WALKING A THIN LINE:
WHITE, QUEER (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHIC ENTANGLEMENTS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH[1]

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Abstract

This paper dives into the messy work of writing (our) sexualities into our qualitative research. We suggest that even though queering research methods opens up new ways of conducting research and sharing a queer identity with research participants there are some limitations to both notions. One such limitation is that queer identities and practices are not synonymous, and that what may be queer to the participant might be considered "unqueer" by the researcher. Autoethnography, therefore, becomes one method in which to facilitate a queer research project given the spectrum of identities and practices. We draw on examples from our graduate research projects to illustrate the curious tension that exists among queerness, race, identity and education within social science inquiry.

Introduction

Robert and Anne, two white, queer, doctoral students with the Faculty of Education, met on the picket line during a labour dispute at York University, Canada in the fall/winter of 2008/2009. As we walked the line, we talked about our unique experiences working as queer educators and we discovered that there were many similarities in our research interests around investigating the experiences of queer educators. Although Robert situates his research in Adult Education and Anne situates her research in Secondary Education, we learned that we grappled with many of the same issues: what does it mean to be a "queer" educator and how do we "queer" research? How do we understand our identities as queer, white educators given that whiteness is regularly understood to be a unified and un-marked subject position? During the strike we met and spoke with other queer students on the picket line and shared our challenges with them. The space that we inhabited on the line was undoubtedly politically charged; graduate students from different faculties mingled and conversations seemed to erupt as students of different races, sexual orientations, ages, classes and interests organized to assert themselves in a seemingly united effort against our employer - York University. In this heated atmosphere of social and political action, what we stumbled across was not what we expected; we found that other queer graduate students had different conceptualizations around what it meant to be queer or to embody queerness. What we would have considered to be "queer" was considered to be "unqueer" by some of our colleagues. These conversations drew attention to the fact that queer is

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very subjective and that to expect our colleagues and, at a later point our research participants, to adhere to our definitions of queerness would be considered an act of appropriation. Therefore, we remained open by listening to our colleagues' definitions of what being, becoming and belonging to the "category" of queer could mean.

As we walked the picket line we experienced a certain degree of tension between asserting our understanding of queer and respecting the different perspectives on queerness held by our colleagues. Even though such evocative discussions could be motivated by our participation in a politicized space, what we point out is that there might be some serious implications for our doctoral research projects. We realized that how we conceptualize our queer identities might be radically different from how our study participants perceive their queer identities and this difference opened up some interesting quandaries and questions. It is this persistent tension that we identify that forms the thesis for this paper and the following research question: What kinds of ethical entanglements surface while conducting (auto)ethnographic research about queer educators?

This question is inspired by our discussions on the picket line and is prompted by recent queer educational scholarship examining research practice (e.g., Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). To begin, we dive more into our notion of "unqueer" as it relates to difference since it is a concept that can set the direction of conversations with research participants. We will then elaborate upon what we identify as trends in queer educational research and consider the ways that our participants and colleagues challenged the ways that we understand queer identifications as they relate to other identities, such as whiteness. Afterwards, we will suggest two methods of inquiry based on our research experiences with queer educators that raise the quandaries and questions that form our thesis: *queering educational research* and *researching queer educators*. Our two proposed methods are by no means original since they operationalize a theoretical discussion to illustrate some of the ways that educational researchers can step outside rigid and categorical understandings of queer that shape patterns of conducting queer qualitative research. We suggest that autoethnography can act as an intermediary research methodology between these two research methods that can expose and interrogate the ways that we have come to know and view queer identities and practices. Our concluding point is that queer researchers or researchers doing queer work should not be nervous about uncovering such difficulties and contradictions; rather, opening up such spaces can encourage rich and meaningful encounters. In this paper, we reflect on our discomfort when we encounter queer elaborations, identities, and representations that complicate the certainty we once felt around queerness; we view this uncertainty as a useful pedagogical entry point into thinking through our research projects.

