
Article

Implicated Audience Member Seeks Understanding: Reexamining the “Gift” of Autoethnography

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Abstract

Researchers have characterized autoethnography as a highly evocative and personalized mode of discourse that affects authors and their audiences. In this article, the author examines autoethnography by recalling experiences communicating with Tillmann-Healy’s (2005) “The State of Unions: Activism (and In-Activism) in Decision 2004,” an autoethnographic poem about recent U.S. election results, civic inactivity among gay men, and the need for their political engagement. Sparked by a philosophical goal more to understand and respond than to admonish and territorialize, the author uses hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative reflections to consider the complexities of autoethnographic communication, and the hope and challenges that such personalized accounts of “experience” make possible for conversational partners.

Keywords: autoethnography, ethnographic research, subjectivity, hermeneutic self-implicature, circumspection, narrative, academic conflict and criticism

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Introduction

Enacting qualitative research immerses practitioners in an invigorating and complex matrix of performances. Ethnographers know of this engagement all too well. As we pursue instances of diverse cultural life, we discern among varying conceptual and methodological options, and, in effect, craft scholarship that connects with others in distinctive and personally meaningful ways. Ethnographers, including those who pursue social change, are apt to discover how this meaningfulness has consequences that are positive and negative, deliberate and inadvertent.

In this article, I examine the ways in which autoethnography as a discursive practice affects audiences. It entails philosophical reflections on my experiencing Tillmann-Healy's (2005) autoethnographic poem "The State of Unions: Activism (and In-Activism) in Decision 2004" at the First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (QI).¹ I use hermeneutic phenomenology (a research approach that foregrounds individuals' lifeworlds, or everyday experience) and narrative reflections to describe the conceptual and methodological opportunities that present themselves within this experience. I discover how Tillmann-Healy's performance enables us to understand the complex, phenomenological ways in which "autoethnography as communication" implicates its audiences and how our lifeworlds enable a highly personalized, rarely simple constitution of experience and ourselves. The "gift" of autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111) takes many forms, hopeful and concerning.

Ethnography as conversation

Goodall (2000) argued that ethnography is "enlarged conversation" (p. 11) and "is constructed out of a writer's ability to hold an interesting conversation with readers" (p. 13, emphasis in original). Writing cultural accounts, like interacting with a trusted comrade, can and should feel intimate, imaginative, and dialogic. Goodall's conceptualization offers ethnographers a unique mode of engaging audiences and suggests a need to confront the types of conversationalists we are and would like to be, and the impact of our communication styles on others.

Few fields have illustrated ethnography as conversation in these fertile ways other than autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2000) conceptualized autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). The method personifies multiple faces, each showing distinct conceptual directions and modes of representation (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). At the heart of autoethnography is the communicative goal to perform as storytellers in creative, evocative, and engaging ways (Bochner & Ellis, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

"Instead of talking about communication," Bochner and Ellis (2006) wrote, "autoethnography shows people in the process of using communication to achieve an understanding of their lives and their circumstances" (p. 111). Researchers, including the persons who experience autoethnography as audience members, are not externally situated on the sidelines of their inquiries. Rather, we are immersed as implicated beings who make possible and, in turn, are affected by the cultural accounts being represented. Autoethnography serves as a "gift" that "nourish[es]" the soul during painful emotional times (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). It also challenges those who come into contact with its affecting messages:

Maybe [something] that scares people about autoethnography is the kinds of experiences we ask people to reflect on. Often we focus attention on experiences that normally are shrouded in secrecy . . . The good stories, the really good ones, grab us by the collar and demand that we listen and that we feel. . . Readers can't just sit back and be spectators. They are thrust into scenes that invite them to feel, care, and desire. (pp. 119-120)

Communicating through autoethnography is increasingly present today (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Goodall, 2000, 1996). Constructive criticism about how to "audience" the method experientially, on the other hand, is underexplored, leaving a bridgeless "relational" gap between orthodox and more progressive or "alternative" ethnographers (Bochner & Ellis, 1999). A range of extant scholarship critiques autoethnography in ways that often reinforce territorial debates on what ethnography is and should be, and moreover, who we should and should not count as good cultural scholars (see, for example, Atkinson, 1997; Gans, 1999; Ragan, 2000; Shields, 2000). Criticism of this sort tends to suggest a limited and more "traditional" academic context for the enactment of ethnography, which, incidentally, takes away from the notion of diversity that so many ethnographers hopefully pursue in our research.

These assumptions tend to keep critics observing at a distance, reminiscent of the realist ethnographic traditions whence they often come (VanMaanen, 1988), and encourage many autoethnographers to become protective of methodological decisions and, especially, their stories.

