Main Article:

Doing Ethnography, Being an Ethnographer: The Autoethnographic Research Process and I

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Abstract

I examine here Theory and Scholarship (taken to be formalized social scientific frameworks that seek to map out the real world and social actions in an objective fashion) via an autoethnographic lens. Chiefly, I ask how autoethnography as a research method reconfigures them: how may we extend knowledge using autoethnography? While much critique has centered on the "doing" (dispassionately?) versus "being" (going native?) of autoethnography, I argue that such a dichotomy is inherently false. Instead, doing is located within the ethnographer's very being, so that a closer look at the autoethnographic research process is required, from conception to implementation to introspection. I attempt such a processual analysis here: drawing on an earlier social scientific project, I relate the intellectual and social process whereby it was translated into an autoethnography. Using a performative lens to illustrate the dialectical mode of doing and being in the research process, I intersperse portions of personal narrative with academic writing, to enable a disjunctural appreciation of the various layers of interpretation. While the epistemic framework I hold to here is indeed a poststructural one, privileging fragmentation and social situatedness, it also emphasizes continuity and interconnections in the research process.

Keywords: autoethnography; performative writing; doing; being; Theory; reflexivity

Author's Note. I juxtapose academic and free-style writing in this article, as performative autoethnography. Often, stylistic disjunctures will be marked by the use of a star (*) in the text.

1. Introduction

I bumped into Cassandra in the stairwell, glad I didn't have to go across to the Union in the icy cold to find her. I'd been surprised she hadn't been in her office. She was usually there these days, working on that book of poems due to come out in May. I wanted to ask her about the paper I'd worked on the past month and-a-half under her direction. It was the reworked version of a piece I'd presented at the last NCA (annual convention of the National Communication Association), and I wanted to know whether it was ethical to present at ICA (annual convention of the International Communication Association) later this year.

Cassandra screwed up her lip and thought for a moment. But it was a stairwell, after all, and there were people constantly coming in, going up, and heading out. Just when she was about to say something, Deidra boomed out loud: "Dr K! I wanted to talk to you about . . ."

But Cassandra smiled and waved at her, indicating she should hold up for a second, and looked back at me and said, "Well, if you think it's so completely changed, that you're presenting something new, something that you haven't grappled with earlier, I suppose you could. Be sure to tell them that, though." And, because Deidra was still there, waiting, and because this was a stairwell, she turned away and so did I, thinking about what she said. Was it different? Did it say something new? Did it say something important? I certainly *thought* it said something new, but was it important from academe's point of view? Would they be interested in an autoethnographic performative revision of an earlier conceptual paper? Would it still be relevant, if I re-situated the concepts within my lived experiences and those of others, to flesh out that story of heteronormative discourse, to the point that it stopped being a theoretical abstraction (Geertz, 1994) and was a real emotional, evocative, and life-affecting issue for me (Behar, 1997)? For me, it made all the difference between the function and the identity: the difference between "doing" research and "being" the researcher, or in the interpretive context: doing ethnography and being the ethnographer.

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I treat this distinction between "doing" research and "being" the researcher, or doing ethnography and being the ethnographer not so much as a dichotomy as a dialectic. My conception of dialectics is adapted from Bakhtin's (1981) work on dialogue and Baxter's (1988) relational dialectics treatise, signifying the ongoing negotiation among various processes and forces, not all of which have to be opposing. I represent dialectical tensions in this article using the forward slash (/) between terms, for example, method/rigor, performance/fiction, identity/distance, and research theme/process/method. These do not represent either mere alternatives or additives, but systemic processes occurring simultaneously, in ways that may reinforce or oppose each other. Thus, when I talk about the "research theme/process/method," I mean to say that the theme of research is implicated in and affects the actual process of research, which may subsume (but perhaps not entirely) the method used by the researcher.

My purpose here is to examine the project of Theory building and Scholarship (mark the capital letters) via an autoethnographic lens, and thereby to tease the role of doing and being. I take Theory and Scholarship to be formalized social scientific frameworks (rather than small *t* individual theories, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion, or Constructivism of interpersonal communication, or any of the others you encounter when you thumb through a fat colorful undergraduate communication textbook) that seek to map out the real world and social actions in an *objective* fashion. I consider them macro-level Grand Discourses, which shape micro-level social interactions and research agendas (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). Drawing on Popper (1998), Phillips (2000), Lakatos (1998), and Kuhn (1998a, 1998b) among others, I examine the role of Theory and Scholarship, with their implications for knowledge production and social progress. Given this backdrop, I ask how autoethnography as a research method and process reconfigures them and/or how we may extend knowledge using autoethnography. My intention in doing so is not to foreground traditional social scientific or post-positivist epistemologies at the expense of interpretivist turns, but to highlight the ontological and axiological journey that not only the field but we as individual researchers need to embark on, as we utilize (auto)ethnographic methods to give voice. To malign a proverb that is much Disneyfied these days: You don't know where you want to go, unless you know where you've been (or are expected to go).

