Chapter twenty two

Naming and Reclaiming Decolonial, Feminist, Performative, and Other Approaches to Critical Autoethnography

Caleb Green and Bernadette Marie Calafell

Dear Caleb,

It was great meeting with you today to discuss your comprehensive examinations preparation. I have no doubt you are ready to go! This preparation is not only going to set you up well for your comps, but for your larger dissertation project, which has the potential to bring together performance studies (Conquergood, 2002; Madison, 1993; Pollock, 1998), critical qualitative methods, specifically autoethnography (Alexander, 2005; Holman Jones, 2005; Spry, 2011), queer feminist (Anzaldúa, 1987; Muñoz, 1999), and decolonial methods (Mohanty, 2003; Smith, 2012). Reflecting on our meeting I was taken back to an essay I coauthored with Richie Hao, Bryant Keith Alexander, Kate Willink, Amy Kilgard, and the late John T. Warren (Hao et al., 2012). My contribution to the essay was “Mentoring and ‘Professional Development’ From an Other Perspective.” As I wrote in that essay, “Very few straight, white men or women ask me to be their advisor.” For those who do, I wonder about their choices. I don’t wonder because I am narcissistic, but because I consider what I might bring to them outside of research overlap, specifically in regards to “professional development” that may be different than the “professional development” I offer to my students who identify as cultural Others . . . I turn around to consider what white straight students might get in terms of “professional development” from a queer woman of color faculty member. I don’t do this to center whiteness, but rather to nuance the experience of faculty of color, who hold precarious spaces in departments where they and their research are often tokenized or exoticized, particularly when they teach in the area of culture and communication. What do we risk and gain in our “professional development” or mentoring of culturally dominant students? What is at stake in presenting our vulnerable selves? For students I mentor from historically marginalized groups I often impart strategies of survival in a predominantly white and heteronormative space that rarely affirms their identities. I affirm their right to be there and often have to teach them scholarship that is ignored in their other coursework, which is most often focused on the so-called canon. For those students from dominant groups, I work with them to more fully develop critical intersectional reflexivity, teach them an Other perspective toward Communication Studies and encourage them to think about things like the politics of citation. Like Thomas Nakayama, another invaluable mentor, I wonder in order to reverse the gaze and to understand what we can learn about “Otherness in relationship to dominance” (Hao et al., 2012, p. 39).

Given my past experiences mentoring and advising graduate students, I was completely surprised, but very happy when you asked me to be your advisor. I wondered again, what “professional development” I might bring to you. But as I have gotten to know you and your commitment to being critically reflexive about your identities and larger issues of power, it makes sense. In many ways you remind me of my friend, the late John T. Warren. The kind of work you are doing and your commitments give me a lot of hope for the future of the field and I am happy to be your advisor. Thanks for asking me.

Bernadette

Dear Bernadette,

Thank you for your kind words. I share your passion for mentor/mentee relationships, as they have always
been valuable to me. In regard to the question of what “professional development” you might bring to me, it is likely a push beyond what I have already learned about the world and scholarship. I came to our program with the goal of conducting dialogic qualitative work examining family relationships, with the later work of Leslie Baxter (2011) as my guide. I came to this focus after an undergraduate and master’s program focused on paradigmatic balance. Throughout my career, I was required to take methods courses examining quantitative, qualitative, and rhetorical research design. I felt most at home engaging in projects that allowed me to focus on specific relationships through interviews. Once I decided on this, I was encouraged to turn to the ubiquitous qualitative methods textbook written by Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor (2011). They taught me the differences between single- and double-barreled questions, as well as open and in vivo coding. I was also directed to the work of Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, particularly a text from 1990 which I was told I would “need” to cite any time I referenced grounded theory and/or saturation. I was directed toward Baxter’s (2011) relational dialectics theory with the idea it would allow me to find a space between interpretive and critical paradigms for my thesis. My project, focused on differences in perceptions of alcohol consumption between drinkers and non-drinkers, was something I was happy with at the time, but I have since developed regrets. Specifically, I regret that my interpretation and engagement with this type of research led me to such binary thinking. Dividing people into two distinct groups is something I no longer believe in. Further, while I was directed in this project to constantly remind myself that qualitative work should not presume to have the power to tell the stories of other people, it is now clear to me the lives of others always appear in our work through a political exertion of authorial control. Allow me to articulate how I came to these conclusions.

