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## AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IS QUEER

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### KNOWING ARTISTRY

The drive-thru line at the new Starbucks—the latest corporate fixture to take up residence in my increasingly gentrified neighborhood—is 10 cars deep. I am in my pajamas, returning from driving my girlfriend to work. The now impossible anonymity of participating in the capitalist caffeineated takeover of the neighborhood is not enough to overcome my need for a \$3.49 iced coffee. Not even close. So I go in and order my coffee and wait, reading over the tastefully displayed propaganda proclaiming Starbucks's environmental sensitivity and staring too long at the cover of a Sheryl Crow CD until I hear the barista call my name.

When I reach for my drink, she says, "Hey, you go to Blockbuster."

"Um, yeah."

She lifts the bill of her Starbucks cap so that I can see her eyes. "I used to work there." I steal a glance at her nametag. Sarah. Still, nothing.

"Yeah," I say, unsure. I'm not sure *why* we're having this conversation, either, but it fills the space between her calling my name and me claiming my coffee, so I don't linger on questions of relevance.

"My wife works there."

"Oh, *yeah*. She always has to call me because I forget to put the movies back in the cases before I return them."

"You know her?" She smiles. "You know who she is?"

"Yeah. Sure."

She hands me a straw. "Enjoy your coffee."

"I will. Nice to see you again."

Now, this exchange was brief, unremarkable. And that, of course, is what was so remarkable about it. In a matter of moments, in a matter of sentences, I understood that I—that we—*recognized* each other. I understood that Sarah—and her wife—knew about me. And that I knew about them. I suppose that's pretty easy when you work at Blockbuster. After all, it's not hard to remember which customers rent entire seasons of *The L Word*. And it isn't hard for me to notice which Blockbuster employees comment on what happens in Season 2 between Dana and Alice. Still, what was remarkable about this encounter was the unremarkable ease with which we slipped into another conversation—the conversation about who we were, there in the Starbucks and everywhere else. Known and unknown, hidden and present, all at once.

It was a conversation about Michel Foucault's (1980) subjugated knowledge, about what Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) calls "lost arts, hidden experiences" (p. 311). Such knowledges—now multiple—are present but disguised in theory and method, criticism and scholarship, experience and disciplinary (and disciplining) conversations. Gingrich-Philbrook contrasts *subjugated knowledges* with *knowledge of subjugation*—stories of struggle, oppression, humiliation. The importance of telling these stories notwithstanding, he wonders if our hunger for and valuing of stories of loss, failure, and resistance don't often work as "advertisements for power" (p. 312). He wonders if such stories ask us to hew to an overly formalist view of what not only constitutes autoethnography but what makes for successful, viable, and remarkable personal storytelling in the *name* of autoethnography or any other academic pursuit. He wonders if our interest in realism, in evocation, in proving—once and for all—that what autoethnographers and experimental writers are doing *is scholarship*—trades in and betrays literary ambiguity, writerly vulnerability, institutional bravery, difference, and artistry. He suggests that telling stories of subjugated knowledges—stories of pleasure, gratification, and intimacy—offers one possibility for writing against and out of the bind of sacrificing a multitudinous *artistry* for clear, unequivocal *knowledge*.

As I leave the Starbucks, this is what is remarkable to me: the ease with which and the pleasure in how Sarah and I acknowledged each other. The way in which we became present and accountable to one another in this very public space. Of course, no one else noticed, no one else knew. So maybe it doesn't count.

I wonder if this moment deserves my words, warrants the hour or more I spend writing it. Perhaps I'm just procrastinating, putting off more important, more rigorous, more consequential work. It is most definitely my experience—particular to *me*. I'm not sure it has any cultural significance or insight, even though I want to believe, as I write it, that something larger than me and Sarah, that something socially and culturally and politically significant—something *queer*—happened

at Starbucks. I'll never know that. Sure, I could return and ask her. Though even if Sarah shared my interpretation, even if she confirmed my telling of our story, I'm not sure that makes my efforts to write it into significance any more or less successful, any more or less significant in the big scheme of things. But then, what is the big scheme of things? What are the possibilities of particular, ambiguous, mundane, queer stories of encounter? Of intimacy? What are the promises and possibilities of this artistry (a word I substituted, just now, for *work*) for qualitative research and critical methodologies? Will such stories help us generate some type of agreement about the value, seriousness, and commitment of autoethnographic work, our approach in engaging such work, and our recognition of those who are doing it and doing it well? Will such stories provide a counterpoint to the balancing act of telling of loss and pleasure, despair and hope? Will such stories help us decide who gets invited to speak, who gets an audience, who gets tenure, who gets acknowledged? Will such stories help us build communities, maintain borders, live somewhere in between? I'm not sure they will, and I'm not sure I want them to.

## HINGE

Autoethnography, whether a practice, a writing form, or a particular perspective on knowledge and scholarship, hinges on the push and pull between and among analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger social, cultural, and political concerns. Our attempts to locate, to tie up, to *define* autoethnography are as diverse as our perspectives on what autoethnography is and what we want it to do. Attempts at such pinning down and hemming in—the stuff of methods textbooks, special issues, and, yes, handbooks—delineate the relationship of a self or selves (informant, narrator, I) and others/communities/cultures (they, we, society, nation, state). And so, autoethnography looks to "extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived" (Bochner, 2000, p. 270). It puts the "autobiographical and personal" in

conversation with the “cultural and social” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Autoethnography locates “the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power” (Neumann, 1996, p. 189; see also Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Autoethnography is analytically reflexive; it presents a “visible narrative presence” while “engaging in dialogue with informants beyond the self” in order to improve our “theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena” (Anderson, 2006, p. 375).

