

Performing Identity, Critical Reflexivity, and Community: The Hopeful Work of Studying Ourselves and Others

Tony E. Adams & Stacy Holman Jones

Identities work, and are put to work, in a variety of contexts: In legislative sessions, court proceedings, city halls, and local diners, elected officials and ordinary citizens attempt to define the legality (and illegality) of particular persons and possessions; decide who others can and should love and marry; and legislate if, and where, particular kinds of people should work, eat, serve in the military, or attend school.

On television and social media sites and in print, these same people debate the possibility of rape, especially in contexts of religion and marriage, and argue over who is the victim and who the perpetrator.

There are conflicts over allowing or prohibiting prayer in schools, moves to construct or prohibit places of worship from being built in certain places, and persons who react to and who see value in publicly burning sacred texts.

There are practices—institutional, social, and relational—and places—cities, buildings, elevators, and buses—that evaluate some people as intelligent, feeling, and able and others as inept, unfeeling, and dis-abled.

These definitions, debates, modes of address, practices, and places are about being, or being presumed to be, particular kinds of people—people of particular races and ethnicities, sexes and genders, abilities, sexualities, religions and spiritualities, ages, and nationalities. These definitions, debates, modes of address, practices, and places are about securing, or eliminating, rights, access, equity, responsibility, and freedom.

Being certain kinds of people and choosing, claiming, affirming, bestowing, re-

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jecting, and denying identities are acts of communication that help us understand, evaluate, and critique others. Being certain kinds of people is *work*—work that relies on and emerges through embodied acts of communication—acts that take up, put on, and push against compulsory and citational performances about what it *means* to be a particular kind of person, even as these acts differ across time, space, and culture (Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Mingé and Zimmerman; Yoshino). Being certain kinds of people puts us *to work*, asking critically, reflexively: Who and what is/are/should be recognized as valuable, worthy of protection, and intelligibly human? (Butler, *Giving an Account*) Asking: Why, in some contexts, are people treated humanely and considerately while others are met with silence, disregard, and abuse? Asking: How are we simultaneously caught up in, marked, and privileged by systems of domination? Asking: How do we use, deny, subvert, and refigure power relations in concert with one another?

Performing the work—of identities and communities—is work that we must do, question, and transform as scholars, specifically in our endeavors as ethnographers and autoethnographers. While ethnographic research has long included identity as a primary focus, *how* such research has occurred has been a topic of concern and debate (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith; Madison). How do we study others and how do we study ourselves, asking the questions above and then waiting for and articulating—and not ignoring or exempting ourselves from—the replies? How do we become—how do we write *and* embody—the kinds of people we want and need to be in our research for ourselves and for others? In our lives and worlds? How do we become “answerable” in our words and our actions, and how is our work both responsible to and liable for the meanings it creates? (Fenske, 12)

Performing the work of identities and communities as ethnographers, especially in critical, reflexive ways, also means treating cultural practices, modes of address, and debate as sources of *hope*: hope that people will be able to meaningfully participate in social life equally and on their own terms—whatever these terms might be—and hope that, out of a desire for fairness and recognition, we can let go of the fear that certain kinds of people, places, and practices threaten the so-called pre-destined and privileged “natural” social order. This hope yearns for connection, for the considered and critical return of our attentions and affections without eliding or silencing the important and difficult questions about our place in and practices of research. This hope yearns for an embrace of uncertain, shifting, and radically open identities, relationships, and embodiments. This hope demands careful listening and learning in our engagement with others, and a willingness to live with/in uncertainty and to accept vulnerability, risk, and the ever-present absence and silence of loss. This hope revels in the joining of hearts, bodies, and minds in “doing and redoing, breaking and remaking meaning” (Spry 36). This hope is the work of a critically-motivated and performance-minded ethnography and autoethnography.

In this special issue of *Liminalities* you will see and hear accounts of identity, communities, and ethnographic practices. All of the contributors work to understand—and sometimes challenge—what it means to be particular kinds of people, in

particular places, and at particular times, as well as what such understandings might mean for ethnographic research. You will see accounts of reflexivity, resistance, and power; self-knowledge and recognition; yearning, grief, and loss; privilege and accountability; identities on the page and in the field; and issues tied to and made possible by our bodies.

The collection opens with Bernadette Calafell's essay, "(I)dentities: Considering Accountability, Reflexivity, and Intersectionality in the I and the We," which sketches a critical, feminist-of-color approach to performative automethodologies. Calafell's work asks and answers questions regarding privilege and accountability in methodological practice, accentuating the critical and performative elements of experience while problematizing competing understandings of "reflexivity" among and across ethnographic paradigms. She wonders if we might push ourselves to a new level of vulnerability—one driven by love and an ethics of care; though this kind of recognition and reciprocity remains, at least for now, unrequited.