Challenging Queer: Unqueer (Im)possibilities

"Queer" as a social term has been circulating in the West among many organizational, cultural and political circles for the past twenty years (e.g., see de Lauretis, 1991). Originally coined as a pejorative term against mainly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people, queer was "reclaimed" by the LGBT community to blowback against the use of oppressive and hurtful language based on sexual/gender identities and practices. Over time, queer has incorporated a spectrum of orientations and practices of sexual/gender minorities as a political affront against heteronormative and heterosexist behaviours and modes of thought (Hill & Grace, 2009;

Gopinath, 2005). Although the term "queer" resists categorization and definition, we can assume that it can include identities, practices and beliefs that complicate more traditional conceptions of sexuality so that, for instance, even a heterosexual relationship could be queer in terms of its gender expression or desire (Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007). With this in mind, we propose that when we project queerness into our daily work as researchers, it might be naïve to think that we will not subjectively encounter "unqueer" realities that do not connect to our own, given the vastness of what has now become "queer" and, similarly, our "queer" realities could be very "unqueer" to the realities of our research participants.

"Unqueer" is a term we use to illustrate the contested nature of queerness. By engaging unqueer realities, we describe the conditions that traditionally frame queer thought in educational research. We do not want to diminish the importance of the political struggles led by many activists who have won significant civil rights for gays and lesbians. However, we do want to highlight queer's potential for, "...a new political direction and agenda, one that does not focus on integration into dominant structures but instead seeks to transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently" (Cohen, 1997, p. 437). So, our use of "unqueer" distances itself from a civil rights strategy and calls attention to the different and disruptive ways that people understand, live and express their sexualities. We engage "unqueer" to suggest that these disruptions are significant for our research projects because listening to queer stories of oppression, justice, and resistance could open up windows of unfamiliarity and disconnection even though we, as queer researchers, position ourselves as coming from queer backgrounds. Significantly, what queer has come to mean for us may be very different from how others might view queerness so while the plurality, diversity and liberalism of queerness might suggest an openness, our embodiments and uses of queerness might actually narrow our views of queerness. What we are suggesting is that our "queer" conceptualizations might not sit so easily or comfortably as we begin to inquire into the lives of queer educators. Significantly, queer educators become a less familiar population when we realize in advance that they may live and define their queerness *differently* than ourselves. Our use of the term "unqueer," therefore, is meant to disrupt the assumed "sameness" that purports to connect and unify queers and points out that where there is a struggle for liberation, there are also significant notions of difference underlying that struggle.

Educational Research in Queer Contexts

Three research trends describe queer research traditionally done in educational circles. First, educational research hailing itself as queer often invokes queer identities and lives to ground its work. Second, queer research provokes a contrast between lives amenable with dominant, often white, middle-class, privileged experiences of queerness and those that are less visible. Third, queer research examines discourses that regard queer lives and experiences as invisible or deviant (Dilley,1999; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Given these research trends, it is not surprising that we both conducted research where we focused exclusively on the experiences of educators who self identified in some way as queer (e.g., see also Grace, 2006; Ferfolja, 2007; Jackson, 2006; Khayatt, 1992). As such, our qualitative research places a strong value on the narratives of teachers who generously share their stories and classroom experiences with us. We do not want to diminish the importance of these projects because we believe that documenting and articulating the experiences of queer educators is significant and necessary work. However,

we do want to question some of the assumptions that our projects hinge upon, given that our work challenged us to examine the structures of our beliefs regarding queerness.

Particularly, whiteness shapes our understanding of queerness and we were challenged to consider this when we interviewed and read about queer men and women of colour in education. As a result, we now understand queer to encompass an array of practices and identities and this further prompted us to explore the uneven territory of queerness in our research. We acknowledge that queer has a curious presence in education; it pops up in surprising places and in unusual forms. And yet, opening up our conception of queer continues to cause discomfort and tension in our research. Thinking through these stumbling blocks is "difficult" but potentially productive if we hope to make our view of queerness more open and less restrictive. Britzman's (1995) call to "engage the limit of thought—where thoughts stops, what it cannot bear to know, what it must shut down to think as it does..." (p. 156) is a significant reminder to examine, for example, the ways that our identities are constructed, and (in the case of our whiteness) socially sanctioned.

