actively try to resist heteronormativity by naming these sites, such as the performances by the bachelorettes and my potential spaces of complicity.

I am well aware of my own politics in this space. This is something I continue to negotiate. I am well aware of the way I have used heterosexual privilege in the past, primarily to secure the citizenship of my then Egyptian partner (Calafell "Performing the Responsible Sponsor"). But as I have written before, that relationship was quite queer and in some ways subversive, and I am queer (Calafell "When Will We All Matter?"). Now that he's not here for people to define me by, as politically incorrect as this sounds, it's easier for me to say that without feeling like a hypocrite. (Calafell "She Ain't No Diva" 5)

In a project in progress I interrogate constant discourses of creating family friendly academic environments that actively discipline both LGBT and straight folks who choose not to have children. However, I am also cautious, as I consider how LGBT parents are constantly under attack in this hateful political environment. In each of these projects I am guided by the words of Linda Martín Alcoff as she writes that we must, "interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in" (25). Our positionalities, whether we are explicit in naming them or not, have bearing and in some cases consequences for our work, and those who are implicated by it.

In each of these projects, and other cases, I reckon with Alcoff's words. However, in many projects it is not just a case of speaking for Others, it is also a matter of interrogating how my personal narrative has qualities that reverberate across cultural, social, and political contexts. How does my story speak in relationship to larger stories of cultural Others like myself? Where do the "I" and the "we" separate? Do they? Further pushing this issue Robin Boylorn writes,

As a Black woman who studies Black women, this oftentimes means that I have to ethically negotiate stories and representations that are problematic not only for me but also for Black women and sometimes Black folks in general. This also means recognizing that researchers of color will see and interpret findings differently than their White counterparts. (qtd. in Berry and Clair "Reflecting" 202)

Additionally, as Shane Moreman and I argue, because stories provided by academics of color stand out as different in a sea of whiteness, they are often perceived as narcissistic (against normative values), or are read as the token representative story for all people with similar identities (Calafell and Moreman). Challenging these perceptions, in describing the relationship between the individual and collective in the experiences of African American women, Hill Collins explains that African American women have a shared cultural history; however, how that history is experienced in the everyday by individuals is different. Thus, as a queer woman of color utilizing auto or performative methodologies, I ask: How does my narrative speak in relation to larger cultural histories? What is the burden of representation here? How does the privilege of whiteness afford white scholars the ability to speak as individuals?

In working through these questions regarding privilege, representation, and the "I" and "we," I turn Jones's discussion of intersectional reflexivity. Not only does Jones argue for an accounting and owning of our various privileges, but he also creates the possibility of alliances across difference. In describing intersectional reflexivity Jones writes,

Part of telling my story means first being reflexive in regards to my intersecting identities, and to acknowledge the disadvantages and privileges that come with them...Self-reflection might scratch the surface, but self-reflexivity cuts to the bone. It implicates you. Reflexivity is uncomfortable because it forces you to acknowledge that you are complicit in the perpetuation of oppression...Reflexivity has got to hurt. Reflexivity is laborious. (124)

The labor of reflexivity is also noted by Madison who asks, “how we might seek reflexivity’s ongoing effects by casting reflexivity as labor?” (“The Labor of Reflexivity” 131). I cite Jones and Madison as a way to return to the questions I posed earlier in this essay, further addressing how they might intersect with reflexivity. I explicate this discussion within the context of not only ethnography, but also autoethnography. Just as there are multiple approaches and schools of thought regarding ethnographic inquiry, obviously so are there with autoethnography. Turning to Daryl Hayano’s work we can see autoethnography in some ways as a corrective measure against imperialist histories of ethnography. In this way, there may be a critical impetus that drives this whether, explicitly stated or not, as histories of power are disrupted. Additionally, we see also autoethnography that emanates from more traditionally social scientific realms (Bochner and Ellis), layering lived experience in more intimate ways, and asking us to consider the extraordinary in the ordinary. We also see performance-centered approaches to autoethnography, which return to a critical positionality concerned with issues of power and representation (Alexander; Spry; Holman Jones), as well as “who we are in relation to others in culture” (Spry 51).

Cutting across these approaches is the issue of reflexivity. However, I wonder what this means across academic camps. I applaud Berry and Clair (“Contestation”) for exploring this question in their 2011 special issue of *Cultural Studies* ⇔ *Critical Methodologies*. Returning to my opening narrative and the confusion or resistance to the perspective Moreman and I provided, I also consider as Alcoff notes, that “how what is said gets heard depends on who says it” (13). Language and style also affect how a claim is heard (Alcoff). In our essay Moreman and I call for a re-vitalization of autoethnography, not based in traditional and easy critiques of navel gazing, but rather based in a critique of race, power, and privilege (Calafell and Moreman). We argue that some autoethnographic studies do not operate from a reflexivity that privileges critical approaches to whiteness. We see critiques of, for example, sexuality and gender that ignore how they intersect with a raced body (Calafell and Moreman). Thus, the question arises: Does all reflexivity necessarily have a critical impetus? What would it mean to, as Jones argues, operate from an understanding of reflexivity driven by a politics of intersectionality? How would a politics of intersectionality or relationality push our auto-methodologies so we do not run the risk of engaging in what we might term “partial critique” of privilege or positionalities? Alcoff argues that, “Speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says. To whom one is accountable is a political/epistemological choice contestable, contingent” (25). Shouldn’t we also be accountable to that which is present *and* those spaces unmarked by power (not simply those identities in which we feel the most versed or

compelled to speak about)? Let me be clear in stating I am not above this critique and have certainly struggled with these issues in my own work. I wonder if we might push ourselves toward a new level of vulnerability, and as Jones and Madison argue, more labor in our reflexivity; a vulnerability driven by love, driven by relationality, and an ethic of care. A vulnerability, love, and care that allows us not only to see our reflection in the “I”, but also in a “we” that may be based in an Otherness that is not our own. These are the questions I continue to work and wander through. Like John T. Warren,

I have become increasingly invested trying to advocate for the world as I wish it to be – not as some idealistic vision of candy cane lanes and rainbows but rather as a progressive vision of the world that enables possibility, hope, and connection. I would love, for the work in reflexivity done in community and in critical dialogue with each other, to make possible a world that is more humane, more caring, and more enabling for us all. I wish more dialogue about the world as we wish it to be. (qtd. in Berry and Clair “Reflecting” 207)

I am inspired by Warren’s words and seriously use their spirit as my guide in offering these reflections.

As a Master’s student I fell in love with autoethnography. I was intrigued by the potentials it offered to resist master narratives. I reveled in the possibilities of identification with authors. I looked for every piece of it I could find. The turn to unpacking lived experience was invigorating. It felt familiar, just like the turn to the personal by Chicana feminists. It *felt* critical and it *felt* reciprocal.

In my present time and space, some fourteen years later the feeling doesn’t feel reciprocated anymore. In the wake of critical studies of whiteness in rhetoric, started by the work of Tom Nakayama and Robert Krizek, autoethnographies that critically unpack whiteness emerge, as do those that ignore it all together or superficially gloss over it. Disappointed I continue to long for my first love, wondering like Lauryn Hill, “Tell me who I have to be to get some reciprocity” or asking like Moraga, “What kind of lover have you made me mother? So in love with what is unrequited?” (8)

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