Scholars associated with autoethnography have suggested ways of examining and emboldening the method (Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Richardson, 2000). Particularly relevant is Richardson's criteria for reviewing articles or monographs, in which she asks, "Impact: Does this affect me? emotionally? intellectually? generate new questions? move me to write? move me to try new research practices? move me to action?" (p. 254). Richardson's question, reminiscent of Bochner and Ellis's (2006) "grab us by the collar and demand that we listen and that we feel" (p. 120), confirms the objective of deliberately moving audiences. I concur with this goal, but I would also remind us of the general, ongoing, and less-planned ways in which audiences are implicated by autoethnography.

Human beings have a personal stake in all phenomena we experience. Schrag (2003) argued,

The goings-on in communicative praxis [the thoughtful and emotional doing of communication] invite us to address the "who" of discourse and the "who" of action. Who is speaking? Who is writing? Who is acting? The unitary phenomenon of communicative praxis . . . yields a hermeneutical implicature of a situated speaking, writing, and acting subject. (p. 115)

We are subjectively "in" ethnography in varying ways that are governed by our phenomenological lifeworlds. For instance, Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) has suggested that his background in performance studies, a tradition grounded in the oral interpretation of literary texts, encourages him to become alarmed by what he suggests is a lack of literary sophistication typically employed by autoethnographers, who, in large part, rely on the literary to distinguish autoethnography from "traditional" ethnographic research. Being hermeneutically self-implicated within communicative (ethnographic) praxis matters, whether or not we are aware of this engagement, and regardless of whether communicators (ethnographers) deliberately attempt to "affect" or "move" us. Schrag (2003) reminded us of the persistent, personalized ways in which we constitute experience and, by extension, autoethnographic discourse and relationships. This article serves as "an experientially oriented tracking of the 'who' of discourse and action" within autoethnography (p. 121), and pursues two questions: What are the ways in which autoethnography implicates those who experience, or come into contact as conversational partners with, its texts? How might we more openly and conscientiously reexamine the gift of autoethnography as communication from within the interaction between autoethnographers and audience members?

Criticism pervasively dwells within communicative experiences and has personal consequences on others' lives (Pelias, 2000). Therefore, this article engages autoethnography for the purpose of understanding its practices and their impact, and not abolishing them or its practitioners. There are good and bad autoethnographies, just as there are good and bad textual analyses, and, for that matter, all research. Unlike past critics of the method, however, I will not make claims that question its legitimacy. Furthermore, because researchers often avoid rich, complex detail and remain only at the surface of their inquiries (Pelias, 2003), I reflect deeply on my lifeworld to understand how I experience autoethnography; how its practices present themselves to me in complex, often contrasting ways. Investigating this topic phenomenologically prioritizes lived experience, descriptiveness, and variation in the ways in which we make sense of experience. This helps to create a more circumspectful (i.e., "rounded") investigation, which can offer a more contingent and diverse understanding of experiences with cultural phenomena and research methods.

Reexamining autoethnography as a gift provides autoethnographers with what I hope is a less threatening window through which to grasp how autoethnographic texts can affect audiences and a possible motivation to gauge research practices by their impact and efficacy. Looking at autoethnography in these

ways also offers audience members an opportunity to raise awareness concerning the experience of these texts and autoethnographers themselves. In particular, it enables audience members to comprehend in greater detail why the constitution of auto-ethnographies can be so tenuous. This study also makes available a closer and more critical examination of how relying on “experience” can complicate conversations among ethnographers. Furthermore, although I certainly have not provided a panacea for disciplinary squabbles and social issues, I offer a step on the path toward a more empathic, and at least better informed, understanding of each other as interdependent scholars, and how gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) individuals continue to be subjected to cultural bigotry. At minimum, I hope to remind us that our work to connect and persuade others might affect us in deeper ways than we might have otherwise imagined.

Engaging the conversation

Tillmann-Healy’s autoethnographic poem, as presented at QI, was a multilayered and emotional performance accompanied by very colorful, poignant, and often sarcastically-timed PowerPoint photographs and other images. Tillmann-Healy’s methodical tone was predominantly serious, echoing the structure and pace of her printed text. In short, she told the story of the recent U.S. presidential election, the failure to elect a Democratic president, and the ways in which her ethnographic research community, members of the Cove, a baseball team in Tampa, Florida, made up primarily of gay men, failed to fulfill what she believes to be their political obligations. Her displeasure with their inaction and the related consequences was made apparent through the performance of the text. Reactions to the poem, one contribution to a panel of diverse autoethnographies, were mixed: expressed anger, frustration, appreciation, and silence.

Tillmann-Healy’s performance occurs against and within a political backdrop in U.S. culture in which members of the George W. Bush administration, including the President himself and individuals affiliated with the “Republican Right,” actively campaigned to prevent GLBT individuals from gaining the legal right to marry and, thus, to enjoy the benefits associated with this privilege. This movement of distancing follows court actions in Massachusetts and California that legalized same-sex marriages and, just as important, served as a pivotal component in Bush’s successful reelection in November 2004. The impact of this rhetorical/political divisiveness remains prevalent today.