In the semester following the completion of my thesis, the next round of theses began to take shape. I heard that many of them were engaged in autoethnographic projects which highlighted their proximity to their thesis topics. I was somewhat familiar with autoethnography. We had read a few in our qualitative methods course. My advisor had even pushed me to begin and end my thesis with brief narratives highlighting my personal connection to the project as a former non-drinker and the child of an alcoholic. Learning of these projects planted a desire within me to lean further into exploring this method. This desire developed a few years earlier, when I was required to take my first rhetoric course. A simple piece of feedback from the professor that I should “use more I language” blew my mind. I had spent the past five years developing a writing style devoid of attachment. The suggestion that I was allowed to speak directly through my academic writing filled me with the special combination of excitement and terror that lets you know there is something you need to do. After a few months in our program, I finally felt the time was right to answer that call.

In my second term as a doctoral student here, I decided to take a class on performance and disability. Applying to graduate school had caused anxiety symptoms I had been repressing to explode to the surface, and I thought this class would be a great way to explore that and my desire to engage with narrative work. In that class, you gave a guest lecture on performance studies. That was my first real interaction with you despite being in the program for half a year. In your lecture, you spoke very passionately about the scholars who influenced you, like Dwight Conquergood, Fred Corey, and D. Soyini Madison. You spoke of performance as the recognition of different ways of knowing not recognized by mainstream scholarship. You also highlighted the moral component involved in performing as an individual in the world. This lecture is why I asked to meet with you about my project, despite the fact we barely knew each other. You had a reading list ready for me, consisting of academic narratives from Barbara Jago (2002) and yourself. That meeting changed my life and gave me the confidence to write my first autoethnography. When I was finished, I remember thinking as if it was either the best or worst thing I had ever written. This was how I knew I was alive in my writing.

I remind you of all this because my relationship with autoethnography is a strange one. I made a leap from focusing on interviewing and fieldwork of others to a performance approach to writing about my own life. It seems I may have jumped over autoethnography in the process. In researching for my comprehensive exams, I found a few scholars who clarify my position on autoethnography. I find Adams’s (2012) definition of autoethnography as the use of personal experience to critique cultural patterns to be the most useful way to explain to those who are unfamiliar. Further, I find power in Holman Jones’s (2005) assertion that autoethnography attempts to speak what is considered unspeakable and move individuals toward action. Langellier (1989) helps me to see that narratives are inherently political and they break down boundaries between author, text, and context. Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) suggest this breaking of boundaries and emphasis on political action is placed against colonial forms of knowledge, which they tend to identify as positivist methodology from
the perspective of social science. While autoethnography is an alternative way to explore phenomena, it is not inherently resistive or critical.

This is an important distinction for me to consider moving forward in my own work. Corey (1998) speaks of the power of writing our personal lives against the master narrative. What does it mean to write our stories if they are easily incorporated into the master narrative? Take my own life as an example. I come from a working-class family in rural Indiana. I am a first-generation college student working toward a doctorate. My story can easily be used to support capitalist, bootstrap success narratives which perpetuate myths of meritocracy. Scholars from privileged positions such as my own always risk perpetuating violence by centering ourselves, and I am prepared to fight this potential for my whole career. This is one of the things you bring to me, a demand to be reflexive about how I benefit from and relate to cultural power. Thus, critical reflexivity seems key to making critical autoethnography.