While much criticism has centered around notions of "good" and "bad" ethnography (Geertz, 1994; Jarvie, 1977; Winch, 1977), chiefly related to the dichotomy of doing ethnography (dispassionately?) versus being overtly immersed (going native?), I argue that such a dichotomy is inherently false. Instead, doing is located within the ethnographer's very being, since his or her standpoint shapes in intractable ways the methods and sites of study (Geertz, 1994; Harding, 1998, 2004), so that a closer look at the autoethnographic research process (from conception to implementation to introspection) is required. In this article, I hope to provide such a processual analysis: drawing on an earlier project (Mitra, 2008), I relate the intellectual and social process whereby the initial social scientific piece was translated into an autoethnographic one (Mitra, 2010). I do so via a performative lens, believing this to be the best way to illustrate the dialectical mode of doing/being in the research process; thus, I intersperse portions of personal narrative with academic writing and reviews of literature (Alexander, 2002; Markham, 2005; Pelias, 2008; Warren & Fassett, 2002), in an attempt not to circumscribe meaning overtly by requirements of (academic) form. Methodologically speaking, there are several ways to refer to this-- performative writing, interpretive ethnography, writing culture, reflexive coperformance-- though the intention is similar: re-centering incoherence and fragmentation to foster questioning among readers and encourage further dialogue drawing on one's personal experiences and outlooks (Alexander, 2003; Conquergood, 1991; Denzin, 2000, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Markham, 2005; Pelias, 2008; Warren & Fassett, 2002). Thus, the juxtaposition of academic form ("I examine the role of Theory and Scholarship . . .") with free-style introspection is not meant to be a seamless smooth transition, but, rather, a JARring JOlt (DISjuncture!) that is meant to take you (me) through various layers of interpretation accorded by the context you (me) find yourself (myself) in. For Markham (2005), "attention to the way fragmented discourse functions helps us not only to understand how people are experiencing everyday life but also, as scholars, explore new

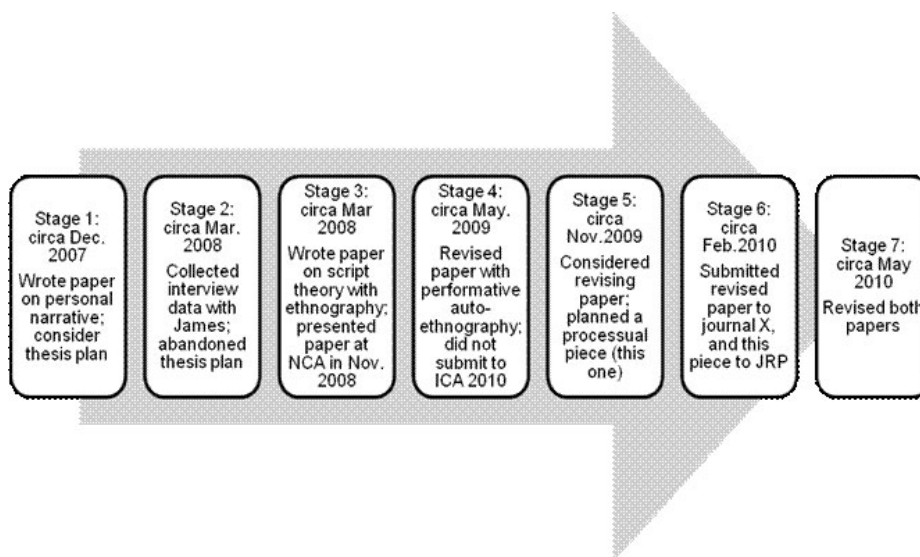ways of making sense of social life and expressing knowledge" (p. 815).

Figure 1. Stages of the autoethnographic writing process, as encountered by me.

The fragments of personal inquiry I use range from my responses to reviewers to independent musings in hindsight, from excerpts of interview transcripts and previous papers to various imagined/real scenic settings, both private and public. Figure 1 depicts a linear graph of the (quite fragmented and haphazard) process behind this project, where relative dates and project stages have been listed. I will not refer to these stages in the temporal order they are shown, but use them selectively to develop my argument. My intent is to illustrate the ongoing postscripted nature of (auto)ethnographic research, wherein one continually revises and reframes one's argument, based on moments of clarity from reading reviewer-comments in the library or (in much less formal circumstances) taking a shower. While the epistemic framework I hold to here is indeed a poststructural one, privileging fragmentation and social situatedness, it also emphasizes continuity and interconnections in the research process: rather than drawing a clear contrast ("boldly go where no man has gone before") between autoethnographic praxis and social scientific traditions, my intent is to draw linkages between the two ("stand on the shoulders of giants").