I convey the ideas below as a focused analysis of experiencing Tillmann-Healy’s autoethnography and articulate several moments from her text and my reflective and embodied responses. The selected passages do not illustrate the sum total of her efforts either here or elsewhere. In turn, others might choose different ideas to emphasize and might engage with her text differently. Finally, I focus primarily on the impact of this one autoethnography yet also recognize and hope that these ways of engaging Tillmann-Healy’s work can serve as access points for further discussions on autoethnographic conversations and their conversation partners more generally.

Capital-T Truths and closedness

The performance begins: “Warning: though I am a post-modernist, an anti-essentialist, and an aspiring queer theorist, I will be making capital-T Truth statements in this political, poetic, polemic. I invite you to offer your own truths in response” (Tillmann-Healy, p. 2). Eyebrow raised with curiosity, I tense throughout the rest of my body. This paradoxical pairing of philosophical assumptions and goals prompts a deep, familiar breath. I love complexity, yet also see postmodernism and antiessentialism as incompatible with “capital-T Truth statements.” Forecasting and foregrounding universals renders me on guard, quietly hoping not to become defensive. I am invited to “respond” with my own truths to statements that, by their nature, leave very little room for ambiguity, contingency, and the diversity and freer movement that both make possible.

These opening moments transport me back to past experiences when other warnings and disclaimers so powerfully governed social interaction. “This is not easy to say.” “This might not be what you wish to hear.” “This is going to hurt you more than me.” These statements in the past have enabled a smoother transition into difficult conversations, and have often softened emotional blows. Yet, I also recall and still intimately experience today “capital-T Truth”-esque warnings and disclaimers and their inherent contradictions, which so often harden everyday experience: “We are Americans/All Americans are equal,” and “The institution of marriage is between a man and a woman.” “All Americans have freedom of speech,” and “Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

I’ve learned not to trust capital-T Truths. I worry about how their universalizing nature forecloses needed and deserved spaces for social diversity. They have betrayed me far too many times. They have built stubborn, insulating walls that protect me from disappointment and sometimes from having any emotional response at all, and so I fear the numbness they create. They feel to me to be hollow and lead me to question whether there actually is any room for welcomed “response” in Tillmann-Healy’s conversation, and the impact that that response would have within the confining realms of Truths.

These feelings are magnified because ideas like postmodernism (if we are even so quick to define it) and antiessentialism seem more like enduring commitments than disposable resources that can be extracted from our intellectual pockets for individual causes. Announcing them in ways that “warn” might serve to set a tone, and even raise eyebrows, but does not delimit their potential destructiveness. Universality threatens particularity and, thus, the diversity ethnographers so admirably and necessarily cherish and work to perpetuate.

Heartfelt experiences of curiosity, mistrust, and betrayal dwell within Truths. Yet, Tillmann-Healy relies on them to pursue the honorable goal of making social change, transformation for the sake of a greater good. She risks personally and professionally for GLBT individuals and our allies. She risks for me. What type of person swipes the leg out from under an ardent advocate in her invigorated journey toward greater justice? An ungrateful one who feels the hurt of his past bleed—gush—into these influential moments of the present. One who does not wish to see the unpleasant faces of homophobic communicators in the faces of supporters like her. Who am I—an ethnographer who embraces diverse modes of representation and unique perspectives on cultural life—to move so quickly to judge the very beginning of this performance? Am I adopting the criticism to ethnographic alternatives embodied by so many positivistic-oriented social science scholars, those whom I am prone to assess negatively? I feel the possibilities for hypocrisy and suspicion. It feels ugly . . . earned . . . necessary.

“Four more years!”

I spent the autumn of 2004 as many of us did: walking, knowing, and what bordered on stalking, all to prevent the result we now have: Four More Years. Four More Years: the refrain lodges in my throat. I swallow and begin to speak, my words flowing from despair, fear, and hope.
(Tillmann-Healy, p. 2)

Eyebrow descends. Body loosens somewhat. Blood more freely and warmly flows through the heart, a welcomed benefit to the possibilities for greater connection that shared memories, attitudes, and beliefs make possible. Arms reach outward . . . hesitant . . . hopeful.

Moments recalling unfortunate experiences from the most recent U.S. election prompt me to recollect those of my own, the mixed emotions embedded within them, and my involvement in attempting to promote social change. I begin to feel a kinship with Tillmann-Healy after hearing of her efforts to prevent Bush’s reelection. I learn through her words that we seem to be more similar than I had

previously imagined. Hearing of her canvassing neighborhoods makes her feel to me more interconnected with the GLBT community and challenges me to confront and soften my beliefs about “insider” and “outsider” statuses in ethnography, the trustworthiness of those “outside,” and issues of community membership in general. Mistrust keeps me from feeling an affinity with her, yet it seems for now as though we are more allied than oppositional. For example, I begin to feel at ease, even if only temporarily, about past concerns that she might inadvertently “other” the gay participants of her research studying friendship across the lines of sexual orientation (Tillmann-Healy, 2001). Previous concerns about the extent to which we can and should hold personal narrative-oriented ethnographers who comment on others’ communication and identities more accountable for their stories become alleviated, though not resolved.