Autoethnography is also painted as an evocatively rendered, aesthetically compelling, and revelatory encounter. In this view, autoethnography is “the kind [of art] that takes you deeper inside yourself and ultimately out again” (Friedwald, 1996, p. 126). It exhibits aesthetic merit, reflexivity, emotional and intellectual force, and a *clear* sense of a cultural, social, individual, or communal reality (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964, emphasis added). It is an effort to set a scene, tell a story, and create a text that demands attention and participation; makes witnessing and testifying possible; and puts pleasure, difference, and movement into productive conversation (Holman Jones, 2005a, p. 765).

Another way of looking at things, of approaching autoethnography, is to open up definitional boundaries. Here, autoethnography is a “broad orientation toward scholarship” and not a method, a specific set of procedures, or a mode of representation (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 298). Such opening up does not abandon intersections or interests but instead makes the politics of knowledge and experience central to what autoethnography is and does, as well as what it wants to be and become. And, with particular attention to performance and embodiment, autoethnography enacts “a way of seeing and being [that] challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other” (Denzin, 2006, p. 422). Autoethnographers believe that the “point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world” (Holman Jones, 2005a, p. 765).

The actions and meanings that we invoke and engage when we utter and inscribe the word

“autoethnography” conjure a variety of methodological approaches and techniques, writing practices, and scholarly and disciplinary traditions. Those interested in autoethnography have eschewed and, in some cases, warned against settling on a single definition or set of practices (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 396–399; Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). In this view, an abstract, open, and flexible space of movement is necessary to let the doing of autoethnography begin, happen, and grow. However, this considered, differential positioning has also caused worry about whose or what traditions we’re working in, which methods of analysis and aesthetic practice we’re using (or ignoring), and whether we can coexist peacefully while at the same time generating positive movement (and change) in our multiplicity. Within and beyond the crises of legitimation, representation, and praxis (see Denzin, 1997, p. 203; Holman Jones, 2005a, p. 766), questions persist about the relationship between analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger concerns, and the reason we do this work at all. Is it to advance theory and scholarship? To engage in an artistic and necessarily circuitous practice? To render clean lines of inquiry and mark sure meanings and thus knowledge? To change the world? Are we talking, as Denzin (2006) wonders, about different things, apples and oranges (p. 420)? If so, we can agree, “reluctantly and respectfully,” to part ways by acknowledging our differences and claiming versions of autoethnography as our own (Denzin, 2006, p. 422). To each his, her, their, *own*. We could also return to the oppositions and to the *hinge*, to the elemental movement—metal on metal, bone on bone—that work these oppositions. And, returning there, we could ask what the hinge holds and pieces together, here solidly, there weakening, in many places coming undone: analysis and evocation, experience and world, apples and oranges. The need to do the work we love and need to do and the need for approval of that work, approval of our needs (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 310).

We could also ask what our hinges *do*, what versions of lives, embodiments, and power these

hinges put in motion, what histories they make go (Pollock, 1998a). These questions go beyond contextualization, historicization, and reflexivity to intervene in the very construction of such constructions (Scott, 1991, p. 779). They ask questions about “discourse, difference, and subjectivity, as well as about what counts as experience [as analysis, as autoethnography] and who gets to make that determination” (Scott, 1991, p. 790). They ask questions about what *counts*—as experience, as knowledge, as scholarship, as opening up possibilities for doing things and being in the world differently. More, they ask questions about who is *recognized*—as visible, worthy, right, and, ultimately, human (Butler, 2004, pp. 4–5). Asking these questions suggests that we *dismantle* the hinge—that we become “unhinged”—from “linear narrative deployment,” creating work and texts that turn “language and bodies in upon themselves reflecting and redirecting subaltern knowledges,” and in which “fragments of lived experience collide and realign with one another, breaking and remaking histories” (Spry, 2006, p. 342). These questions also remind us of the *necessity* of the hinge, of the link that it makes, however tenuously, to others even in the release of their hold on us. This necessity speaks to the threat of “becoming undone altogether,” creating selves, texts, and worlds that no longer incorporate the “norm” (of sociality, of discourses, of knowledges, of intelligibility) in ways that make these selves, texts, and worlds *recognizable* as such (Butler, 2004, p. 4). Of the movements of hinges, of their doings and undoings, Butler (2004) writes,

There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human. I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living. (pp. 3–4)

The juncture, the critique, the hinge. The *claiming* of experience, of a personal story, of humanity in the struggle over self-representation,

interpretation, and recognition (L. T. Smith, 1999, pp. 26–28, 37). The *accounting* for oneself as constituted relationally, socially, in terms not entirely (or in any way) our *own* (Butler, 2005, pp. 21, 64). The *movement* between two “traps, the purely experiential and the theoretical oversight of personal and collective histories” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 104). The performative space both within and outside of subjects, structures, and differences where the activist (the writer, the performer, the scholar) *becomes* in the moment of acting (the moment of writing, performing, doing scholarship). Where we are *made* in the same way the judge, promiser, oath taker is made in the act of judging, promising, or swearing an oath (Sandoval, 2000, pp. 155–156). The hinge is an instrument of *transitivity*, a moral movement that is inspired and linked, acting and acted upon (p. 156). The hinge asks us to align what may seem divided perspectives—without forgetting their differences or their purposeful movements—in order to “puncture through the everyday narratives that tie us to social time and space, to the descriptions, recitals, and plots that dull and order our senses” (pp. 140–141). Rather than agree to disagree or to decide the form, subject, purpose, and value of autoethnography once and for all, this chapter takes up Sandoval’s call for a “differential” methodology that aims at tactically, and we might add tectonically, shifting ways of being, knowing, and acting in the world (p. 184). As one point, or tactic for departure, we explore the hinge that links autoethnography and queer theory. We wonder if, in the binding and alliance of autoethnography and queer theory—if in recognizing their tensions and troubles, as well as the ways these “broad orientations” complement and fail each other—we might emerge with something else, something new. We are not after a homogenizing blend or a nihilistic prioritizing of concerns, as such attempts leave us, as they do Alexander (Chapter 6, this volume), marking and marked, “yearning for more.” Instead, we want a transformation of the identities and categories, commitments and possibilities that autoethnography conjures and writes, as well as the identities and categories, commitments and possibilities of

autoethnography itself. We wonder what happens when we think, say, do, and write: *autoethnography is queer*.

