I often experience moments of confusion, clarity, pain, and discomfort. I find these moments deeply intertwined with my social identities and the assumptions about human behavior connected to my identities. When I have these moments, I write narratives and then tuck them away into the pockets of my computer memory. I usually forget they exist until one emerges via a file search.

I begin this chapter exploring the connections between intersectionality and autoethnography with a narrative I tucked away in 2013, when I knew my marriage to a cis-het man was coming to an end, my nonbinary gender identity was coming to a head, and my gender-fluid child was feeling the weight of those changes as they navigated their own transition. This is our story.

***

My child keeps peeing their pants. They never pee their pants. The further I drift into darkness, the more they pee. There is a connection.

***

I haven’t been myself lately. Crying uncontrollably. Relegated to my closet floor with the door closed. Only me and my sobs. Pitch blackness, except I can see the burdens that mark my body distinctly female.

The begging for help.
The pleading for attention.
The boo-boos that need bandages.
The request for a bedtime story.
The need to be tucked in.

He sits in his chair, ignoring the neediness, the chores, the duties.
They are mine now.
All of them.
Mine.

***

It is lunchtime. The children are hungry.
He is standing in the kitchen preparing food that I most likely paid for.
He does not ask them if they are hungry.
Not if I am here.
He only feeds himself.

He does not read to them.
Or tuck them in.
That is solely my job now.
If I am home.

He does not clean, or cook, or play with us.

Those are my jobs, and mine alone.

I have never felt more like a woman than now. I do not like it.

***
“Will that be all, sir?”
The store clerk marks my body distinctly male.

In a moment where marking is not necessary, the clerk marks me anyway. I am not ashamed to be read as masculine. As a nonbinary person, it adds dimension to my experience. But I do not experience the benefits of masculinity. Not now. Not ever. So the title is not . . . fair. It is wrong. Out of place. My ex-husband is masculine. He can ignore his children. He can push us out. He doesn’t have to experience the guilt associated with not wanting to parent or partner.

* I am sinking further into darkness. Like his skin, he reminds me that my life is dark. Unhealthy. Not whole. It is missing the love. The kindness. The feelings. The smiles.

It is missing me.

I am not here.
I am not this woman.
I am not that woman.
I am no one’s woman.
I am someone else.
A skeleton wrapped in duties. With a tongue cut out and filling the mouth with swelling. I dare not speak or discuss my thoughts.
They are too dark now.
Too dark to open and release.
I am not me.

* And my child is not my child. That three-year-old, independent, vibrant, young, toddler learning words for their spelling bee. My child is crying. And peeing their pants. My child has fallen into darkness with me.

How do we re-emerge?

* I remember being a young, budding scholar and wondering: What will my legacy be? What will I contribute to the communication discipline? I also remember thinking about ambitious collaborative research projects I wanted to complete alongside other scholars, but first feeling like I needed to get my stories as research out. I could feel these stories and experiences living and breathing in my body, and they needed an exit. My computer was littered with narratives upon narratives of experience, and I needed to process them. Intersectional autoethnographic exploration gave me a framework to process those narratives and make sense of my experiences as they connected to larger bodies of history, feelings, community, and power. Intersectional autoethnography provided a platform to share my experiences as poetic catharsis while also creating space to digest, and eventually divest in, power. Intersectional autoethnography saved my life.

* Autoethnography is research, writing, storytelling, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, political (Ellis, 2004, p. xix), and performative (Conquergood, 1985). Autoethnography calls for inserting the bodily flesh and its many positions as ways of (not)knowing via autopoetic narrative (Alexander & Warren, 2002), autocritography (Awkward, 1999), performance (Conquergood, 1985), and rhetorical autoethnography (Johnson, 2014b). Regardless of approach, the goal of an autoethnographic text is to produce a creative yet critical articulation of lived experiences in a textual performance where different perceptions and standpoints of experience enter into conversation (Conquergood, 1985, p. 9) and create new memories and new experiences that foster a space for understanding and possibility.