As performance is how I come to autoethnography, it is not surprising that I suggest performance is our bridge to critical autoethnography. Conquergood (2013) suggests performance is about breaking down boundaries between researcher and researched, theory and praxis, author and text. Conquergood (2013) suggests performance is a caravan, capable of moving and shifting, more than a paradigm. In this way, performance fulfills the promise of dialectical theory to bridge critical and interpretive paradigms by attempting to leave situated approaches to research behind. As Corey (1998, 2006) suggests, and I have heard you say several times, performance is primarily about possibility. However, possibility is our responsibility to realize. Performance provides us with the possibility to use our stories in critical ways. Madison (1999) demonstrates how to do this when she performs her disappointment with theorists who inspire her through writing. Muñoz (1999) also demonstrates this through how he writes on his experience with queer artists of color both as a friend and an audience member. These are just a few examples of possibility.

As I begin to perform this possibility in academic life, I fear the criticism I often hear at conferences, and in stories of manuscript rejections that possibility needs more theory in order to be realized. As you note, I am compelled to act by various forms of feminist theory in order to strive for this realization. I must be careful now to blend my existences as a heterosexual, white man, and a student when I ask for your help. I know it is never the job of women, people of color, queer folks, or any other marginalized groups to educate those in power. Further, I feel you and other teachers have provided me with a good foundation with which to engage feminism. As I prepare for my comprehensive exams, particularly my theory-focused question, I was wondering which feminist theorists you believe have the greatest potential to help autoethnography reach its critical potential. Perhaps, a better question to ask is which feminist theorists already use narrative in their own work. I look forward to your response.

Caleb

Dear Caleb,

Thank you for your response. I am definitely thinking through everything with you. I’m happy to discuss the role of women of color feminisms and queer of color theories in my understanding or approach to autoethnography. It’s something I have been thinking about since I started graduate school. For me a lot of this came together when I was introduced to Chicana feminisms. Reading Cherríe Moraga (1983) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) write so vulnerably about their lives in critical ways that connected what they were experiencing to larger structures of power spoke to me in a very personal and political way. I began to understand how you might be able to use voice, especially as a member of historically marginalized groups to challenge or resist. It was also in reading the work of Black feminist scholars, like Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and bell hooks (1989), that I started to understand the importance of theorizing through everyday experience as a means of survival and resistance, as well as talking back. This further connected to what Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) were talking about when they wrote about the theory in the flesh. Barbara Christian (1998) elaborates, “For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic” (p. 68).

This scholarship by women of color informed Conquergood’s (2002, 2013) theorization of performance studies and the need to elevate the performance paradigm alongside the textual paradigm. Conquergood (2013) acknowledges how historically marginalized groups have been denied access to produce textual forms of knowledge and instead often have theorized in performative or embodied ways. For many of these groups, textuality can connect to surveillance and oppression. I’ve tried to put Conquergood’s (2013) work in conversation with critical rhetoric, specifically vernacular discourse as theorized by Kent Ono and John Sloop (1995), as a way to challenge the textual bias of rhetoric (Calafell, 2010). I see autoethnography as being a component of a critical rhetorical project connected to vernacular discourse, which is all
about looking at the different forms of rhetoric that historically marginalized groups create at the level of the everyday (Calafell, 2010). It’s time for rhetorical scholars to acknowledge how their identities and subjectivities inform the way they choose and critique texts (Calafell, 2010). Thus, autoethnography could work within a critical rhetorical perspective, especially for those of us from historically marginalized groups who challenge the status quo of rhetoric (Calafell, 2010). Performing critical reflexivity in rhetoric would lay bare the pretense of objectivity that still clouds the field. But, I digress . . .

Several years ago I traveled to Austin, Texas, in particular the Benson Latin American Collection at UT Austin, which houses the Gloria Anzaldúa papers. In her unpublished papers she wrote about autohisteoria or auto-teoria. These concepts would eventually make their way into publication (Anzaldúa, 2000, 2015). Anzaldúa (2000) defined autohisteorias as referring to the “‘auto’ for self-writing and ‘historia’ for history—as in collective, personal, cultural, and racial history—as well as for fiction, a story you make up. History is fiction because it’s made up, usually by the people who rule” (p. 242). I started thinking about how Anzaldúa’s (1987, 2000, 2015) and other feminists of colors’ work predates what we see as this auto-ethnographic turn in Communication Studies. It echoes a critical approach to autoethnography that is based in a decolonial and anti-imperialist ethic similar to what David Hayano (1979) envisioned in his discussion of what he termed auto-ethnography. Mary Louise Pratt (1991) later discussed autoethnographic texts as texts “in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (p. 35). Pratt (1991) elaborates,

Thus, for these scholars autoethnography was not simply an interpretative method, but a critical one.