## UNDONE

I arrive early. I don't want to be late for the plenary session for which I am an invited speaker. Plenary: plentiful, absolute, and unqualified. A session for all members of the collective. I arrive early and discover that I am not ready, that I am unprepared. Before the conference, I had begun by writing a paper, then stopped when I learned the session was to be devoted to discussion of truth and evidence, knowledge and spirit. I turned my attention to a response rather than a call, a conversation rather than a representation. When I arrive for the session, I am asked to present—to make evident, to provide, full and absolute—my paper. I am asked for my prose, my discourse, my words inscribed in unequivocal terms. I do not have words to give. I have, instead, fragments, lists, and a poetic reading of poetry prepared for yet another panel.

We begin, and when I am called upon to do something—to *say* something—I decide on the poetry, on the poetics. I decide that poetry is the most “economical” of arts, the one that requires the “least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between” other paper presentations, right there in the conference room “on scraps of surplus paper” (Lorde, 1984, p. 116). I decide, with Lorde (1984), it is no mistake that poetry is made into a “less ‘rigorous’ or ‘serious’ art form” by the command of economic, gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic—not to mention academic, institutional, and sociocultural—*superiority* (p. 116, emphasis added). And yet, poetry is a place for voicing experience, for recognizing and challenging difference and indifference, for doing the “political work of witnessing” (Alexander, Chapter 6, this volume; Hartnett & Engles, 2005, p. 1045; Lorde, 1984). And so I begin.

I begin with Minne Bruce Pratt's (1990) poem, “All the Women Caught in Flaring Light,” part of her poetry collection *Crime Against Nature*. The back cover of the collection declares Pratt a

“lesbian poet, essayist, and teacher.” The inside cover—the scrap of paper folded over and holding in Pratt's words—tells me that her poems take their title from the “statute under which the author would have been prosecuted as a lesbian if she had sought legal custody of her children” after she came out. After she became queer. Was queered. After that, there are poems, a place to “write what happened” (p. 17). In “All the Women,” Pratt writes,

I often think of a poem as a door that opens into a room where I want to go. But to go in

here is to enter where my own suffering exists as an almost unheard low note in the music, amplified, almost unbearable, by the presence of us all, reverberant pain, circular, endless,

which we speak of hardly at all, unless a woman in the dim privacy tells me a story. . . . (p. 31)

I write,

All the women caught  
in the flaring light, incandescent  
movement of loss, separation, and denial  
banishment from the ranks of the entitled  
still offering hope. Poetry for  
something else, something other  
for pleasure and for *freedom*.

“A few words, some gesture of our hands, some  
bit of story  
cryptic as the mark gleaming on our hands,  
the ink  
tattoo, the sign that admits us to this room,  
iridescent  
in certain kinds of light, then vanishing,  
invisible” (Pratt, 1990, p. 32)

Shimmering reflection of not only what *was*  
possible  
but what *is* possible

Saying this, I begin. I begin with poetry, with words of my own and words I make my own. I look

up, and I am signaled to continue. I say that I am reading and writing Pratt's poetry and my own (in her voice, in my voice, in ours) because the stories these poems tell are *queer*—they invoke and defy alliances, categories, and desires. I say,

This story is a "door that opens  
into a room where I want to go" (Pratt, 1990, p. 31)  
I want to go. To go in and to go on

I enter this room, not pausing at the threshold,  
but moving over the gap into the texts  
where I recognize my own experience  
Not *my* experience, evidential,  
foundation for an argument

My experience as always  
inseparable from language  
from self-subject, from others, from discourse  
from difference

This is what and all I know in the world  
the starting and ending points of a life (Fryer,  
2003, pp. 153, 154)

I pause, then begin, again. I want to say that this poetry does not stop or end with queer. That our poetry does not stop or end with radical historicization, with questioning categories or normalization, with turning cutting language inside out or making manifest violent and colonizing hierarchies, though these are things that must be done. I want to say that such poetry, such a poetics, is *also* a chance for movement, a means to transform the static of a noun—*queer*—into the action of a verb—*queering*. I want to speak about moving theory play into methodological activism. I want to say, *autoethnography is queer*. I want to make autoethnography into performative speech that creates a freedom from having to be "careful about what we say" (Pratt, 1990, p. 30).

A queering talk  
a "commotion of voices" (Pratt, 1990, p. 33)  
that doesn't undo the things

that have been done to us  
the things we have done  
the ways we have become  
things and beings unbecoming  
becoming undone

I want to say this, but I do not. I cannot. Before I can get the word out, I am stopped. I am asked, then told, that I am finished. Thank you. Next.

I leave the podium, the place of plenty and absolute attendance, and reclaim my seat. The words, full and ripe in my mouth, will wait. Unfinished, but not undone.

### QUEERING

What is the act of queer, of queering? Who or what does queer become in the transitive moment of queering? Who or what becomes "redeployed" and "twisted" from a "prior usage" (derogatory, accusatory, violent) in the "direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (Butler, 1993, p. 228)? How does *queering* make manifest normalizing, subjugated knowledges?