2. Question: How Do I Enter This Discursive Space?

Social scientific Theory in the positivistic tradition has been heavily influenced by the natural sciences, both in terms of methodological rigor and ontological stance: the social world is real, in that there is a tangible social reality that exists outside of intersubjective interpretations, and which may be ordered and predicted via specifically discovered and designed rules of law (Pavitt, 1999; Phillips, 2000). Theory (with capital *T*) is iron-clad, in that it operates via "covering laws" (Berger, 1977) that explain phenomena by ordering observations gleaned from "real life." For Fay and Moon (1994), it "goes beyond particular generalizations by showing why the generalizations hold, and it does this by specifying the basic entities which constitute the phenomena to be explained, and their modes of interaction, from which the observed generalizations can be inferred" (p. 27). Theory

building and legitimate Scholarship (with capital *S*) hinge on the key factors of accuracy, reliability/consistency, validity, verifiability, falsifiability, objectivity, predictability, and in some cases, simplicity or elegance (Kuhn, 1998b; Lakatos, 1998; Phillips, 2000; Popper, 1998; Ruse, 1998).

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Scene Setting: A foundational seminar on communication studies for first-year doctoral students at a Big 10 US university. (Stage 5 in Figure 1, circa November 2009)

The Actors: Fifteen first-year doctoral students arranged in a semi-circle around two faculty-members, one social-science inclined and the other critical. It's just another day in just another week while we pontificate on matters of ontological/epistemological/axiological importance: some of us are checking e-mail, chatting on Facebook, shopping for clothes, books, or CDs online, etc. while the two faculty-members clash: not quite battle-armor material, but close enough . . .

Critical Faculty:

> . . . This implies that some theories are more "progressive" (Lakatos, 1998) than others, in that they seem to explain better, and be more practical or pragmatic than others (Capella & Hornick, 2010).

> Second, the role of the larger community or society is implicit, though seemingly ignored; it is, after all, societal and cultural push-and-pull factors that influence collective judgment (Carey, 1988; Weber, 1994).

Social Science Faculty:

> Third, reliability and consistency mean not only internal reliability, but also consistency with other established theories of the day (Kuhn, 1998b; Phillips, 2000).

> Fourth, because sense-making is continuous (for instance, molecules are discovered, but what makes molecules up? Atoms are discovered, but then what constitutes an atom?), Theory is always to be verified, falsified, or corroborated (Phillips, 2000; Popper, 1998; Ruse, 1998).

Voice in my head (stirred by a Facebook poke):

> How iron-clad is Theory then, really?

Critical Faculty:

> Theory is tentative because the definition of what makes good or bad theory is culturally and socially determined (Weber, 1994). Cultural backgrounds are not simply "variations" to be analyzed but determine the "significance" and

scope of a theory. A grand framework of legitimate and scientifically approved Theory persists in scholarly observations, to the extent that they are never completely value-neutral, but colored by the social scientists' theoretical and cultural propensity (Harding, 2004; Kuhn, 1998b).

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I first started working on the heteronormativity paper in the Fall of 2007 (Stage 1 in Figure 1), my first year in graduate school, while in a class on communication pedagogy. It was all very new for me, someone who had worked in the media industry in India for close to 4 years, to enter the US academe and grapple with Paulo Freire (1973, 1977), Dwight Conquergood (1991), and bell hooks (2003) among others, and their ideas of reflexivity, participation, power, and control. Far from the metropole, situated in a rural Midwestern town, I started teaching undergraduates and became acutely aware of my own difference: brown-colored, Indian, gay, and urban male.

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Stage 7 (Figure 1) interlude:

During a meeting with a professor, one of our first heart-to-hearts, she exclaims joyfully: "O, my friend Dharma told me that I'm never going to see a gay Indian man! They're too rare, she says, and won't come out of the closet! I'm so glad you're so strong and open and active!" *Gulp*! How on earth do I react to that?

The discomfiture wasn't entirely unbearable--in fact, it helped me situate myself in my new surroundings, spurred me on to understand, negotiate, ask questions, and interpret the people I was meeting daily. Nor was this a completely novel experience; it's not like being a guest panelist on one of those Intercultural Communication classes where everyone seems to think that just because you're from a different country, you're an alien who's never heard of Burger King or thinks unproblematically that America is the land of opportunity. So there were important disjunctures of novelty/familiarity within people, places and customs that provided important ways of knowing and settling. And one of these disjunctures was being a gay (foreign) college student in a sea of heteronormativity (see Yep, 2003, for a detailed discussion on the discursive normalization of heterosexuality).