Keith Berry also writes toward a new level of vulnerability in "Seeking Care: Mindfulness, Reflexive Struggle, and Puffy Selves in Bullying," treating reflexivity as an act of love, compassion, and care in the wake of the looming social problem of bullying. Berry explores bullying relationally, using mindfulness and reflexive struggle to explore the intersections of suffering and gentleness—where we find both a puffing up of selves in violence and an ability to rest in the welcoming softness of care.

Like Berry's stories of bullying, the story of a sexual encounter that Julie Cosenza relates in "Once Upon A Time: Looking to the Ecstatic Past for Queer Futurity" is both troubling and compelling. Working at the intersections of autoethnography and queer futurity, Cosenza unravels the complexities of queer storytelling as a response to the public silence in autoethnography (and elsewhere) around queer women's sexual identities and experiences and able-bodied norms and biases about desire. She questions normalizing discourses of heterosexuality and interrogates what counts as public and private space. Her desire is to disrupt, trouble, and destabilize dominant notions of gender and sexuality by writing and performing this story in/on her own time—a queer time that looks to the past, acknowledges and assumes the risk of a queer future, and makes the unfamiliar familiar.

Sandra Faulkner's essay, "Notes from a Pretty Straight Girl: Questioning Identities in the Field" also looks to the past and into the future in order to ask questions about the shifting nature of the identity labels we claim and the ways in which we do (and do not) enact these labels in our relations with others. Faulkner also asks how others use identity labels—assuming that we and others are or might become certain kinds of people—as acts designed to fix, dominate, and control others—while experience teaches that the dance of identity and desire is slippery, malleable, holographic.

The next two essays use and extend more traditional approaches to ethnographic fieldwork. In "Finding 'Home' in/through 'Latinidad Ethnography': Experiencing Community in the Field with 'My People,'" Wilfredo Alvarez explores a desire to feel at "home" with his research participants, all of whom were, like him, Latina/o immigrants to the United States (US). Alvarez illustrates the power and privilege that can

be inherent in ethnographic practice, shows how his relationships with interviewees cultivated a sense of belonging, and how these relationships helped him heal from much of the anti-Latina/o and anti-immigrant discourse he/they experienced in the US.

In “Collaborative Intersectionality: Negotiating Identity, Liminal Spaces, and Ethnographic Research,” Brielle Plump and Patricia Geist Martin call attention to the numerous ways in which identities can intersect in ethnographic practice. They consider their relationship as collaborative researchers in terms of interpersonal liminality—a condition characterized by uncertainty, care, awkwardness, and commitment—and they show how such liminality can be a moment ripe for refiguring identities and challenging—even reversing—power dynamics and hierarchies encountered in the classroom, in the field, at home, and in writing.

The final two essays investigate the intersections of online and offline identities/contexts. In “Blackgirl Blogs, Auto/ethnography, and Crunk Feminism,” Robin Boylorn takes up the identity labels “feminist,” “black feminist,” and “autoethnographer” to understand, story, claim, and politicize her experiences as a blackgirl, question the interrelated oppressions of patriarchy, racism, and classism, and define herself for herself, instead of believing and living the problematic and skewed representations of herself, as a blackgirl, offered to her by others. Throughout, Boylorn shows what it means to do the public-private experiential work of *crunk feminism* and she encourages us to make ourselves vulnerable, take risks, speak up and out, and to create and participate in communities that respond to and resist social injustices.

Kurt Lindemann answers the call to become vulnerable, take risks, and to speak up in “Listening for Echoes: Hypertext, Performativity, and Online Narratives of Grief.” Lindemann explores his grief and sense of incompleteness after the death of his brother as a call to reconsider how we write identities into being—not as a linear, predictable or ontologically secure series of revelations and understandings—but instead as a way of making sense of losses, traumas, and selves. In the dance of presence-absence-presence-absence that marks his search for his brother online, Lindemann calls out for his brother and listens to the contours of the echo of his returned voice. He asks questions about himself and about his relationships with others as he waits—patiently, openly, and compassionately—for a reply.

We hope that the work in and of this special issue affords us a better understanding of the ways in which identity shapes ethnography and how ethnography shapes what we understand about identity. We hope that the essays here point the way to asking critically important questions about the why and how of our work as scholars and encourage us to wait for and articulate our replies; to be answerable to the meanings our words and our actions make. And we hope to better equip ourselves to interrogate situations in which people are pointed out and pointed at, recognized and not recognized, of being told that they matter always, sometimes, or never at all.

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