Intentional reappropriation and an outlining of normalcy remain *perpetual endeavors* for both queer projects and queer theory itself because, as Foucault (1981) remarks, when "a program is presented, it becomes law and stops people from being inventive" (p. 6; see Butler, 1996; Sontag, 1964). Queer theory refuses to close down inventiveness, refuses static legitimacy. One could argue that queer theory has discursively achieved this legitimation and sanctioning, a form of normalcy, but it can attempt to work against this normalcy, never becoming comfortable with itself as a sensibility or its cultural acceptance. But as Perez (2005) suggests, many queer theorists unfortunately have a difficult time queering themselves.

Why hinge autoethnography to queer theory? What can we learn if we consider autoethnography a queering methodology? What might autoethnography-as-queer do to, for, and in research and scholarship? Similar to Ahmed's (2006) melding of

phenomenology and queer theory, what can happen if we queer autoethnography?

Both autoethnography and queer theory share conceptual and purposeful affinities: Both refuse received notions of orthodox methodologies and focus instead on fluidity, intersubjectivity, and responsiveness to particularities (Plummer, 2005; Ronai, 1995; Slattery, 2001; Spry, 2001). Both autoethnography and queer theory embrace an opportunistic stance toward existing and normalizing techniques in qualitative inquiry, choosing to “borrow,” “refashion,” and “retell” methods and theory differently (Hilfrich, 2006, pp. 218–219; Koro-Ljungberg, 2004, p. 604; Plummer, 2005, p. 369). Both autoethnography and queer theory take up selves, beings, “I”s, even as they work against a stable sense of such self-subjects or experience and instead work to map how self-subjects are accomplished in interaction and act in and upon the world (Berry, 2007; Butler, 1990, 1993; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Jackson, 2004; Spry, 2006). And, given their commitments to refiguring and refashioning, questioning normative discourses and acts, and undermining and refiguring how lives and lives worth living come into being, both autoethnography and queer theory are thoroughly *political* projects (Alexander, Chapter 6, this volume; Denzin, 2006; Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003).

Autoethnography and queer theory are also criticized for being too much and too little—too much personal mess, too much theoretical jargon, too elitist, too sentimental, too removed, too difficult, too easy, too White, too Western, too colonialist, too indigenous. Too little artistry, too little theorizing, too little connection of the personal and political, too impractical, too little fieldwork, too few real-world applications (e.g., Alexander, 2003; Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 1997, 2006; Barnard, 2004; Buzard, 2003; Gans, 1999; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Halberstam, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer, 2002; Lee, 2003; Madison, 2006; Owen, 2003; Perez, 2005; Watson, 2005; Yep & Elia, 2007). Queering autoethnography both answers

and exacerbates these critiques in that they are critiques of abundance and excess. Queering autoethnography takes up a broad orientation to research and representation that exists between and outside the tensions of experience and analysis. It hinges distance and closeness, equality and prioritizing oppression, conversation/dialogue and irony/rebellious debate, and accessibility and academic activism (Plummer, 2005, p. 370). Our goal is to be “inclusive without delimiting,” to “remap the terrain” of autoethnography and queer theory “without removing the fences that make good neighbors” (Alexander, 2003, p. 352; see Gingrich-Philbrook, 2003). With these ideas in mind, we hinge a brief portrait of queer theory and queer projects to the purposes and practices of autoethnography.

### NAVIGATING (IN)VISIBILITY

I own a hat, a shirt, and a box of checks, all of which possess the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) logo, a logo that consists of a yellow equal sign housed within a blue square, a logo that belongs to one of the largest, U.S.-based organizations that deals with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) affairs. I use my hat, shirt, and checks to mark my everyday, mundane body, to show others that I am, at the very least, LGBTQ friendly, to potentially get recognized by others as possessing an LGBT and/or Q identity, to breed connection and make meaningful relationship building possible. But not everyone knows the HRC logo; its LGBTQ connotations are only known by those who seek to align with, who are aware of, or who advocate against LGBTQ rights.

A trip to Starbucks. I’m wearing my shirt with the HRC logo.

“Tall half-caf Americano, please,” I say to the barista. “And a bottle of water.”

“\$1.82,” he responds. Based on mathematical estimation, my bill should be about \$4.00.

“Did you charge me for my water?” I ask.

“Yeah, but I didn’t charge you for the Americano. I like your shirt.”

“Thanks,” I say, happy to achieve recognition and a free drink, ambivalent about my special treatment I receive for marking myself in a particular way, pleased that I have an experience based on my making nonheterosexuality visible or at least an experience with what can happen when nonheterosexual support becomes marked.

My boyfriend and I take a round trip from Tampa, Florida, to Chicago, Illinois. We arrive to the Chicago airport to return to Tampa. I’m wearing my hat with the HRC logo.

“All four of your bags weigh more than 60 pounds,” the male attendant says. “The weight limit is 50 pounds for each bag.”

I’m upset that I/we bought so many used books. I/we forgot that the books would add a significant amount of weight to our baggage. We’ll now have to pay extra money to board the plane, money that will counteract the savings we received by buying used books.

“But I like your hat,” the attendant says, disrupting my used-book, additional-weight thought processing. “Don’t worry about compensating for the extra weight.”

Making a nonvisible sexuality visible: the benefits, experiences, recognition.

A trip to Chipotle, a restaurant. I’m wearing my HRC shirt. I place my order, a vegetarian burrito, and arrive at the register. “What is that logo?” the employee asks, pointing toward my shirt. I know he knows what the logo is and thus I know that he wants to make conversation.

“It’s the logo for the Human Rights Campaign, an organization that advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues,” I say.