I proposed to write my research paper for the Communication Pedagogy class on heteronormative discourses. Since there wasn't enough time left to get IRB approval (the university's Institutional Review Board for research involving human subjects/participants), I used my personal narrative as the drawing-board, citing the extensive literature on being gay in the (American) classroom and the teachings of critical pedagogy. I fashioned a conceptual piece about heteronormative discourses and constraints. And, voila, I was done:

> In this paper, I shall explicate topics such as "queer theory" and "heteronormativity," and go on to discuss the objectives behind "critical" pedagogy." The construct of "male-ness" and the representation of

"homosexuality" in the media will also be examined. I will talk about how sexuality is currently perceived in college campuses across the US, discussing the findings of both studies and personal impressions of students and faculty. The efforts by various groups in campuses and schools across the country, who are trying to reduce homophobia, will also be studied. Finally, using my personal narrative as a student-teacher at Flatlands University [name changed] in North-West Ohio, I will attempt to identify certain themes, under which heteronormativity is expected to play out on this campus. At the close, this paper will make recommendations for empirical research to follow up on these themes and other areas that the literature reviewed may reveal. (Mitra, 2008, p. 1)

I was so thrilled with the final product--a 25-page paper with Introduction, Literature Review, Theory, Method, Data Analysis, and Conclusion--that I decided to craft my thesis pre-proposal out of it.

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The underlying question of this paper is: how does autoethnography as a research method re-configure how we understand Theory and Scholarship? Drawing on the exposed tentativeness of Theory, I suggest that this occurs along broadly two lines: first, on method and rigor (doing autoethnography) and second, on identity and distance of the researcher (being an autoethnographer). These lines are intertwined and coterminous, despite positivist admonitions to separate them. Instead, I argue that autoethnography constitutes small *s* scholarship: a research framework that starts with lived experience and shared meaning between researcher and researched, mingling identity with practice (Denzin, 2003; Pelias, 2008).

3. Method and Rigor, i.e., Doing--Part I

For Phillips (2000), "bad" Theory results when scientists (social or otherwise) are unable to keep their personal/social values from affecting their research. In response to Kenneth Gergen's (1985) groundbreaking essay on social constructionism, Stroebe and Kruglanski (1989) defended the cognitivist bastion by arguing that "it is inconsistent with the social epistemological position to demand of a scientific theory or paradigm that it resolve any particular set of issues" (p. 487). Thus, they advocated rigorous recording of participant behavior, noting every syllable uttered, and transcribing interview data maniacally, rather than considering extra-interview and contextual issues that mere recording tactics cannot capture. Similarly, Pavitt (1999) stressed on objectivity of Theory and Scholarship, to ensure that personal biases, in either sampling mechanisms or data analysis, do not hinder understanding the "truth."

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Information Sheet in the IRB application (Stage 2 in Figure 1, circa March 2008)

Project Overview. Hello, my name is Rahul Mitra, and I am a Masters student

in the School of Communication at Flatlands University. If you are at least 18 years old, I would like to invite you to participate in a research project about social practices in the college classroom that may give us an idea about how sexuality is perceived.

Your Participation. This study involves focus group sessions and in-depth interviews with college students in northwest Ohio. If you agree to participate, you will be invited to join a focus group session, or a detailed one-on-one interview, or both. Each focus group session, consisting of 7-8 participants, should last about 30-40 minutes. You are reminded that focus group participants should keep confidential whatever is discussed in the session. The one-on-one interviews, which should take 45 minutes each, may be either face-to-face or by phone, and will be arranged at a time of mutual convenience. If you agree to both the focus group session and the interview, we will schedule the interview first and then the focus group. The possible risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

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For the thesis, I wanted "data" to make my work more Generalizable and Objective, so my first research "participant" was James [name changed], a 38-year old gay man who had recently obtained his Masters in Romance Languages. James had graying hair, traveled extensively, had a quirky laugh, rolled his eyes, flirted incessantly, was single, leaned back deep into his chair, ordered a latte, eyed some of the cute men in the coffee shop, looked deep into my eyes, didn't much care for the voice recorder I was using, touched my hand briefly (but sizzlingly), and asked me out on a date. (Or something like that. Not perhaps in that order. Not perhaps anything like that at all, except in my head.) I asked him . . .

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Proposed interview questions in the IRB application (Stage 2 in Figure 1):

1. How would you describe the environment on campus and in town, in terms of being gay-friendly?

2. Provide me with a brief description of your social networks. What kind of people do you hang out with? How comfortable are they--or you, around them--with gay issues, or with you being gay?

3. How comfortable are you with disclosures of sexual identity (your own or somebody else's) in the classroom? Do you think it plays a role for the strengthening self-esteem for gay individuals?

4. Have you ever felt like you had something to say in class (as a gay person, or about gay identity), but the setting was inappropriate?

5. How do you think the majority of your colleagues feel about some of the

ways in which gay people might feel uncomfortable in the classroom and/or elsewhere on campus? Would they be sympathetic, if they were aware? (If you are straight, please answer how this applies to you.)