Shane Moreman and I have critiqued what we see as uncritical uses of autoethnography, which simply serve to center whiteness, while leveraging critiques of my research against scholars of color (Calafell & Moreman, 2009). In some ways, Craig Gingrich-Philbrook’s (2005) critique of autoethnography echoes and extends some of our concerns. Arguing from a performance perspective, he suggests that because common forms of autoethnography embraced in Communication Studies are beholden to the social sciences and inferentially seek approval from them, they lack critical and poetic underpinnings. In my own work (Calafell, 2013), I have argued that autoethnography is a critical method that must be driven by what Richard G. Jones Jr. (2010) terms intersectional reflexivity. This means that you can’t just write about your performance of masculinity. Rather, can you critically reflect on how your performance of masculinity is informed by its intersections with race, class, sexuality, and ability within a larger system of power (Calafell, 2013). If autoethnography has its roots in resistance, then it has to be critical and connected to intersectionality, which makes it inherently feminist and based in women of color feminisms.

Bryant Keith Alexander (2014) suggests that doing critical autoethnography is something like capturing a picture of yourself in a glass borderless frame; a picture in which an image of you is represented and there are sightless borders of containment; containments called race, sex, gender, culture, and occasions of human experience fixed in time and space, floating in a fixed liquidity of memory, giving shape to experience, structuring vision and engagement with the intent for others to see and know you differently as you story the meaningfulness of personal experience in a cultural context.

(p. 110)

Alexander (2014) explores what he terms the bleeding borders of identity that place people “betwixt and between” (p. 113). In some ways, Alexander’s (2014) understanding of critical autoethnography mirrors Gust Yep’s (2010) theorization of thick intersectionalities, which consider the embodied complexities of people’s intersectional identities within contexts of histories, time, space, and the “interplay between individual subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces” (p. 17).

On a side note, you may want to check out the edited book that Alexander’s (2014) essay is in. It is
called *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* and it is edited by Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe (2014).

Recently, Bhattacharya and Keating (2018) have taken up Anzaldúa’s work examining how it blurs the private and the public. They write that her work could be viewed as autoethnography or critical ethnography; however, the unique genre of *autohistoria-teoría* stands on its own (Bhattacharya & Keating, 2018). They see it as “more than writing self into existence, a move made by many minoritized scholars, autohistoria-teoría represents a hybridized space of creativity and bridge building, in which we use our life stories to develop deep critical, spiritual, and analytical insights, to boldly theorize experiences and insights against the broader landscape of specific sociocultural discourses” (Bhattacharya & Keating, 2018, p. 345).

I know this has been a lot, but I’m hoping my train of thought, connections, and feminist ways of approaching critical autoethnography makes sense. Have I missed anything?

Bernadette

Dear Bernadette,

This is indeed a lot to think about. Forgive my attempt to digest it in order to direct myself toward my future projects. In reading (and re-reading) your stream of consciousness about these connections, I am compelled to organize them into three specific calls to address in this final response and my entire career moving forward. These three calls are that of responsibility in reflexivity, developing and maintaining a flow of resistance, and manifesting these ideas in the physical world. All of these are equally important, and I regret that the linear nature of the English language and training in academic writing conventions compel me to address them as follows.