“Oh,” he replies and says nothing else. When I arrive to my table, I see that he’s written his name and phone number on the back of my receipt: “714-874-9824. Kevin. Call me.”

A checkout line at Publix, a grocery store. The male customer ahead of me pays, grabs his bags, and walks away from the grocery bagger and the cashier. Upon his departure but out of his hearing range, I hear the cashier tell the bagger that he, the former customer, “was a flaming faggot.” Both begin to laugh as I move forward in the line.

The cashier begins to scan my groceries while the bagger bags. Both still laugh about the cashier’s flaming faggot remark, and both are not paying much attention to me.

The cashier soon says what I owe. While I usually pay for my groceries with a credit card, I decide, this time, to use a check, a check that sports the HRC logo and a check that has “Working for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equal Rights” printed above the signature line. My move to pay by check will hopefully force the cashier to ask for my ID in order to verify the check’s signature and to thus see the printed political text. As planned, he asks.

“May I see your ID?” he says.

“Sure,” I respond as I retrieve it from my wallet. I give him the ID. He looks at the ID’s signature and then compares it to the check. It is here where he pauses. I now know that he’s read the print above the signature line, and I now know that he knows that I know he laughed at the flaming faggot that passed through the checkout line before me.

“Uh . . . thank you,” he says, followed by, “I’m sorry for what I said about that man.”

“No problem,” I respond. “Thanks for your help.”

Recognition: It can subvert. Violent, colloquial philosophy: Kill them with kindness. And even if I may have been cast as a second flaming faggot after I left the checkout line, I know that I received an apology from a person who called someone else a flaming faggot. I hope that the cashier also



knows that he apologized to a faggot who likes to make flames as well.

## QUEER THEORY

Queer theory is best conceived of as a shifting sensibility rather than a static theoretical paradigm. Queer theory developed in response to a normalizing of (hetero)sexuality as well as from a desire to disrupt insidious social conventions. Fluidity and dynamism characterize queer thought, motivating queer researchers to work against disciplinary legitimation and rigid categorization. In this section, we provide an overview of queer theory, identify queer assumptions, and discern characteristics of queer projects. We then suggest how and why autoethnography functions as a queer research method.

Queer theory primarily developed from the work of three scholars: Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2004, 2005), Teresa de Lauretis (1991), and Eve Sedgwick (1985, 1990, 1993, 2000, 2003). Queer theory has roots in feminism (e.g., Frye, 1983; Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzuldúa, 1984), lesbian and gay studies (e.g., Chesebro, 1981; Katz, 1978; McIntosh, 1968), and identity politics (e.g., Alcoff, 1991; Foucault, 1978; Keller, 1985/1995; Phelan, 1993). "Queer" can function as an identity category that avoids the medical baggage of "homosexual," disrupts the masculine bias and domination of "gay," and avoids the "ideological liabilities" of the "lesbian" and "gay" binary (de Lauretis, 1991, p. v; see Anzaldúa, 1991). As Sedgwick (1993) argues, queer can refer to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (p. 8; see Corey & Nakayama, 1997; Khayatt, 2002; Nakayama & Corey, 2003). Queer can also serve as a temporary and contingent linguistic home for individuals living outside norms of sex and gender (e.g., intersex, transsexual) and, as such, must not just involve transgressions

of sexuality (Berlant & Warner, 1995; Gamson, 2000; Henderson, 2001); a person can claim a queer signifier if she or he works against oppressive, normalizing discourses of identity (Butler, 1993; Sedgwick, 2000; Thomas, 2000). As a critical sensibility, queer theory tries to steer clear of categorical hang-ups and linguistic baggage, removes identity from essentialist and constructionist debates, and commits itself to a politics of change.

### Categorical Hang-Ups and Linguistic Baggage

First, queer theory values "definitional indeterminacy" and "conceptual elasticity" (Yep et al., 2003, p. 9; see Haraway, 2003; Henderson, 2001; Thomas, 2000; Wilchins, 2004). Many queer theorists simultaneously reject "labeling philosophies" and reclaim marginal linguistic identifiers (Butler, 1993; Muscio, 1998; Nicholas, 2006, p. 317; Watson, 2005), work to disrupt binaries of personhood, and remain inclusive of identities not subsumed under canonical descriptors (Bornstein, 1994; Gamson, 2000; Hird, 2004; Khayatt, 2002; Sedgwick, 1990; C. Smith, 2000). Queer theory reveals in language's failure, assuming that words can never definitively represent phenomena or stand in for things themselves.

For instance, how might we definitively define *woman* (Butler, 1996, 1999; Fryer, 2003)? Do essential qualities exist for this category? We might say, "All women can have babies," but this would position persons unable to have babies as nonwomen or unable to claim women status. We might say, "All women are terrible at math and science" but would thus position persons who excel at these subjects as nonwomen or unable to claim women status. We might say, "All women have vaginas," but this would position persons lacking vaginas as nonwomen or unable to claim women status (e.g., a male-to-female transgender who does not desire sex reassignment surgery). The more we interrogate identity categories, the more we fall into linguistic illusion, the more we recognize language's fallibility. Such an illusory,

fallible condition, however, creates a “greater openness in the way we think through our categories,” a goal of queer research (Plummer, 2005, p. 365). With identity, this linguistic failure becomes important: While we interact with others via socially established categories, these labels crumble upon interrogation, thus making a perpetual journey of self-understanding possible. Autoethnography, as method, allows a person to document perpetual journeys of self-understanding, allows her or him to produce queer texts. A queer autoethnography also encourages us to think through and out of our categories for interaction and to take advantage of language’s failure to capture or contain selves, ways of relating, and subjugated knowledges (see Berry, 2007; Carver, 2007; Corey, 2006; Holman Jones, 2005b; Jago, 2002; Jones, 2002; Meyer, 2005; Pelias, 2006; Pineau, 2000; Spry, 2006).