We might consider how our understandings of queer identities cause us to avoid examining our whiteness and the ways that our queerness is contained by our white privilege. As we move forward in our research projects to question what queer means, we are also conscious of the power of whiteness that is contained within the ideas of queerness that are available to us since it has been well documented that, "...whiteness turns out on closer inspection to be more about the power to include and exclude groups and individuals than about actual practices of those who are to be let in or kept out" (Frankenberg, 1997, p. 13). Just as we might claim to understand queer's potential to disrupt the clean and tidy corners of identity, we are sometimes uncomfortable or unprepared when queer reveals identities to be relational, fluid and unpredictable, especially when these identities are attached to racialized bodies and practices. At times we find ourselves at a loss of how to proceed when we encounter ways of performing or understanding queer that are foreign to us. For example, Alexander (2005) evokes both his queer and black self as a testament to how the personal becomes a point of focus in the classroom. Effectively, he raises awareness of the "political potency, the psychic disturbance, and the potential physical impact" that his black, gay body can have on his students (Alexander, 2005, p. 251). He further writes,

> As teachers we also place our bodies in the instructional gaps negotiating the tensions that often exist between our teaching persona and the fullness of our being. Our sexualized and racialized bodies always signal a history, an enfleshed knowledge that may or may not, to our students, obviously inform our pedagogy and our orientations to the subject matter. (p. 258)

Alexander signals a queer self that is unfamiliar to us. As white, queer educators basing our research on queer educators, are we ready to listen to the ways that queers of colour, such as Alexander, interpret and conceptualize their queerness? In what ways are our understandings of what we believe constitute queer persons or practices informed by our whiteness? And finally, how are we utilizing queerness in a way that alienates queer educators of colour? We continue to grapple with these tensions as we explore what it means to be queer researchers doing queer work. In many respects, connecting to individuals and learning about their various subject

positions and practices, on the basis of conducting educational research, can be a very queer experience.

Identity, Queerness, and Research

By characterising queerness as an identity are we quarantining queerness in such a way that makes it intelligible or familiar to us? How can we move beyond identity politics in our queer research? Or is this a productive goal? Identity politics continue to haunt our research even as we struggle to free ourselves from this more traditional way of understanding queerness. By approaching queer as an identity we are locating queerness as a part of the self that we can name and express in categorical terms. Claiming a queer identity was a problem for some of our participants who found that their queerness became the dominant aspect of their subjectivities that was noticed by their colleagues and students.

Issues such as those identified above led us to question how we situate ourselves within our research and this prompted us to ask questions that we had not previously considered: how do we conceptualize our sexualities through a research lens? What are the limits of our thinking around sexuality when we include ourselves in our work? How does writing about queer educators through our eyes shape our research? How do we encounter queerness and sexuality and how is this influenced by the complex histories of our sexual and racial identities? As Corey (1992) suggested, "To be out is really to be in- inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible" (p. 125). In other words, our "insider" queer subjectivities might advance access to a particular type of queer knowledge; however, what we wish to question is that given the spectrum of queerness that remains pervasive in queer circles, how can we hope to make culturally intelligible connections with our queer participants? By mentioning a spectrum of queerness, we are acknowledging that queer understandings of sexuality have many layers, identities, communities and practices.

We begin by exploring some of the dilemmas and possibilities that we are struggling with as we encounter (our) queer, white identities and practices in our research projects. Significantly, this paper is also an exercise in considering the limits of our thinking, namely what we can and cannot bear to think about in relation to queer sexualities, racialized subjectivities, educational spaces, and our research more generally. Our shared interest in queer educators is a place to begin this discussion and is an especially relevant location given that queer bodies and pedagogies are often precariously positioned within heteronormative educational institutions. What we mean is that thinking about sexuality and education tends to be a risky exercise since "putting the terms, 'schooling' and 'sexuality' together is the stuff of which scandal can be, and often is, made" (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 1). So even though homophobia continues to be a pervasive element in the field of education (Elia, 2005), sexuality in general and queer sexualities in particular are undeniably a part of the histories of our experiences of schooling. As a result, we bring those experiences to bear on our work as researchers in the field of education. To further crystallize our emerging ideas, we operationalize this work of locating queer selves in our research through two approaches: *Queering Educational Research* and *Researching Queer Educators*. Although we recognize the difficulties inherent in our research, we hope that these two perspectives can begin to help us create productive research possibilities. We consider some