I hear in our discussions of the various types of reflexivity a responsibility to keep our expressions and examinations of our lives focused on critical engagement with how all of our experiences are tied to the intersectional web of power and domination. I see your expression of critical reflexivity in rhetoric and autoethnography not only as a suggestion for enriching scholarship and fighting assumed objectivity but as a duty as ethical participants in the world. For me, this started on an affective level with frustration in rhetorical and social science methods classes. I recall a number of us feeling fatigued after spending the first month of the semester transported to ancient Greece, each of us waiting to get to “the good stuff.” An investment in ancient Greece as the guide toward understanding rhetoric has me thinking about Edward Said’s (1979) recollection of Orientalism as a project of European scholars writing an idea of any non-European cultures in the Eastern world as a homogenous and othered Orient. Said (1979) and Hayano (1979) both reveal how ethnographers create objectivity for the Euro-obsessed academy. Academia is filled with white people writing about cultural Others and citing other white people in order to “understand” these Others. I often wonder how different the field would be if every citation were followed by a careful consideration of why that name must be invoked.

That said, I feel this responsibility most immediately when I read the words “your masculinity.” Whether intended or not, I take the use of the second-person seriously here. I recall all of the times I have felt compelled to write about cultural issues with a level of detachment. Even a few sentences ago, I wrote about white people in a way which suggests that group does not include me. Too often, scholars such as myself attempt to engage with intersectional writing by finding a way to see ourselves in it. I have heard many white, male classmates express an inability to see how discussions of race, gender, and sexuality relate to their own work. Coming from a working-class family and suffering from anxiety, I feel compelled to find a way to relate all justice to economic and disability justice. As you have suggested, this is irresponsible on the ethical grounds we have established. In doing so, I am perpetuating a dismissal of intersectionality as a statement of merely personal identity, when intersectionality is concerned about the relationship between power and identity (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCa11, 2014). In examining the connection between identity and power, I can see how failing to see beyond myself is about how to re-center my own experience. In examining identity on this level, intersectionality becomes a field of study capable of “undoing” theory by conducting academic work with attention to empiricism, indigenous knowledges, and equality in participation between (or a radical blending of) researcher and subject (Namaste, 2009). In the words “your masculinity,” I read the challenge of responsibility to think within and outside myself. To recognize my experiences as a first-generation college student is necessarily related to how my performances of whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality make me an ideal candidate to “prove” meritocracy. In these words, I feel the responsibility to resist this narrative and continuously connect my work to the radical women of color who have shown us how to write our experiences into existence and against power.

Thus, as you suggest, resistance is key to autoethnography and a key part of why it must be critical.
Autoethnography has demonstrated the potential to resist and force the academy to recognize voices. As you also note, the failure to remain critical in this push has the opposite potential to maintain the status quo out of a desire for respect from systems designed to dole out said respect as a scarce resource. This often manifests itself as the exact kind of sanitization of our work Hayano hoped autoethnography could avoid (Hayano, 1979). Talk of resistance leads me to thinking about movement and direction. Here, I recall Sara Ahmed’s discussion of being directed by forces of white supremacist heteropatriarchy (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed (2017) writes about being directed by power as being caught in the flow of a crowd. Crowds move in directions which force all caught in their wake to move with them. Anyone attempting to move in the opposite direction is seen as a problem and an obstacle in the face of the crowd. This discussion of direction and flow recalls the Barbara Christian (1998) work you cited earlier. In that article, Christian (1998) describes the increasing pace in which scholars are expected to “produce” theory and how this speed pressures scholars to critique fields and ideas before they can gain traction and develop. This disproportionately happens to theory arising from the lives and perspectives of marginalized people, in the name of moving forward. Reading resistance through the perspective of movement allows me to think about critical autoethnography as the tool to move against not only the power pushing us to live our lives in a specific direction but also the direction of time itself. Critical autoethnography asks us to constantly recall our lives and live in our memories, as well as theorize from our present. Thus, critical autoethnography allows us to move against the forward direction of time and progress. We are not writing about the past, but questioning the idea of the past itself. By questioning notions of the past, we engage Corey’s possibility and Muñoz’s utopia, suggesting the future of our work is already here. Systems of power, and here I include my academic training in those systems, work to deny the existence of that which is possible. These conversations allow me to recall, rethink, and rebuild my mind toward seeing the possible future in the now.