### Identity-as-Achievement

Second, we argue that queer theory conceives of identity as a relational “achievement” (Garfinkel, 1967). An achievement metaphor situates identities *in* interaction, in processes where we are held accountable for being persons of particular kinds, kinds that we sometimes know or try to present ourselves *as*, but also kinds about which we have no definitive control (Hacking, 1990, 1999). A queer, identity-as-achievement logic implies that we are held accountable for identities that often take the form of linguistic categories but implies we can never know what categories others may demand of us or what kinds of people others will consider us *as*; we can try to pass as kinds of persons, but we may not succeed or know if we succeed (see Adams, 2005). A queer, identity-as-achievement logic implies that selves emerge from and remain contingent upon situated embodied practices, acts that rely on compulsory, citational, stereotypical performances about being kinds of people (Butler, 1990, 1993, 1999, 2004; Sedgwick, 1993; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). A queer, identity-as-achievement logic implies that identities fluctuate across time and space, thus requiring constant

attention and negotiation; identities may come across as “singular, fixed, or normal” in *an* interaction but may not be singular, fixed, or normal across *all* interactions (Watson, 2005, p. 74; see also Butler, 1990; Freeman, 2001; Gamson, 2000).

Viewing identity as an achievement also distances identity from essentialist *and* constructionist debates of selfhood. Essentialists view identity as something innate, biological, and fixed. Constructionists view identities as socially established and maintained through interaction. A queer, identity-as-achievement logic, however, works outside of essentialist and constructionist perspectives: It embraces the contextual achievement of and passing as certain *kinds* of people. In one context, an individual may be perceived as heterosexual whereas in another context, the individual may be perceived as bisexual or homosexual. In one context, an individual may pass as White, and in another context, this individual may pass as Black, and in another context, this individual may pass as multiracial (Greenberg, 2002). In one context, an individual may pass as Catholic, and in another context she or he may pass as Baptist, and in another context, she or he may pass as Jewish. An identity-as-achievement perspective does not imply that biology has nothing to do with interaction, nor does it foreground environmental influences on selfhood; the essence of selves and the processes through which selves are made are not the foci of queer theory. Queer theory simultaneously embraces both “identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 9).

However, the permanency of print, the representational livelihood upon which many autoethnographers rely, can make a queer sensibility come across as “singular, fixed, or normal” for both writers and readers (Watson, 2005, p. 74; see Sontag, 1964). With the exception of a virtual text like blogging, a written text can function as a permanent representation, a lifeless, uncompromising snapshot of culture. Finished texts solidify human trajectories in time and space, making it possible for life to imitate immobile art. Such permanency fixes identity regardless of an autoethnographer’s intentions, qualifiers, and desires to present a “partial, partisan, and

problematic” account (Goodall, 2001, p. 55). When we turn autoethnographic research into print—when we present it at a conference, publish it, turn it into a handbook chapter—we solidify an identity into text, and we harden a community, never allowing us or it to change unless we produce a second, solidifying account to accompany the first. We could provide two textual stories rather than just one, two accounts of a self to try to emphasize, display, the trajectories of a self-in-process, but we now have fixed two immobile versions of a self and suggest, by way of the print medium, a lack of movement. But by considering autoethnography queer, we recognize that identities may not be singular, fixed, or normal across *all* interactions (see Ellis, 1986, 1995, 2007; Johnson, 2001; Pelias, 2000, 2004; Rambo, 2005; Ronai, 1995; Wyatt, 2005, 2006). Identities constructed through a queering of autoethnography are relational; they shift and change. We are held accountable for being particular kinds of people by numerous seen and unseen forces, but our/these kinds of identities are in constant need of attention, negotiation, and care.

### A Politics of Change

Third, queer theory values “political commitment” (Yep et al., 2003, p. 9; see also Alexander, Chapter 6, this volume), deconstructs what may pass as “natural” and “normal” (Garfinkel, 1967; see Berlant & Warner, 1995; Dilley, 1999; Kong et al., 2002; R. R. Smith, 2003), focuses on how bodies both constitute and are constituted by systems of power as well as how bodies might serve as sites of social change (Althusser, 1971; Berlant, 1997; Bornstein, 1994; Butler, 1990, 1993, 1999, 2004; Foucault, 1978; Yep & Elia, 2007), and embraces a “politics of transgression” (Watson, 2005, p. 68; see Hird, 2004). Queer theorists revel in “symbolic disorder” (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 125), pollute established social conventions (Haraway, 2003), and diffuse hegemonic categories and classifications. As Henderson (2001) suggests, normalcy “needs perversion to know itself” (Henderson, 2001, p. 475; see Bell, 1999). Queer projects function as this denormalizing perversion often by re/appropriating marginal discourse.

While it could be argued that all re/appropriations are political, queer projects intentionally re/appropriate phenomena to pollute canonical discourse, to question what mundanely passes as normal. Queer re/appropriation tries to “twist” social order (Betsky, 1997, p. 18), counter canonical stories, and make discursive “trouble” (Butler, 1999).

The use of “queer” in “queer theory” is an example of a queer act, a queer politics. As Butler (1993) writes, something becomes “queered” when it is “redeployed” and “twisted” from a “prior usage” in “the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (p. 228; see Kong et al., 2002). Watson (2005) suggests that “reclaiming the word, ‘queer’ empties the category of its effects” (p. 73). Queer theory re/appropriates the once-taboo word and tries to reclaim abject power. Prior to this re/appropriation, *queer* possessed negative connotations, negatively deeming phenomena as out of the norm and “slightly off kilter” (Walker, cited in Johnson, 2001). By using *queer* in an affirmative sense—by incorporating it into mainstream discourse and associating the term with the academically valued *theory*—queer endeavors can emerge as desirable and esteemed. A queer re/appropriation is similar to how individuals try to reclaim other words for political purposes (e.g., *nigger* [Kennedy, 2003], *cunt* [Muscio, 1998], and *vagina* [Ensler, 2001]).