6. Do you think that classrooms and out-of-class interactions sometimes create a sense of "compulsory heterosexuality"? How do you think this may be countered?

And then, this is what I wrote about him after our meeting when I got back to my apartment, after a furious night of transcribing the interview data:

The subject was at ease during the interview, possibly because he had some prior personal contact with the researcher. Some key takeaways: he is comfortable with his sexuality and being out, both personally and professionally; he believes that being out is essential to forming gay identity; he does not seem to believe in the idea of gay "community" through demonstrations or pride parades, but rather through context-building; his insight of being gay and "fitting in" to provide a role model was interesting in that it might actually suggest fitting into the heteronormative model; but his ideas on how a possible counter-scripting might be achieved was also insightful, in the context-building thrust, perception of a subject or course-divide (Sciences versus Liberal Arts), highlighting of innocents hurt, combination with a larger anti-discrimination campaign, etc. It is strange in that while his narrative suggests a central place for disclosure and being "out," he does not evince unqualified support for the visibility tactics of queer groups and parades, and stresses a subtle entry point for the classroom environment. This might be suggestive of how the classroom and campus is seen as not quite a "public" space for all it is supposed to be. (Author's research diary, May 3, 2008)

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I sat there, looking at the transcription, feeling happy about it. I liked the interview impressions as well, but of course, I wasn't going to use that for my work--it was too subjective. My first work of research-oriented data collection, my first interview (aside from my prior journalism): there was something momentous about it. I felt thrilled both that I'd finished the transcription and that James had flirted over coffee. He'd said something like, "I'll give you a call Saturday, and maybe we can hang out"--as it turned out, he never called--and that added to my . . . crazy mood. I looked over at my copy of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and wondered whether I should start coding for themes, but then decided to wait for more data and more interviews (more dates?) like a good scholar.

The date with James wasn't the only thing that never materialized. Three days later, I looked at the transcript again, listened to the tape, read my notes, and was quite . . . blank. There didn't seem to be anything there. It was a conundrum: I had this great interview, pages of data transcribed rigorously, my Strauss and Corbin at the ready, but still lost as to

what actually came of it. I wanted to provide some great new insight into how people re-inscribe and subvert heteronormativity in overt/covert ways through their everyday living. Was it my fault that "everyday living" seemed so . . . mundane? That was an oxymoron, and I knew it. But realizing that I was unable to grasp the everydayness of the everyday didn't do me any good. So I sat and fidgeted, called my advisor and told her this particular thesis project wasn't working out.

4. Method and Rigor, i.e., Doing--Part II (or, Performance and Fiction)

Scene Setting: Jump to Stage 5 (see Figure 1), circa November 2009, again. Fast-forward to the week(s) on the interpretivist turn in that foundational seminar for first-year doctoral students.

The Actors: Semi-circle and two professors again.

Social Science Faculty:

> For Geertz (1994), ethnography is good when there is attention to detail and context, *thick description* of the actors at hand, and character-oriented, emotional, or evocative, but in a way that the raw emotion does not overwhelm the subject at hand.

Critical Faculty:

> But ethnography has moved away from these origins, from the study of the other as an entity distinct from the self in so-called natural surroundings, with a minimum of personal involvement, and sated with cultural and civilizational judgment (Winch, 1977). Instead, we attempt to *dialogue* with the other as well as the Self, examine their mutual constitution, and suggest ways to identify (with) each other (Behar, 1997; Conquergood, 1991; Pelias, 2008; Warren & Fassett, 2002). Action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and consciousness are dialectically tied to one other (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Random voice in my head:

> A bit self-centered, eh?

Critical Faculty:

> Yes, this necessarily privileges the researcher/storyteller, but by invoking both the "outside" and the "inside" of the researcher's world, it creates a "coperformance text" (Denzin, 2003). The function of the text shifts from representation to fostering dialogue and evocation among researcher, researched, and audience, so that meaning is effectively cocreated by these disparate (but not necessarily separate) groups.

Apparition resembling Norman Denzin:

> The reflexive, performed text asks readers as viewers (or coperformers) to relive the experience through the writer's or performer's eyes (Denzin, 2000, p. 905).

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Such an experience necessarily blurs the boundaries between what is real and performed, so that something may become real (valid?) simply via its performance/reception. Performance thus transcends the event and signifies the everyday as text not just to be studied, but also lived and experienced. Performance as research and research as performance center on situational experience: how I act, what I do, how I feel, how I laugh, how you respond . . . How James made me feel, how I felt thrilled, how I typed furiously . . . . Counter to the hegemonic discourses of Theory and Scholarship that enable the researcher-as-expert to instrumentalize research "participants" and reduce the deeper implications of socio-political structures (Deetz, 1992, 2005; Harding, 1998, 2004; Mumby, 1988; Shiva, 1985), the objective of small *s* scholarship is to understand with, not of, the other, using experience, memory, emotion, and performance to redefine the research objective.