There should be no unbending, prescriptive rule that delineates the communities with which ethnographers should and should not study. The busyness of lived experience, taken phenomenologically, typically prevents us from simultaneously theorizing and critiquing experience while living it. Therefore, I believe there to be invaluable benefits—for selves and others—in encouraging all ethnographers to study with communities other than those in which we claim membership. This type of work, however, should come with added care and concern, as it typically does for multiple camps of ethnographers who share this sensibility.

Tillmann-Healy’s disclosed political activism compels me to face my efforts in 2004, which likely fell far behind hers. I remember hanging a large “Kerry-Edwards” campaign sign in the window of my campus office, debating on its exact location, and asking, How visible do I want the sign to be? How visible do I want to be? Each possible location would indicate a distinct emphasis of political affiliation, and in turn, a distinct me. I also remember conscientiously including “Election Day: Exercise Your Right to Vote” on courses calendars. I am out in the classroom, and my political stances are mostly known, and so I wonder about the impact of visibility and students’ perceptions that I am using my powerful position in the classroom to advocate for particular candidate choices. I pause to think about the ways in which the performance of political signage differently matters in terms of vulnerability for untenured versus tenured faculty, although I do not want to suggest that “tenure” in contemporary U.S. academic culture means “safety.” I wonder why being outraged and vocal about the discrimination of GLBT folks seems to mark the outraged in different ways than it would if we were outraged about injustices based on race. Tillmann-Healy would likely concur that oppression of GLBT individuals seems to be a less important and pressing concern. When will more of us become outraged about homophobia and sexuality-based oppression?

I echo Tillmann-Healy’s feelings of “despair, fear, and hope,” yet also believe that these feelings, for me, far preceded the 2004 election. Her feelings prompt me to acknowledge how discrimination based on sexual orientation pervaded U.S. culture long before the current administration and, in many senses, has transcended political parties. I come to comprehend intimately this discrimination as one of a handful of blatantly accepted and legislated discriminations in the proverbial “land of the free” and “home of the brave.” What is left unanswered is how “free” others will permit GLBT persons to be and how “brave” we have to be while waiting for social justice to be granted?

The unapologetic activism I witness through Tillmann-Healy draws attention to my own less active performances as a politically savvy scholar/citizen. My individual and communal identities, in effect, get called into question: If membership is decided based on participation, am I a less concerned member than she is? If being a valuable gay man, as she suggests, means being highly active and assuredly voting, is she (a self-identified heterosexual) “more gay” than I am?

I am less active but no less angry at our political situation. I have always avoided violent responses, emotionally and physically, yet never have I tasted anger and sadness in regard to social issues more than I do now. Never have I so viscerally reacted to the stuttered voice of a country’s smirking president on

television. Never have I so frequently yelled at the screen, “Stop chuckling! Quit smirking! These issues are not funny to me!” Never have I found myself visualizing—in color, plasma, HDTV clarity—what could happen socially if a sitting president were impeached or felt too ill to continue holding office. Visualization provides a freer and safer forum in which “activism” can be done. Maybe this is what happens when despair and fear outbalance hope.

Joys of address and connection

I address this address to men like those in my research community. Men with whom I have been collaborating for ten years on a project exploring the communicative and relational opportunities and challenges of friendship across sexual orientation. . . . That audience, the “you” in the commentary to come, is probably not the “you” reading this page. But I suspect I am not alone in counting such men among my closest friends, my family. (Tillmann-Healy, pp. 2-3)

Linking her ideas to long-term research with gay male softball teammates comforts the common ethnographic sensibility to situate our research interests within particular communities. I am thrown back to past research during which I overtly contextualized lessons about cultural life, for example, with a community of Upward Bound communication students (Berry, 2001) and with the “speechies,” members of a high school speech team in Illinois (Berry, 2005). The seemingly basic move to specific contexts works as a prideful reminder of the ethnographic pursuit of cultural distinctiveness, often in direct competition with other normative traditions and disciplines, which have mandated that sociality be studied in generalizable ways.

Tillmann-Healy’s moving from/within the particular reminds me of the ease with which I observed televised news reports that demonstrate stories from “Boystown,” the GLBT safe space in Chicago central to my coming out years ago. It allows me to feel similarly at ease as I do when I watch diverse types of GLBT individuals and their allies as part of televised news stories concerning Gay Pride Parades in Chicago and Minneapolis, instead of commonly myopic images of drag queens (who, fabulously, are worth as much spotlight as they can get!) as sole representatives of gay culture. Working the particular feels more intimate, reasonable, safe, and promising.