Queer projects work to disrupt insidious, normalizing ideologies by way of re/appropriating parts of discursive systems and explicitly advocate for change. For instance, Cvetkovich (2003) shows how Dorothy Allison’s work disrupts common storylines of abuse in that Allison shows how she both was a victim and pleasurable recipient of abusive behaviors, expanding notions of how an abused identity functions. Alexander (Chapter 6, this volume) demonstrates how the film *Brokeback Mountain* can function as a conservative story that perpetuates heteronormativity and subordinates raced “Others” (e.g., Mexican male prostitutes) to White desire; Alexander’s read disrupts the text’s assumed liberal status. And another intentional queering of canonical discourse involves the television program *Noah’s Arc*, a scripted show that features experiences of five, assumed-gay Black

men, individuals whose sexuality is implicitly perceived to rub against canonical religious doctrine and the rampant homophobia found in predominantly Black communities (see Yep & Elia, 2007). Naming the show *Noah's Arc* is also a queer act in that it mixes the religious baggage of Noah and the Ark with nonheterosexual storylines, thus potentially disrupting and reframing common understandings of religion *and* sexuality. A politics of change, as deployed in queer projects, constitutes much of current autoethnographic work as many autoethnographers intentionally, politically try to make ideological and discursive *trouble* (Butler, 1999; see Corey & Nakayama, 1997; Foster, in press; Jeffries, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Lee, 2003; Nakayama & Corey, 2003; Owen, 2003; Pelias, 1999, 2006; Rambo, 2007; Taylor, 2000).

### MANEUVERING

I have a female friend who had two male friends, both of whom called me a "homo-phoney." According to her friends, a homo-phoney described a man who identified as gay but did not have any "gay qualities" and a man who would be identified as gay solely to establish intimate, sexual relations with women. According to her friends, I was straight. I, not she, had other motives in our relationship since her friends commented on and criticized my, not her, behavior. My gendered performances conflicted with a sexuality I claimed.

A colleague once asked why I was attending the National Communication Association convention. I told him I was participating on a gay-themed research panel. "Are you gay enough to be on that panel?" he asked. Gender and sexuality conflict, again.

In graduate school, a professor frequently informed me that there was a "woman out there for me" since I did not "act gay," even though she knew of my intimate relationships with men. I regularly asked her why she thought this, but because of her authoritative role of "professor" and mine of "student," I felt I could press the fake-gay issue only so far.

Each of these situations makes conditions for queering possible, conditions that I now embrace

and intentionally challenge in my everyday, embodied affairs. For instance, after disclosing my sexuality to a class I taught, a student told me that he thought I was a "geek" rather than gay. "You wear black-rimmed glasses," he said. "But you're masculine. It wasn't until you said you couldn't operate a laptop computer where I began to think you might be gay." At the end of the semester when students completed course feedback, absent my physical presence, one student later told me about two debates that occurred during the feedback process: Some students believed that I was lying about my gayness; others felt that I was transgendered, a man with a vagina who wanted to undergo sex reassignment surgery. Even though I still may perpetuate scripts of masculinity by intentionally working against an effeminate gay male stereotype, such comments also suggest that my intentional queering of the categories and normative conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexuality do generate confusion, blur categories, and make questioning possible.

### QUEERING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Queering autoethnography embraces fluidity, resists definitional and conceptual fixity, looks to self and structures as relational accomplishments, and takes seriously the need to create more livable, equitable, and just ways of living. The hinge that links queer theory and autoethnography is, like Sandoval's (2000) resistive semiology, a differential and oppositional form of consciousness (p. 184). It is performative in the transitive sense of a hinge, a middle position, a form "that intervenes in social reality through deploying an action that re-creates the agent even as the agent is creating the action . . . the only predictable final outcome is transformation itself" (p. 157).

A differential, oppositional, performative, and above all transformative approach to autoethnography is one in which bodies are immersed in texts and as such lives, contexts, and cultures. The subject-selves of autoethnography are doing, speaking, and understanding beings, yes, but they are forthrightly incomplete, unknown, fragmented, and conflictual. Failing to recognize these contingencies,

ellipses, and contradictions, autoethnographers paint themselves into a corner where boundaries are policed, disciplinary and scholarly turf is defined and fought over, and systems for what and who “counts” and doesn’t count undermine the very liberatory impulses we imagine for our work. In the place of relationality, performativity, and transitivity, we create singularity, clarity, and certainty. In short, we create *good stories*: stories that report on recognizable experiences, that translate simply and specifically to an “actionable result”—an emotional response, a change in thinking or behavior, a shift in policy or perception, publication, tenure (Eisenberg et al., 2005, p. 394). As scholars have responded to a perceived need for good autoethnographic stories, we have:

- Favored *clarity and transparency* of knowledge via criteria or “rules of art” over *ambiguity*—room for interpretation, misunderstanding, not knowing, leaving things unfinished, unanswered (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Madison, 2006; Pollock, 2006)
- Foregrounded *knowledge* claims and publication in sanctioned or legitimate outlets (journals, academic books) and glossing over *aesthetic* (literary) concerns (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005)
- Sought proof of *worth and legitimacy* by creating typologies for good stories to enact (Bochner, 2000; Clough, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Holman Jones, 2005a; Pollock, 1998b), even as we resisted doing so
- Engaged in recursive debates about how to define autoethnography, about what constitutes authentic or legitimate autoethnographic research, and about what the purposes and meanings of autoethnographic work are for research, for academic careers, for ourselves, for the world (Alcoff, 1991; Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006; Bochner, 2000; Buzard, 2003; Corey, 2006; Denzin 2006; Gans, 1999; Madison, 2006; Rambo, 2007; Ronai, 1995; Spry 2006)