I had to think, sitting in that foundational communication seminar in my semi-circle with my laptop on, about what this meant for me and my work. While "doing ethnography is [more than just] establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on" (Geertz, 1994, p. 214), where do I draw the line with "thick description"? I could sense a mirror-appreciation for the fragmented in Geertz, when he urged researchers to make sense of "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit" (p. 217). Yet, he pulled away at the last moment from embracing the personal: "the notion that memory--which is a form of knowing--always takes place elsewhere, that it is always 'other,' is at the heart of the reflexivity that defines anthropological knowledge" (Behar, 1997, p. 82). I however was hard-pressed to find the difference between the two: if every act of translating data, even in the most objective sense, to written pieces of research is an act of making (i.e., *fictio*) the other, then the line between imaginary and real, impression and fact, becomes nebulous indeed. So I dug up my old interview transcript, with a clearer focus on who James and I were: not merely participant and scholar, but more intimately connected through being and attraction (even if I had fictionalized it). Furious underlining ensued (Stages 5 and 6, see Figure 1):

> I teach a class in Hispanic Culture here. I think <u>something like that</u> [talking about gay issues] must happen <u>through comprehension</u> . . . I guess I <u>haven't discussed that too much in class</u>. I mean, there's <u>a lot of work, the syllabus is full</u> . . . I can sometimes bring up [the gay thing through] <u>discussions</u> . . . For instance, I once told them about how I was <u>in Europe</u> with <u>my then boyfriend</u> at <u>Gay Pride in Madrid</u> last year. Some of them thought it <u>sounded like fun</u>, some <u>eyes rolled back</u>, but <u>then some of them could be talking about something which I wouldn't find important, and my eyes would roll back</u> . . .

> So I would bring it up <u>in the story</u> . . . [something like] <u>common knowledge</u> . . . <u>very casually</u> . . . like, my sister could talk about something like, <u>O, me and my boyfriend</u> went there . . . (Excerpt from James interview transcript)

I didn't leaf through Strauss and Corbin (1990) this time, I didn't need to, Suddenly, and I don't mean to make this sound magical (but perhaps I do?), it was as if I was walking within those pages, remembering everything he was saying to me then, every crease of his face when he smiled, or nodded, every wink, felt the sensations when he touched me, and it was amazing. The slight grin and catty look when he spoke about his ex, his travels . . . The exoticizing (Said, 1978) of gay issues to a non-American (Spain, Europe?) or extra-ordinary context (Gay Pride) apart from the everyday, made me wonder how he saw me, South Asian and gay, in his environs . . . The use of Reason as a legitimizer of heteronormativity so that "comprehension" and "common knowledge" took precedence over being and identity, and the implied labeling of gay as "not important" . . . The embeddedness of the casual within his discourse thrilled me because it was both empowering and veiling. I wished I'd asked him then, why he wouldn't simply plough ahead with talk about homosexuality in class, rather than wait for a "natural" discussion to crop up, why he made excuses about not having enough time and a full syllabus, did he feel constrained to even talk about it with me, how so, would he feel more comfortable over a drink, (and could I stop myself from being intimate with him then, or should I even care?) . . .

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Critical Faculty:

> Far from eroding research fidelity, Harding (1998, 2004) argues that incorporating standpoint into one's methods provides for a more accountable, communally defined, and contextually situated "strong objectivity." For Harding (1998), "the strong objectivity program rejects the epistemological or judgmental relativism that assumes that because all such [scientific] assumptions and claims have local, historical components, there is no rational, defensible way to evaluate them"; instead, though "different cultures' knowledge systems have different resources and limitations for producing knowledge; they are not all 'equal,' but there is no single possible perfect one, either" (pp. 18-19).

Reflexivity then must be "robust" and involve a dialectic of doing/being.

5. Identity and Distance, i.e., Being

Rewind to March 2008 (Stage 3 in Figure 1). I'd abandoned the idea of basing my thesis on heteronormativity or collecting more interview data. But, I'd also started learning a bit more about script theory and decided to revisit the old piece with this framework in mind. My aim was to fit the original concepts in terms of scripts that college students use in their interactions to make sense of reality and their selves (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). By this time, I was more used to critical research, ethnography,

participation, and social interaction, though, given my journalist background, I was not entirely comfortable with them. While journalism schools train you to value the objective and unbiased, critical theory wears its heart on its sleeve and makes no apologies for it. As a critical scholar, one comes to realize that bias is socially constructed, as is the appearance of it--in most cases, power relations work through invisible, internalized ways and means-- and the researcher's goal is to deconstruct these biases that align our daily lives, to enhance positive social change (Deetz, 2005; Mumby, 1988). Bias thus comes out of the closet and becomes situated with(in) one's heart and soul.