Tillmann-Healy further describes her participants as “men who have shared their stories, struggles, and families with me” (p. 3). Participants’ emotions vividly create conditions that make possible ethnographers’ emotions. It is easy to become enveloped—often positively so—in the lives of those with whom we study. Consequently, understanding her connectedness with Cove teammates fosters a connectedness between her and me.

Similar memories come to mind. I remember instances when a group of speechies would see me around town and directly address me as “Stenographer Keith.” This was a heartfelt nickname they had given me in response to having encountered me previously making fieldwork jottings on a visible notepad. These resound as warm moments that I still cherish. I also recall occasions when friends and strangers often felt comfortable confiding in me. Tillmann-Healy’s closeness with teammates further brings to life how, for me and many GLBT persons, non-family members often become rich, enduring, and accepting forms of support—how friends necessarily become quasi family within the gay community.

Unsettling categories

[These participants/teammates are m]en who identify (privately) as gay (not queer). Men who also tend to be white, healthy (at least for now), middle-, upper-middle, or upper-class, educated (not academic), professional (not overly political). Men who can and do pass. (Tillmann- Healy, p. 3)

I trust that she has more intimate, first-hand knowledge about this community. She is also in a position to select representational styles that best serve the project. Nevertheless, portraying teammates in these ways strikes me as so intensely troublesome. A previously welcomed sense of connection between us becomes troubled by categories that feel to me to be tight, restricting, and even loaded. My chest retightens . . . mind spins . . . I attempt to clarify.

Describing participants with the labels “gay” and “healthy” can be read as a creative effort to evoke a particular sensibility toward this community, its past challenges, and its future struggles. “Healthy (at least for now)” is awfully compelling and provocative. At the same time, I cannot experience this moment without reliving Tillmann-Healy’s earlier warning of “capital-T Truths.” This is because, to me, audience members are simply left to fill in the blanks of this idea intuitively and stereotypically, to draw on stock ideas of what it means to be “x” or “y.” These categories, along with the assumptions associated with them, remain unsettled, and in rather unsettling ways.

This moment yields an encompassing mix of perplexity and anger that calls back personal memories of (what I believed were) my parents’ heartfelt concerns that my being gay meant my being prone to disease, and particularly AIDS. I remember my similar assumptions from much of the early and middle 1990s, when coming out, and actively having sex with another man, felt as though testing HIV positive would be an inevitable, self-evident outcome. Things like “retirement,” “saving for the future,” and “long-term” anything seemed then like distant and unattainable abstractions. It reminds me of how I still have trouble watching films with AIDS-oriented storylines, because they were released during a more emotionally charged, perceivably life-threatening time. I think about how a private agency like the American Red Cross—currently reaping public praises of beneficence after Hurricane Katrina—openly excludes (sexually active) gay citizens from donating blood, based on a presumption of our greater risk for HIV/AIDS. (Folk wisdom suggests that every vial of blood collected by the agency is tested for various infections, including HIV.) That gay men were to contract HIV, later developing to full-blown AIDS, felt “inevitable” back then. Ignorantly, we were all “healthy, at least for now.”

Revisiting this anger encourages varying considerations: About whom is this moment of conflict? On whose laps shall we place interpretive responsibility, mine as audience member and/or Tillmann-Healy’s as rhetor? Does she genuinely assume that because her participants are gay, they are likely to contract the disease? If so, does this suggest a continuation of what she suggests elsewhere to be a naïveté about gay culture prior to meeting her cherished participants (Tillmann-Healy, 2001)? And/or does this concern present itself more because of narrative choices, which do not explicitly indicate that they are linked to past experiences with teammates’ scares with HIV (Tillmann-Healy, 2001)? And/or does my reaction merely illustrate a hypersensitivity to labels and the assumptions dangerously embedded within them? And/or has government-based discrimination hardened me as a cultural observer, leading me to perceive even allies as opponents?

I have learned to be fearful of simply leaving others to work through abstractly communicated ideas about vital social issues on their own. It is painful to allow others to “live their own story” when doing so drastically calls into question and refashions the ongoing constitution of my own. I have become concerned with provocative discursive moments like these, in that the ability to be good at writing (in this case, autoethnographically through poetic verse) seems to rely on minimizing verbiage. As a result, the extent to which we can complicate ideas is lessened.

And these ideas need complicating. There’s too much at stake. Granted, overly scrutinized ideas can limit creativity, but less circumspectfully relying on categories can minimize fairness, coherence, and, in effect, greater awareness. Provocative can be sexy, yet sometimes sexy feels dirty.

Evaluation trumps understanding

Flowing throughout Tillmann-Healy's verses are encouraging moments of empathy. It is easy to detect a deep caring for participants and social justice. She confirms her community by acknowledging the risk involved with becoming more politically active, embraces the complexities with her own positionality, and demonstrates her personal connections to hardship and social constraints by disclosing her tenure-seeking process in a department and institution governed by "middle-aged, heterosexual, upper-middle and upper-class men" (pp. 4-5).