The necessity and helpfulness of methodological primers and criteria for the evaluation of our work notwithstanding, a queering of

autoethnography asks us to find ways of living together, “without agreement, without confirmation, without clarity” (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 298). Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) recommends writing, as we noted earlier, subjugated knowledges, stories that are present but disguised (pp. 311–312; see Conquergood, 2002). These are stories of pleasure, of gratification, of the mundane, as they intersect, crisscrossing rhizomatically with stories of subjugation, abuse, and oppression. One of the most ready forms for such tellings is found in narrative accounts of our lives. And so, autoethnography is queer. Saying so means taking a stand on a poetics of change. Saying so treats identities and communities as a performative, relational accomplishment. Butler (2005) reminds us that whatever stories we choose to tell, and however provisionally *or* transparently we work to tell them, we are always doing so in order to make ourselves “recognizable and understandable” (p. 37). This is recognition of a need to unfasten the hinge that separates experience and analysis and the personal and the political, even as we need it to create an intelligible humanity, a life both livable and worth living. It is a recognition of humanity that doesn’t end or stop in the move from the space of illegitimacy, all breath and speech, dark and hollow, to the place of legitimacy, resplendent and lucid in word and text (see Delany, 1988/2004). In the next breath, in the next book, however, Butler (2005) ends with the pleasure and ethics of being *undone* in a radical relationality:

We must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient “I” as a kind of possession. (p. 136)

We wonder if the ethics of undoing that Butler describes enacts both the pleasures and the oppressions of autoethnography and, furthermore, if it anticipates the juncture, the stitching

together—the hinging—of autoethnography and queer theory. Consider, for example,

- Making work that *becomes*, like a perpetual horizon, rather than an artifact of experience; making work that acts *as if*, rather than says *it is*. Such work understands the importance of being tentative, playful, and incomplete in equal measure with radical historicization, persistent questioning, and perpetual revision.

- Making work that simultaneously imagines fluid, temporary, and radically connected identities *and* that creates and occupies *recognizable* identities. Such work views identities as relational accomplishments: manifestations of selves that shift and change, that must be negotiated and cared for, and for which we are held personally, institutionally, and ethically responsible.

- Making work that advocates for trouble, that takes a stand in and on the otherwise. Such work disrupts taken-for-granted, normalizing stories and posits more open, more free, and more just ways of being in the world.

Making autoethnography a queer method offers a way to trade in the debates around legitimacy, value, and worth and for conversations about practicality, necessity, and movement. It is a move autoethnographers are ready to take, are taking. We encourage you to claim and reclaim the word *queer* in the name of autoethnography, in the name of challenging categories and achieving identities and communities that are fluid yet complex, multiple yet cognizant of the attention, negotiation, and care that impinge on any scholarly project. We encourage you to twist *autoethnography* from its prior usages, whether diminishing or valorizing, and put it to use for altogether new and other political purposes.

## RECOGNITION

Making coffee at home—a home I share with my girlfriend and my son—I thought about a conversation I had with my mother a few months after

I left my other home, my other life. For months, I could not summon the courage to tell my mother the details of the split, of my reversal, my betrayal. And then, in an unremarkable moment, I told that story in sentence. When my mother asked if I was interested in having another relationship some day, if I would date someone and maybe be married again, I simply said, “No.”

“Oh. . . . Why?”

“Mom, I’m not interested in dating.”

“What if you meet someone nice? A good man?”

“Mom, I’m not interested in dating men.”

“Oh. . . . *Oh*. Okay. As long as you’re happy.”

And that was it. Unremarkable except for the remarkable way she moved without hesitation into my new narrative. Unremarkable except for the remarkable way she chose to accept and, yes, *believe* my story—a queer story with no immediate recognition, no diagnosis or translation, no ready or apparent ending—as true. Or at least good enough. Later, we would talk about this story in more detail, and still, my mother did not waver in her acknowledgment of what she could not know. She did not read or tell this story as extraordinary or rare, mournful or wasted. She did, however, share one concern: She was worried I’d be alone. That I wouldn’t have someone to share my life with, to grow old with. All I could say was, “There’s no guarantee of that—of having someone—for anyone. I don’t think it’s any different for women. Maybe we just don’t see women growing old together. Or maybe we do, but we don’t recognize it.” I don’t know whether this satisfied her or put her or my worries about what is surely the inevitability of loneliness in life at bay, but that was the end of our conversation, at least for now.

Making coffee at home, I thought about my mother’s gift to me: an unblinking, unmoving acceptance of the “lost arts” and “hidden experiences” that had become my life. In her recognition of me, in her acknowledgment and claiming of my story, she taught me what I could not teach myself

in those long months: the importance of risking ourselves in moments of unknowingness, the necessity of resisting offers of certainty or stability, and the flattery of legitimacy. The importance of taking a chance motivated not out of a misplaced or, worse, righteous self-sufficiency, but a willingness to become undone *and* moved to act. Why not write over, on, and through the boundaries of what constitutes and contributes to autoethnography—to qualitative and critical research—by creating a few queer stories, a few queer autoethnographies? Why not embrace a critical stance that values opacity, particularity, indeterminateness for what they bring and allow us to know and forget, rather than dismissing these qualities as slick deconstructive tricks, as frustrating, as unmoving and unrecognizable? Why not write (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 311)? *Why not?*

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