My ongoing intellectual journey affected how I conceptualized the heteronormativity paper, in which I now centered ethnography as a method explicitly (rather than using the term "personal narratives"). I read some articles, spoke to some people, and they said: (a) go back to what you wrote and re-read it, (b) ethnography is time-consuming and there's no way around it, (c) it's exhausting as well, and (d) be reflexive about what you write, think back to how it was when you were in that situation. The original piece, untouched since December 2007, recounted six separate instances--and I now wanted to show these as different scripts used by college students. I re-wrote the Introduction, Literature Review, and Theory sections, and re-labeled Analysis as Findings. While I realized that the changes in tone involved a corresponding change in meaning (Pelias, 2008), and even embraced the new scholar I was becoming, there was still some last vestige of resistance against a jumble of emotion, performance, and fiction.

5.1. Reflexivity

The problem with advice like "be reflexive about what you write" is that it's not very specific, making it easy to confuse and misunderstand reflexivity. Reflexivity involves being aware of one's backgrounds, contexts, and predilections, and realizing how it affects the way we do research (Behar, 1997; Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; Harding, 2004), but where, after all, does one draw the line? Behar (1997) stresses on the making of oneself "vulnerable," open to critique from both peers in academe and those whom we study and write about. Yet, even vulnerability has a certain logic and must "be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake" (p. 14). Thus, she inserts her personal pathos at her grandfather's death, to show how grief, death, and memory transcend boundaries, from the Spanish village she conducts ethnography in to Miami Beach where her grandfather passed away. Similarly, Alexander (2003) invokes performative drag to produce new ways of understanding the performance of gender in the classroom, integrating the personal and the institutional.

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Stages 3-4 (Figure 1): I received word by May of 2008 that my piece was accepted as a poster presentation at NCA. Out came the power-point slides, and I was on my way to San Diego for the conference. I printed out pictures of tattoos and rainbows for the bulletin board where my poster would hang, and selected songs from my o-so-gay music library to play next to the poster: Boy George, Cyndi Lauper, Cher, and Madonna. I put on my *Boystown, Chicago* t-shirt and stood ready to talk about my work and the contributions (I

believed) it made. Six people stopped by that afternoon, which was thrilling because I'd heard awful things about poster presentations, that no one ever comes over and one might as well be in a black hole with a poster instead of a 15-minute talking slot. So yes, the visitors meant a lot. Several of them offered interesting feedback on the scripts I'd highlighted, as they recounted their own experience, gay and straight, with their students in the classroom. Responding to a situation where a professor had made it clear to her students from the first day of class that she was lesbian and would not brook homophobia in her classroom, a visitor from the East Coast remarked:

> I used to do that before, but I found it doesn't really do anything. I leave it out of my classroom interactions these days. It's too much like a challenge to say I'm lesbian and don't you dare be homophobic in my class, and I don't like that. I prefer they get to know me better, get to understand me, see who I am, and I think that plays a more useful role. (Comment by a visitor, November 23, 2008)

I listened, scribbled down notes, smiled and chatted with her, exchanged business cards, and promised to e-mail her a copy of my poster. It was a good conference, I thought, on the flight back home.

And then, there was a gap during which I turned to other subjects and papers, my thesis, doctoral program applications, etc. When did I get the chance to think back to my NCA poster and performance at San Diego? Was it after I read Warren and Fassett (2002) on the re-situation of performed identities, or when I read Conquergood's (1991) vision on the critical-cultural turn in ethnography for the refugee essay I was writing? Did it strike me then that my whole music, picture, and wardrobe at NCA was hilarious (and provocative) in itself? Did it strike me then that in choosing the song-list I did, I was performing the heteronormative divide I was theorizing about in my paper? Or that through my *Boystown* t-shirt, I marked the ghettoization of queers in the city and university, as well as claimed a fetishized (and largely constructed) identity for myself? Why did I never connect all this to my talk with James and the legitimization of heteronormativity via Reason and Exoticization in the everyday-mundaneness of living? Did it strike me then that discourses of freedom, queerness, and pedagogy interact in fluid ways that defy their characterization as readymade scripts? Or did all this really hit me later, as a throwback to that vague but important term "reflexivity," long after I'd re-written the manuscript and asked Cassandra on the stairwell whether I could submit it for ICA, so many months later?

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Stage 4: "Well, if you think it's so completely changed, that you're presenting something new, something that you haven't grappled with earlier, I suppose you could."