Discussion of being directed leads me to the final call of manifesting this responsibility and resistance in the real world. If critical autoethnography is the practice of writing our lives through critical reflexivity, then it follows that we have an obligation to manifest this reflexivity in our own lives. For me, this means not only writing about how my performances of masculinities, whiteness, physical ability, and heterosexuality are challenged and informed by intersectional and critical reflexivity but also finding ways to live these reflexivities. This means taking the time to think about how I behave as a classmate, examining whether my voice needs to be heard and questioning my tendencies to speak over others. It also means thinking about how positionality influences the ways I treat my mentors, including respect and appreciation for your time in exchanging these messages. Perhaps most importantly, it drives me to think about my own classroom and potential advisees. Intersectional and critical reflexivity calls me to construct reading lists which reflect living a feminist life. Living this life and recognizing a critical project is inherently a feminist project that involves treating people with respect, not simply writing about that respect. This call of manifesting resistance and responsibility in our lives recalls Hayano’s assertion that autoethnography is almost impossible to parse as singularly a method, technique, or theory. Here, I want to suggest you have shown me that critical autoethnography is a lifestyle. It is a commitment to think of our lives as shaped by and steeped in power, and a call to resist that power as an obligation to live ethical lives.

To end my response, I wish to return to your final question: “Have I missed anything?” At first, this seemed like a difficult question to answer, especially considering the balance of power in our roles as student and teacher. After considering these calls and our definitions of critical autoethnography, it seems the answer to this question is, and always will be, a definitive “yes.” By the nature of situating our work from our perspectives, we are always missing something. The feeling as if we have fully covered something strikes me as an objectivist and Eurocentric impulse. We are always leaving something out by the nature of living and writing in the world. I do not come to this answer out of defeat or panic, but instead believe it speaks to critical possibility. Missing something means the search necessarily continues. Just as our own stories are never finished, neither are the connections we seek to make to the lives of others. We are all working on a reference list that is perpetually incomplete. It seems to me, from your words and our continuing conversation, the ethical responsibility we all have is to live in constant recognition there are always more voices to hear, and a critical search for these perspectives must be intersectional. Just like this our search, this conversation will surely continue. As always, thank you for your time. I look forward to our next meeting.

Sincerely,

Caleb
Dear Caleb,

I wanted to send you a quick note, because I ran across something that could be useful for you going forward and it connects to my own queer and performative commitments. Satoshi Toyosaki and Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway (2013) argue that we consider the connection between autoethnography and social justice. They write, “Autoethnography serves as a critical mechanism for working with micro-social justice in the spirit of social injustice and towards productively ambiguous social justice in the spirit of with others” (p. 562). Autoethnography allows us to not “simply accept the present as it is; rather, we continuously and critically gesture towards how the present might be differently understood in its temporality, in its coming from the past, and in its look toward the future” (p. 563). Scholars, such as Toyosaki and Pensoneau-Conway (2013) and Alexander (2013), connect this approach to autoethnography to the performance of possibilities as described by my dissertation advisor, D. Soyini Madison (1998), as well as work by Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009). I find symmetry here but also to hope and perhaps that is where we end; on the possibilities of critical hope and social justice. In a sense we’ve come full circle.

Bernadette
Post-script: June 2019

I had hope once; a dream that was realized in a graduate program that centered the experiences, theories, and methods of Others.

Sadly, the dream is dead with the death of the graduate program, though its legacy continues in students like you.

As a result, I must move on. However, I know you carry the work and the lineage in your body.

You are hope to me as you embody the possibilities that continue despite the loss of a physical home for our ideas. Besides, our ideas were never meant to be sealed off in the walls of the ivory tower.

Theories in the flesh aren’t bound by books, walls, or borders. And so, we must continue . . .

. . . I must think of work as in progress, rather than yet to begin. These walls, books, and borders have led me to feel as if my academic life is over before it has even started.

As you say, hope lies in embodiment. We read books not because the written word makes them powerful, but because they are the way we learn about the actions and bodies of Others.

Justice is not measured in vitae lines and job titles, if it is even measured at all. Therefore, I must also move on, believing my muscles and bones know what form that may take, regardless of the expectations placed upon me. And so, we must continue . . .

REFERENCES