of the implications and difficulties that arise when we think ourselves and our queer sexualities into our graduate research.

Queering Educational Research

We envision that in order to evoke and question our queer, white identities and experiences in our research, we will need to queer educational research. What we mean is that traditional research methods tend to restrict, bind and categorize our data collection methods according to certain rules and categories that are rendered (not) acceptable in terms of advancing knowledge. However, by queering educational research, we argue that a much richer array of methods can surface and, consequently, we are able to access data that traditional research methods would generally have difficulty with. When we refer to the process of queering educational research, we are referring to research that is done in education contexts that are not bound by traditionally fixed rules, categories or labels.

Rather than adopting traditional research methods, queering research seeks to adopt a plethora of research practices to help get to the crux of the matter. This method also allows us to further interrogate our habits of thought regarding queerness. It invites us to situate ourselves in our research projects such that we can begin to a) identify some of the ways that we have been schooled to think about queerness, b) challenge the tendencies and norms that govern our sexual identities and behaviours, and more importantly, c) how we come to characterize and understand those identities and behaviours of our participants. Some examples that we think of when we want to queer educational research are: the use poetry as a research method (Grace & Benson, 2000), performance and ethnography (Butler, 2008), and most significant to this essay, autoethnography (Hayano, 1983; Chang, 2008).

Robert's research methodology offers an example of what we mean by queering educational research. He uses autoethnography in his research project to reflect on his experiences living and working as a white, queer educator in Kosovo. Autoethnography is generally considered to be a non-traditional form of inquiry that connects 'the personal to the cultural' (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Adams and Holman Jones (2008) contend, "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" (p. 374). Through autoethnography, the researcher's identity, experiences and presence in the research are given equal consideration to those of the participants when the researcher analyzes the data. In many ways, autoethnography is a "queer" research method because it resists traditional ethnographic forms of inquiry by taking into account the often marginalized experiences of the researcher without relying on rigid "methods" that make up an autoethnography (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008).

The use of autoethnographic forms to project an inquiry into the lives of queer educators has been helpful on different levels. For example, Grace (2006) uses his life story and other autobiographical mediums as a way to critique the heteronormative discourses that silence his work as a teacher and teacher educator. He writes, "In this sense, writing the queer self becomes a cultural and political medium to explore my history and engage the present. It is an educative

act because it teaches the self about challenges and possibilities associated with queer positionalities, representations, access and accommodation" (Grace, 2006, p. 827). In addition, Grace and Benson (2000) also argue that "autobiographical queer life narratives" are useful to "help us inform critically reflective teaching practices and to build a fugitive knowledge base that w/e can turn to when formulating challenges to exclusionary policies and programs in schooling" (p. 90). Lastly, Toynton (2006) also names autoethnography as his research approach to illustrate that, "the queer teacher is caught between empathy and alienation, resolvable through the abandonment of empathy or the risk-taking of disclosure" (p. 191). Effectively, when the term "queer" is applied to "autoethnography" to inquire into one's life experiences, it conjures meaningful possibilities for extending research into silenced and marginalized areas of qualitative research. Adams and Holman Jones (2008) write, "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" (p. 379). With this in mind, the method of writing the autoethnography becomes a personal endeavour that defies the traditional view of conducting an ethnography that silences the researcher. For example, Robert's autoethnography inquiry into his lived experience as a white, foreign, gay male adult educator working in Kosovo enables him to invoke his queer knowledge and the various competing and contradicting "narrative voices" that accompany his experiences that would have otherwise gone unarticulated if traditional research methods managed his research intentions (Mizzi, 2010). By considering his whiteness through autoethnography, Robert examines how his white privilege is implicated in the way that he navigates awkward and risky encounters with homophobia and heteronormativity – and he wonders if his ability to successfully work through such encounters might be less accessible to queer educators of colour.