Intersectionality is an approach to research and theory that foregrounds the compounded impact of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other social identity categories on lived experiences within systems of power. An intersectional approach to research and theory requires that the researcher be cognizant of how systems of injustice affect lived experiences across multiple categories because those categories and systems of power are interdependent, complex, and inseparable. Ange-Marie Hancock (2007) defines intersectionality as

both the normative theoretical argument and an approach to conducting empirical research . . . that considers the interaction of race, gender, class, and other organizing structures of society a key component influencing political access, equality and the potential for any form of justice.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1993) coined the term in her groundbreaking article, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” She used the theory to delineate
the qualitative differences between cisgender women’s experiences with sexual assault and domestic abuse across intersections of race and class. What Crenshaw’s work contributes to autoethnographic scholarship is a formula for mapping the multiple and overlapping ways bodies not only perform as political entities through discourse but endure the systematic attempts to maintain power through representation, politics, and institutions. The labels attached to our bodies mimic more than arbitrary words designed to highlight difference; they also have the ability to (re)inforce and challenge power structures as divisive systems of oppression.

Intersectionality and autoethnography together affect what stories we choose to tell, how we understand our bodies and other bodies within stories, and how we connect our bodies and stories to larger political structures and systems of power. An autoethnographer can establish a rigorous intersectional praxis by addressing four criteria: (1) narrative fidelity and (2) narrative cohesion, (3) self-reflexivity, and (4) connecting the personal to the political—via representational, structural, and political intersectionality, respectively.

**NARRATIVE FIDELITY AND NARRATIVE COHESION VIA REPRESENTATIONAL INTERSECTIONALITY**

Narrative fidelity and cohesion extend from Walter Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm, which suggests that humans are natural storytellers and communicate via stories. If humans see the world through stories, Fisher (1985) crafts the criteria for judging the merit and value of story via narrative cohesion and fidelity. Narrative cohesion suggests that for a story to make sense, it must be consistent internally and structurally. Internal consistency means the characters are reliable and there are sufficient details. Structural consistency means the story aligns with similar narratives. Narrative fidelity points to whether a story fits a priori understandings, values, and ideas (Fisher, 1987).

Representational intersectionality refers to the rhetorical, cultural, and social constructions of representative bodies within popular and everyday cultural contexts. For instance, mediated representations of non-trans Black women are largely wrought with stereotypes, while trans and nonbinary people are largely absent from mediated representations.

Implementing representational intersectionality through narrative fidelity requires that the narrator give truth to power and give power to truth. The narrator does this in three ways: (1) locating their truth as one possible truth within a complex system of power and perceptions; (2) mapping the way power affects the way they understand their truth and are willing to tell it; and (3) understanding the fissures, ruptures, and mistruths in the narrative as they are connected to power. The narrator must unpack these moments for deeper meaning and value.

Incorporating representational intersectionality through narrative cohesion requires acknowledging how power informs the storytelling process and mapping connection to the theoretical and analytical sensibilities that drive a narrative and subsequent analysis. For instance, who do the narrators cite as framing agents in their work, what theories do they point to and why, what stories do they choose to tell, how do all of these decisions mimic their own values, and what does that mimicry suggest about power structures?

In the opening narrative, my truth is front and center and pivots around my feelings, perceptions, and roles connected to gender, power, and parenting. As a scholar invested in giving truth to power and giving power to truth, I pose the question: Whose narrative is missing? My ex-husband likely had a different perception of our relational downfall. As a cisgender and heterosexual man without prior contact with gender-fluid people, he likely didn’t have the capacity to understand what his child and spouse were experiencing as nonbinary humans attempting to navigate a nuclear family without the support and affirmation for our gender identity shifts and complexities. My child and I didn’t have the capacity to understand our own bodies and growth. At the time, however, I did not consider the capacities of all parties involved; surviving my own truth was difficult enough. But now, six years removed from this moment, and in conversation with my co-parent and child, it is clear that we were all hurting, growing, and coping to the best of our ability, even when our best resulted in perceived failure.

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In addition to the issues associated with attempting to represent another person’s experience, sometimes understanding the ruptures in a story proves to be more illuminating than the story itself. For a scholarly example, we can turn to “Confession of Video Vixen: My Autocritography of Sexuality, Desire, and Memory” (Johnson, 2014a). In this essay I wrestle with a story I told for eight years to disguise my desire to star in a music video as a sexual being because “our bodies are metaphorically tied to histories, politics, and social stigmas that not only render us silent and undesirable as sexual beings, but also cast us as hypersexual and uncontrollable should we choose to be sexual anyway” (p. 197). Telling the fabricated story
alongside the truth while also analyzing my own problematic language around bodies and desire allowed me to trouble boundaries of gender, sexuality, and language. By telling and re-telling my truths, I illuminate how bodies move between and beyond boundaries established by language due to the intersectional properties of our experiences, counter-memory, and re-membering. Sitting in the ruptures often moments of clarity and revision that otherwise may not available.

**SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND STRUCTURAL INTERSECTIONALITY**

Self-reflexivity is the intentional and rhetorical process of analyzing our own research processes, biases, word choices, story choices, and analytic choices in a constant process of perception checking. As Malterud (2001) suggests, “a researcher’s background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (pp. 483–484). When considering the subjective and deeply personal process of analyzing our own stories as research, self-reflexivity is imperative. Mary Weems (2010) warns us that separating intellect, imagination, reflection, and emotion is a mistake.

New ideas and reflection incorporate imagination, reason, logic, and passion that drives us to pursue research, to ask questions, and to take risks. It is not possible to formulate an idea without reflection, or to develop an idea without imagination.

(p. 1)

Autoethnographic research promotes the symbiotic merging of intellectual rigor and imagination through reflexive writing.

The narrative text is reflexive, not only in its use of language but also in how it positions the writer in the text and uses the writer’s experiences as both the topic of inquiry and a resource for uncovering problematic experience.

(Denzin, 1997, p. 217)

Structural intersectionality refers to location, systemic injustice, and how people experience differences due to situational circumstances as they correlate to systemic power. For instance, unemployment, immigrant status, formal job training, race and gender oppression, or lack of access to resources and information determines how a person responds to a specific situation. Approaching structural intersectionality from a nonbinary point, we can attend to the ways in which Black trans women experience structural hardships at an even greater degree due to a lack of cisgender identity, often experiencing physical and discursive violence from both cismen and ciswomen.

Self-reflexivity is an exercise in unpacking structural intersectionality because peeling back the layers of systemic power and how they dictate the way we conduct research, tell our stories, and reflect back on those processes require a keen awareness of structural power and experience. As Langellier (1999) reminds us:

> Identity and experience are symbiosis of performed story and the social relations in which they are materially embedded: sex, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, geography, religion, and so on. This is why personal narrative performance is especially crucial to those communities left out of the privileges of dominant culture, those bodies without voice in the political sense.

(p. 129)

Being self-reflexive in an autoethnographic text is a rhetorically courageous act of unpacking our own biases and linguistic choices because they connect to larger systems of power. In the aforementioned narrative, my language reflects my own buy-in to gender and the rigid roles of caretaking and parenting. I often question how I could have interrogated roles and relational boundaries better by communicating my desire for more support and help raising the children. Being more communicative and upfront about my needs could have resulted in a different outcome. In addition, I did not unpack my perceptions of my roles as they related to rigid gender norms.

For an additional scholarly example, we can turn to “From Academe, to the Theatre to the Streets: My Autocritography of Aesthetic Cleansing and Canonical Exception in the Wake of Ferguson,” where I wrestle with my complicity in capitalism as a university professor while also critiquing racial tokenism in hiring practices by majority white institutions that rely on canonical exception to prove their policies are equitable and post-racial (Johnson, 2017). In an act of self-reflexivity regarding my choice for writing the essay and my reasons for engaging in scholarship and activism, I write:
Recognizing my own complicity with canonical exception by accepting the position [at Saint Louis University], I arrived on campus and began to craft this essay in the midst of continued racial eruption and compassion fatigue. . . . This autocritography bears witness to the cognitive dissonance I experience when being perceived as a canonical exception, yet choosing to stand firmly at the helm of social justice activism. I exist between race, gender, and the ivory towers of scholarly life. It is the constant friction of shifting between the two that erases boundaries. These worlds work together as a motivating factor. I am motivated to tell these stories. Not as a victim. Not as a complicit body. But as an active body that uses my education and privilege to fight alongside those relegated to the streets.

(p. 11)

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL AND POLITICAL INTERSECTIONALITY

The final criterion for establishing rigorous intersectional praxis as an autoethnographer is the connection between the personal and political. Autoethnography highlights three concerns: how cultural practices shape identity, how identity shapes cultural performance (Alexander, 2005), and how publicly responsible autoethnography addresses central issues of self, race, gender, society, and democracy (Denzin, as cited in Alexander, 2005, p. 425) through imagination, intellect, reflection, and emotion (Weems, 2010). In order to pursue the body as a reflexive site of (not)knowing, one must position the body by examining the social identity categories tied to the body, and the respective systems of power that chaperone how and why bodies move through the world. Political intersectionality is one theoretical framework for understanding systems of power as complex, intertwined, and overlapping on the single body’s social identity categories and their political ramifications.