Heartfelt empathy is matched with several moments of direct confrontation and appraisal:

Here is my question: my friends, where were you in this election cycle? (p. 5)

It could be said that, of all members of your—our—community, you have the most to lose by making yourself vulnerable. Passing brings privilege however temporary and unstable.

I also see, hear, feel—but never understand fully—the economic, social, and even bodily consequences you might bear should things go terribly, even violently, awry, as they so often have for those "too public."

On the other hand, my friends, compared to your non-White, working-class, lesbian, and transgendered brothers and sisters, you stand on firmer ground.

In this election cycle, so many others did make themselves vulnerable, canvassing for Kerry, MoveOn, or most visibly, the Human Rights Campaign. Why not you? (p. 8, emphasis in original)

I sit upright, prepared to protect myself. My eyes are squinted in defensive, less embracing ways. (Never a pretty look. The response, though, feels innate.) Like so many other times when allies are possibly misaligned with enemies, I quickly question Tillmann-Healy's positionality: Who are you to call out gay men like this? She acknowledges the complicated nature of doing so, and concedes that silence and inaction are likely "responses to homophobia and heterosexism" (p. 9). She accounts for how, because of her privileged heterosexual status, the "excoriation" might seem "heretical" (p. 9). The calling out, nevertheless, bites at the hopeful soul of a community who is no stranger to harsh confrontation and ridicule. Her text is rife with troubling complications.

Emotions lead so very powerfully in these types of conversations—this one is no exception. Implications weigh heavily. Words here feel like an intervention, like when a close "friend" who "truly has my best interests in mind" risks confrontation because she/he "felt it was something that had to be done." That moment when the mutuality of good relationships is lost because one partner "knows what's good for you" and enacts a one-up social position. Hers are fast-moving assumptions about identity that lead me to wonder: Are there ways in which I "pass"? Does "passing" even matter anymore? It seems to be important to Tillmann-Healy's (2001, 2005) research community. It's important to Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological research and his research participant "Agnes." I know that "passing" is important to many GLBT folks who feel very significant pressures of having to compare their identities and everyday experiences to heteronormative standards. I know about the fears that come with believing that I do not necessarily "pass," and by pass, I mean "fit in" and "matter."

I am transported back to when the ways in which I carried myself in public seemed to matter so much:

Body upright . . .

Chest up and out . . .

Abs in . . .

Repressing the “gracefulness” of my voice.

These were my performances as a closeted and just-out-of-the-closet communicator. They feel as scary and despair ridden as any undesirable election result. Their memories can be haunting, like the feelings you have when, years later, you relive a loud car accident. Persistently feeling as if I had to be on guard, self-consciously monitoring my surroundings, living hypervigilantly, preparing for what I thought would be hostile, misunderstanding reactions from others. Indeed, the perceived “consequences” were, and are, palpable in both everyday ways and in those extraordinary moments when things might go “terribly, even violently, awry” (p. 8). Tillmann-Healy’s identification and empathy are received as heartfelt but temporary and unstable.

“You stand on firmer ground.” “Why not you?”

These words echo for me, today, months after hearing them live during her performance at QI. Surely, gay men might experience privilege in ways that lesbians, and, for that matter, lesbians of color, might not. I remember when the “Dyke March” became a necessary Pride-oriented event. It began to be held a week before the annual Chicago Gay Pride Parade after (possibly) intoxicated gay men shouted hurtful critiques of female genitalia to lesbians who passed on floats during previous years’ Pride Parades. Critically thinking about this issue now reminds me of privilege, which, although invisible to many, can feel undeniable, destructive emotionally, and unhelpful politically.

“You stand on firmer ground.” “Why not you?”

Still, how might these words sound to a “passing” and “privileged” gay man who cries himself to sleep each night on his pillow, unaware of the benefits that his “firmer ground” makes available? And which “you”—those gay men who live day-to-day life as if this “firm ground,” in practice, is so very shaky and emotionally uncertain? We could say that this uncertainty is the very reason why more gay men should become politically active. However, these issues are tricky, and in ways that quickly “passing” provocative poetic verses might otherwise suggest.

“You stand on firmer ground.” “Why not you?”

As an ethnographer and phenomenologist who values critical thinking, I am quick to respond with pressing, though still unresolved, questions of my own: How would your participants define the “ground” on which they stand? Explicitly foregrounding participants’ voices would seem to be vital in a time when an increase in GLBT voices is necessary to allay or abolish discrimination. What risks are related to the creative practice of representing others by embedding their perspectives within succinct poetic verses? Furthermore, if we are to speak about, and thereby speak for, others in ethnography (Alcoff, 1991), what is at stake when we comment on the extent to which marginalized persons face marginalization? In a time when equity is so desired from political candidates and U.S. government officials, do we not risk losing the “firmness” in our own “ground” by quantifying and hierarchizing others’ experiences of hardship?