Therefore, by queering educational research, innovative, thoughtful and fluid approaches to conducting research emerge and, as a result, researchers are able to interrogate their tendencies and ask difficult questions of themselves and their research participants. In some respects, autoethnography also allows queer subjectivities to reveal themselves so that moments when queer dis/connections occur, the researcher can understand, through autoethnography or other forms of life-writing, the queer realities that embody the queer subject. For example, Robert was able to examine his queerness and his whiteness by writing about the ways his experiences (dis)connects with his research topic or by reading about queer lives particularly from racialized perspectives on queerness and how they could extend his way of queerly understanding the world. Queering educational research opens up new possibilities for research participants to describe their queerness and lives in richer detail. This method then invites researchers to imagine different types of research participants and projects (e.g., Bryson & MacIntosh, 2010; Charles, 2010).

Researching Queer Educators

In addition, by locating ourselves in our research, we are able to draw greater connections to participants who take part in our data collection. Our queer identities and experiences provide access to queer knowledge, language and bodies that might have been overlooked if we did not think about how our identities and experiences can inform the knowledge that is shared by our study participants. We understand that by including ourselves in our dialogue with participants, we are able to strengthen the relationship between the researcher and the researched, hence, stimulating a deeper conversation to further enrich knowledge being shared (Agar, 1996;

Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wekker, 2006). We draw on Anne's research history to elucidate how her queer identity and experiences helped her to better access and interpret the queer knowledge, language and bodies that surfaced during her data collection (Stebbins, 2008).

Anne conducted semi-structured interviews for her research project; she asked her female participants how they made sense of their lives as sexual minority secondary school teachers. One of her participants talked about the difficulties of feeling invisible at school, especially given that she felt that she lived openly as a queer woman. Anne found it difficult to interview this particular participant because she had trouble understanding the ways that the participant positioned her sexual identity. The participant refused to adopt more traditional labels to describe her sexuality, such as lesbian or bisexual, and preferred to simply describe herself as "non-heterosexual." Anne felt uncertain about whether or not to describe this participant as "in" or "out" of the closet; Anne had to confront the reality that the closet did not properly characterize the participant's sexual identity and as a result, she was forced to question the usefulness of the closet as a way of understanding the sexual identities of her participants more generally. By focusing on queer as an identity category, Anne was limited in her ability to understand the ways that her participant located her queerness. Autoethnography could have enabled her to wonder about how she engaged her queerness as an identity category, allowing her to identify the ways that this did not map neatly onto the experiences of her participant. Additionally, Anne's use of queerness as an identity category contributed to her inability to think about the ways that her questions privileged whiteness and marginalized non-white queer teaching bodies. Autoethnography might have provided a space within the ethnography for Anne to engage her queerness and whiteness to clarify the ways that they mutually informed each other.
For instance, a different participant exposed the gaps in her thinking around whiteness. The only visible minority woman whom Anne interviewed asked that her racial identity be classified ambiguously as non-white. She felt that part of the homophobic harassment that she experienced in her classroom was amplified by her visibility as a racial minority woman; however, she did not want to explore this topic during the interview. She indicated that she felt vulnerable about having her race formally documented and pointed out that doing so could potentially risk her anonymity since the community that she lived and worked in was predominantly white. This exchange brought Anne's whiteness into focus because it revealed her white skin as "...un-named—the exposure of whiteness masquerading as universal" (Frankenburg, 1997, p. 3). It is important to note that the participant's hesitation regarding the initial question of Anne's study (which sought to collect background information such as age, years of teaching, teaching subject, sexual orientation etc.) highlighted the apparent ease with which other participants answered her questions. The participant's discomfort answering the question about her race, "...reveals ways in which whites benefit from a variety of institutional and social arrangements that often appear (to whites) to have nothing to do with race" (Bush, 2004, p. 6). The multilayered nature of oppression that the queer woman of colour faced was illustrated by Anne's question and Anne was left to ponder not only the fallacy of the anonymity that her study promised, but the whiteness that underscored this guarantee.
Perhaps we sometimes resist seeing queerness in its various guises because as queer researchers we are implicated and invested in particular understandings of queer. However, if we understand identities as complicated and mediated by race, and sexual identifications as possible sites of resistance, then it becomes necessary for queer researchers to interrogate the tendencies of their research practices and ask difficult questions about how they make sense of their own as