Political intersectionality refers to the ways people are often silenced and marginalized by contradicting political agendas like anti-racist versus anti-sexist groups. It points, too, to the ways social movements compound systemic injustice by focusing on single-identity issues as if they are neat, compartmentalized, and capable of being understood apart from other identity categories within the single body. As a nonbinary Black person, I cannot separate my experiences of racism from my experiences of sexism; I understand them in tandem. Unfortunately, as social groups attempt to fuse intersectional difference across race, class, and gender, those attempts are still largely targeting cisgender experience.

For instance, the Women’s March attempted to be inclusive, but the pink pussy hats identified womanhood based on genitalia and color, and thus excluded a lot of trans women and nonbinary femmes. Understanding how political discourse and social movement target individual social identity categories while excluding complex understandings of human experience is crucial in connecting our own bodies as political entities to discourse and the ways in which discourses attempt to silence some parts of us while uplifting other parts. The intersectional autoethnographer must tend to the political structures within and beyond the body.

Revisiting the opening narrative, the political directly affected my personal body in two ways. First, the political expected me to mother because I was assigned female at birth and bear “the burdens that mark my body distinctly female.” Second, the political forces me to fulfill the stereotype of the strong, Black, independent woman who can handle juggling a career, parenting, intimacy, and the bulk of financial responsibility. Those political systems kept me from speaking my truth, asking for help, and communicating my own boundaries and needs. I became a “skeleton wrapped in duties. With a tongue cut out and filling the mouth with swilling. I dare not speak or discuss my thoughts.” Political structures are pervasive and affect every aspect of our lives, which is why the personal is political. Political ideologies inform the way we see ourselves, how we move through the world, and how we see others moving through the world.

Political structures also chaperone our relational selves, especially when it comes to deeply personal behaviors connected to larger systems of power, like intimacy, parenting, and sexuality. For example, in the essay titled “Doing it: A Rhetorical Autoethnography of Religious Masturbation and Identity Negotiation,” I interrogate a sexual experience I had as a teenager and the ways political, religious, and spiritual rhetoric informed my sexual behavior, or lack thereof (Johnson, 2014b). I argue that “before we can begin discussing how to re-introduce the body to church, we must map out why the body was every absent” (p. 379). The answers are simple and rooted in political and religious ideology that suggest the body should be controlled, tamed, cleaned up, and sanitized in order to be sacred and pure. These ideals prevented me from experiencing sexual freedom and agency, and nothing about that is solely personal; it is cultural phenomena resulting
in ideologies “[holding] our bodies hostage, policed, secular, wrong” (p. 381).

***

Intersectional autoethnography provides space for me to unpack the complex layers of power systems that chaperone my experience. “Autoethnographers bring their bodies and stories into scholarship so their personal histories can speak to learners systems of power” (Johnson, 2014b, p. 382). From being a Black parent, to a mother, to a gender-fluid body, to a lover, and back again, intersectional autoethnography pushes me to find the complex and overlapping systems that determine how and why I see my body the way I see it, how I see other people’s bodies, and the role of our bodies in my world and other people’s world.

From a representational standpoint, my narrative represents the bodies in my story in explicit ways. From characterizing my children as a list of needs and using words like “crying,” “begging,” and “pleading” to solely referring to my ex-husband as a he and him and never a proper pronoun, my language choices represent my family in very distinct ways that capture my own angst and heartache at the time. My words paint a painful picture of patriarchy and agency over our own bodies as they involuntarily urinate or perform household chores begrudgingly.

The gender binary influenced both my child and me, resulting in feeling a lack of autonomy and agency over our own bodies as they involuntarily urinate or perform household chores begrudgingly. From a political standpoint, the way I performed and expressed my social identities reflects an over-investment in the gender binary, even though I was navigating nonbinary identity and transitioning at the time of writing the opening narrative.

Ideologies sink their tentacles deeply into our psyches. Untangling those systems and learning to love our bodies from a place of organic and unmediated care required intentional labor. The first step, however small or large, is to locate the political forces that oppress the body and the potential political movements that may liberate that story or connect the body to other liberating theologies. Intersectional autoethnography helps us perform that first step. It helps the narrator and reader unpack the roles patriarchy, racism, sexism, binary gender, and colonialism play in experience and provide complexity, nuance, and possibility for emancipation.

NOTE

1. In 2017, following the inauguration of President Donald Trump, at the Women’s March in Washington, protesters wore pink, knitted hats called “Pink Pussy Hats.” While the protest was staged to fight for reproductive and women’s rights, several critics of the hat felt it excluded trans women and nonbinary people whose genitalia may look different as well as ciswomen of color whose genitalia may not be pink but rather brown.

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