6. Doing/Being

Geertz (1994) argues that the ethnographic process is an "interminable" one, lacking a single moment of revelation or perfect predictability (no single a-ha moment?). Yet, the complex process of knowing/getting to know is rewarding in that it centers both agency and

context. The autoethnographic project is not an outcome "of systematic rules, an ethnographic algorithm, which is followed, would make it possible so to operate, to pass (physical appearance aside) for a native" and produce "clever simulations" of reality (p. 218). Rather, it results in the interpretation and creation of knowledge rooted in the native context, so that meaning is intrinsically tied to localism, rather than the supposedly universal truth of scientific Theory. Moreover, being is implicated with doing, and vice versa, as I have shown here.

I have used instances and examples to argue that doing (that is, method and rigor) ethnographic research is not divorced from the researcher's location and interpretation, so that performance/fiction become highly interlinked with the research process, both while doing fieldwork (collecting data?) and representing one's research (the act of writing)--to the point that all ethnography involves writing oneself into and with the other, producing an autoethnographic dialogue. At the same time, being (that is, identity and researcher distance) an ethnographer intrinsically revolves around reflexivity, which is intractably linked to the subject studied, depths examined, methods used, and so on, that is, the doing of research. My journey with the two projects I have chiefly cited here--the heteronormativity paper that first started around December 2007 (Stage 1 in Figure 1) and the present piece (which I have also referred to as the "processual piece" in places) that I began planning in December 2009--has been a stormy, fragmented one. In many ways, this journey represents my (ongoing) evolution as a scholar and understanding of key concepts of objectivity, reflexivity, and participation.

The heteronormativity paper started as a cluster of observations, changed into an instrumental usage of ethnography with only surface-treatment of the deeper concerns related to doing/being, and finally (?) evolved into an autoethnographic work examining my own constitution in the university-society complex, in relation to heteronormative discourses. Rather than didactically analyze other people's behaviors and utterances as heteronormative, I had to face my own implication in these discourses, that I willfully (intentionally?) centered myself in ways that effectively limited queer expression. While helping me see this, reflexivity (Harding, 1998) also prohibited me from believing overly in my vulnerability. I felt uncomfortable on realizing how performative (fictitious) my initial engagement with the issue had been and yet how performative (again, fictitious?) was my discomfiture? Vulnerability is to be understood not only when the ethnographer opens oneself, but also when one realizes complete closure is impossible: the "boundary between social realms that are purely personal and those that are part of ethnographic fieldwork become blurred" (Behar, 1997, p. 82).

At the same time, this piece itself has gone through several stages of rethinking and revision, reflecting the un-ending process of writing the self/other dialectically. My goal, however, remains the same: to elaborate on the process behind autoethnography/autoethnographer and to problematize Method, Theory, and Scholarship from an autoethnographic perspective. As Geertz (1994) notes, "Finding our feet, an unnerving business which never more than distantly succeeds, is what ethnographic research consists of as personal experience" (p. 220). My project here is not to denigrate or belittle the contributions of social scientific traditions, but to add to the body of literature

that positions autoethnography as a site for further theorizing about scholarship/Scholarship and theory/Theory (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; Denzin, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Mumby, 2000; Putnam, 2001). Autoethnographic work urges an expansion of ivory-tower Theory and Scholarship beyond rationalist and scientific legitimacy, by toppling the self from its position of authority and turning the gaze inward (Alexander, 2003; Behar, 1997; Warren & Fassett, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). While abandoning traditional objectivity, recognized to be profoundly artificial in any case, the autoethnographer draws on widespread accountability to the community and stakeholders of the research project, robust reflexivity and strong objectivity based on one's standpoint, and the continued appraisal of interpretations. Epistemologically, for me, this represents not so much a shift away from social science, but a critical and much-needed extension.

7. Postscript

I never did send that (re-worked) piece to the ICA conference in 2009. I looked at it again, made some changes to some reflective streams, added some, deleted others, and re-read the whole thing. And then I lost my nerve. Perhaps it was because I was a graduate student, or because it was my first attempt at autoethnography. I knew it was more pervasive and critical than the NCA poster--but was afraid of the reviews, honestly. I kept imagining them asking (in red ink?): what about Theory? "How does this add to the body of literature? What theoretical implications can you provide for us? This piece doesn't add anything to the miles of Scholarship we have already on heteronormativity in college classroom. So you re-jigged a few lines, made it all personal. That's not Scholarship. That's not ICA material." So I gulped. And, without even talking to Cassandra again, I decided there would be other opportunities. Perhaps a journal? Five minutes later, after the deadline had passed, I felt like an ass.

Thankfully, hindsight is an amazing rationalizing device. And autoethnography is tailor-made for revise-and-resubmits like no other method/process. Following the amazing foundational doctoral seminar (that I have probably done little justice to, here in my representation), I went back to the drawing-board, dug up my old notes from James' interview, and re-thought the piece. What emerged this time around was (I think) much stronger, more implicative and much more critical of who I was and what I intended to do. It was eventually sent to a performance studies journal.

As for the present piece, your feedback is always welcome.

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