This last concern relates to West and Fenstermaker’s (1995) criticism of using mathematical metaphors to understand oppression, that is, assessing “difference” by, in a sense, stacking up the various categories of oppression individuals might encounter. They proposed analyzing difference as an intersectional, interactional accomplishment. Discernment, in this sense, comes through engaging diverse experiences

constituted within discourse, which might or might not include oppression, rather than by using prefigured categories. Their position can help in making assessments that relate oppression and political inactivity more contingent.

“Why not you?”

Although posed as a question, this passionate statement feels to me like an evaluation. Indeed, more GLBT citizens, and, for that matter, all persons, must vote in elections to make possible the change we so desire and to remedy the social ills about which many so often and openly complain. Yet, I wonder if we will ever be able to make richer connections among the GLBT and ally communities, and between GLBT citizens, allies, and “opponents,” if evaluation takes greater precedence over understanding. When social injustice weighs heavily on the souls of vulnerable cultural communicators, how much time need we spend dwelling and reflecting within performances of empathic questioning and sharing before confronting others in these ways? “As much as the contexts and/or our positions specify” would seem to be a popular answer that many might offer in response to this question. I have yet to come up with answers of my own.

Gifts are meant to be appreciated, and some are given out of obligation. Yet, so often they demonstrate a sign of affinity and caring. There are also times like these when I want to give the gift back.

I do not trust “tough love” much any more.

Engaging the self through the “gift”

Experiencing Tillmann-Healy’s autoethnographic poem from within the experience itself creates plentiful conditions for reflecting about ethnographic conversations. It provides us with personalized ways to understand the nature of this autoethnographic conversation, its impact on conversationalists, and the ways in which this discourse serves as a “gift” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111) that “experience” makes possible.

Communicating through autoethnography continues to make possible emotional, personal, and provocative texts that address cultural phenomena in ways previously unavailable in orthodox ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Tillmann-Healy’s text reminds us that so few words can convey so much: anger, outrage, empathy, disappointment, and fear (for starters). In turn, a closer examination suggests that the cultural issues and persons we describe ethnographically are often more complex, more intensively nuanced, than they appear on the surface.

Autoethnographic praxis enables its audiences to experience its research in rather intriguing ways. Autoethnographers’ risks in representing thoughts and feelings about cultural phenomena enable audience members to think and feel. Occasional numbness set in by my own disappointment after Decision 2004 is unsettled by Tillmann-Healy in unsolicited, though undeniable and multilayered, ways. A sort of paralysis is shocked out of its stasis by the jarring words and images of a researcher who openly communicates her passion but who handles pain differently than I do. Audience members to autoethnography are made aware of our implicated statuses in both enriching and distressing ways. Conversations like these also enable a confrontation and reexamination of pressing issues. Differences and similarities between conversation partners prompt a reconsideration of our standpoints, how ideas about them will be communicated, and the impact of such disclosure on others and ourselves. As such, autoethnographic communication, regardless of how pleasant such an exchange is and can be, makes possible newer paths for experiencing social issues. This engagement renders audience members, effectively “grabbed” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, pp. 120), different persons in noticeable and often tacit or less visible ways than prior to the communication. It offers the gift of self-examination and self-

transformation, and, even if only temporarily, allows us the opportunity to avoid being static, complacent, and myopic. Experiencing autoethnography can enable us to re-create the interpretive “anchors” that so powerfully shape how we constitute ourselves and experiences (Berry, 2006).

Autoethnographic discourse provides autoethnographers themselves, valuable conversational partners in this relationship, the opportunity and necessity to engage this exchange with the above considerations in mind. Although each conversation and conversationalist brings to this communication different experiences and perspectives, autoethnography as communicated to audiences allows autoethnographers to become more self-aware (in ways that extend beyond the heightened awareness often connected to the reflexive work in this method), and in turn, self-confrontational. If arms are left open to experience the messages of audiences fully, observant autoethnographers are apt to feel the possibilities for self-transformation made available with the doing of this research.

The experience between autoethnographic texts and audiences personifies a reciprocal relation entailing rhetorical force and subjective impact. It is a sense of connection (not necessarily warm but assuredly intimate) that is felt by, and sensible to, those “audiencing” autoethnographic texts but that is typically not analyzed and theorized in situ. This would suggest that audience members have a challenging responsibility to consider more comprehensively autoethnographies and the ways in which we can respond in impassioned, honest, and direct ways. We have the right and responsibility to offer the gift of reasonable insight and, if possible, relational bridge building. This encourages us to slow down the rate at which we offer criticism to enhance mindfulness in how we respond, given that autoethnographic discourse’s interpretive impact on audiences, due to our hermeneutic self-implicature in this dynamic instantiation of communicative praxis (Schrag, 2003), is as much about audience members as it is about autoethnographers. Instructive questions that can facilitate this expanded awareness include: How might diverse aspects of my unique lived experience make possible the engagement of this autoethnographic text and autoethnographic texts in general? How might I understand this connection in varying ways?