well as their participants' queerness. If we do not take queerness for granted or use one way of being queer as a point of departure in our research, then we might be more open to recognizing and sitting with the ways that other educators make sense of their queerness and their lives, even when it abrades our own queer practices, understandings or identifications.

Some Limits to Our Two Research Approaches

The benefits are clearly pointed out in the above two approaches, yet we also intend to consider two limits of writing (our) queer identities in our (auto)ethnographic research: The "unthinkability" of queerness and the absence of the reader's voice in autoethnographic inquiry. Essentially, do our queer subject positions and experiences, as well as our interest in education, restrict the ways that queerness can be conceptualized, indeed thought about or imagined, with regards to schooling?

With this question we are thinking about the friction between queer identities, knowledges, and pedagogies and heteronormative spaces in schools. We wonder if there is something *unthinkable* about queerness in these places. The ways that we have come to know - and make sense of - education, are related to our individual experiences of schooling as students and as educators. And many of those experiences sit uncomfortably alongside our queer identities. However, the point that we are making is that none of these individual experiences are shared; each experience is autonomous and influences the ways that both of us differently conceptualize queerness. The ways in which we have come to understand our sexual and gender identities is deeply personal and informed by our many layered and often competing identifications (Yon, 2000). Although our research projects seek to elaborate on the lives of queer educators, we are reminded that conceptualizations of queerness are restricted by the ways that queerness can be imagined in educational settings. We are also mindful that the identities that do emerge are complex and comprised of contradictions, possibilities and surprises that relate to their locations in schooling.

The second limitation of autoethnography that we identify is the method's inability to recognize the reader's voice within its ethnographic processes (Holt, 2003). Significantly, although we recognize the creative possibilities of integrating our perspectives through autoethnography we wonder about the ways that our work with queer educators could provide opportunities for readers to contribute their queer experiences in meaningful ways. The idea to involve readers in our research with queer educators works to further break hold of categorizing ways of traditional research and imagine the full spectrum of actors involved in our research projects.

Conclusion

The queer identities to which we are attracted and attached offer us certain possibilities in our research. It is as if our queer identities prop us up, offering us a secure sense of self and yet they also have the potential to undo us if we imagine our queerness as a core or finite sense of ourselves. The ways that we know and understand ourselves as queer, white educators, is bound up in our muddled and crowded histories as students and teachers. For instance, what might have been considered as a smooth "coming out" process for one queer educator might be quite the opposite for another. And yet in many ways our queerness remains indescribable and

unnameable in certain contexts. The lives of sexual minority teachers who are members of cultural diasporas refuse to acknowledge and respect sexual minorities within their culture is one example in which an indescribable and unnameable queer identity remains at the fore (e.g., Gopinath, 2005).

In short, what queer might mean to us, as we have come to know it, might be considered "unqueer" to our study participants or the methodologies in which we use to conceptualize our research projects given the subjective nature of being queer. We hope that future studies documenting the diverse experiences of queer educators will resist the urge to flatten out the differences between queers and instead engage the complexity within which queerness emerges in education. Is there something about queer that closes down thought or defies articulation about queer educators? Does the process of confronting or accepting this awkward limit of queerness and education allow us to think ourselves into spaces that are normally unthinkable? We cannot offer immediate responses to these questions, but we hope that this paper can encourage further conversations around the curious nature of queerness that haunts educational spaces.

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