My best sense is that this circumspection, due to the dynamic nature of everyday experience, is more readily available with a sense of distance and added reflection. For instance, I could not write about the Tillmann-Healy experience for many months after its occurrence. So often, reactive feelings of anger and protectiveness hamper the warmer and more constructive emotions necessary in achieving empathy and when working to be enriched through this line of discourse. Thus, the thinking that distance makes possible can allow for greater clarity in assessment. Exploring deeper issues of response like these is critical but extends beyond the scope of this article.

We can never give the “perfect” offering either through autoethnography or through any other mode of ethnographic praxis. No cultural text can/will comfortably identify with all aspects of audience members’ subjectivities. Furthermore, as audience members, we cannot assume that we can/should “wrap” for others what they wish to “present” to us. As Goodall (2000) argued, ethnography is always “partial, partisan, and problematic” (p. 55). However, the inevitability of reflexivity and incompleteness in representation should not detract from our desire and need to examine how our lifeworlds get used within this process.

Scott (1991), in her critique of historian scholarship, described a risk of simplistically using “experience” as self-evident, uncontested, and undisputable warrants to support claims. This sensibility illustrates an alluring sort of “I was there, and therefore I know best” logic. Using the “evidence of experience” like this greatly lessens our ability to understand experience as discursively/recursively constituted, and therefore, more subject to change and contingent. Consequently, those who encounter experience used in this way can come into contact with obstacles in critiquing the scholarship that it works to sustain and legitimize.

In preparation for writing this article, I heard many warnings from endeared colleagues: “I don’t understand why the ethnographer in you won’t let Lisa do her ethnography.” “Let her tell her story.” “Whose story is it to critique?” “You’re ideas [in responding to this text] would be greatly strengthened by actually having done more autoethnographies.” Although heartfelt, this counsel works to bolster Tillmann-Healy’s claims and rights to represent others as she wishes based on storied experience and my efficacy in responding to her ideas on the ability to garner enough “experience doing autoethnography” to be able to speak “effectively” to its practices. Moreover, it fails to give adequate attention to the reality that audience members experience stories as hermeneutic beings who cultivate understanding in personalized ways that can be necessary and beneficial to the ongoing and coherent constitution of these stories.

Closely examining the ways and implications of using the “evidence of experience” merits future research. I believe crafting stories in this way makes communicating through autoethnography, particularly for those who audience autoethnographic discourse, challenging and problematic. It can leave audience members in a tenuous position of wanting to respond but not knowing how, or if it is “appropriate” to do so. Reflecting on Tillmann-Healy’s performance reminds us that discourse by scholars who seek to confront a community should be met with feedback from audiences in equally direct ways. If this exciting and hopeful mode of communication is to be increasingly dialogic in practice, and authors/performers circumspectfully reflexive and accountable, then storytellers face a risky task of deeply considering the implications of using lived experience to make claims and, more particularly, how doing so can affect the likelihood of receiving instructive criticism from diverse audience members.

The risks of increasing the openness of ethnography as conversation in these ways are tangible. I have opted to revise this article numerous times, perhaps unnecessarily, because of my uncertainty about how the ideas will be accepted by an academic community that so readily privileges stories. I privilege stories too, and yet, pushing for a more circumspectful conversation risks devaluing so much of what ethnographers have created in terms of the ability to convey evocative, personal stories. I risk being perceived as the respondent who rashly steps on Lisa’s story and, therefore, on Lisa. In other autoethnographies, critically responding to experience used as evidence likely can render me to many as the oppressor and not a supporter of researchers who have often bravely reinvigorated previously silenced voices (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I risk identifying more with the abuser than with the abused. These complex challenges intertwine with the ongoing ways that autoethnographers risk by performing vulnerable, emotional, self-disclosing selves. In fact, our vulnerabilities mutually and necessarily fuel each other. Still, we must respond—inquisitively questioning and reflectively probing all intellectual conversations important to our lives, and those by which we are so readily implicated.

Being freer to experience autoethnography in ways that talk back with/to the stories that so provocatively talk to/with us intersubjectively creates a gift that might be less welcome to some. However, such an offering is central to growth as diverse, more aware storytellers and audience members. This gift nourishes by genuinely disclosing appreciation, admiration, and points of similarity while also indicating the ways in which conversation partners’ texts can be hurtful—perhaps inadvertently, but no less counterproductively—to the goal of engendering warmth and acceptance for cultural others and ourselves.

Note

1. Unless otherwise specified, references to Tillmann-Healy relate to her 2005 work. [back to text](#)

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