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Godfried A. Asante

University of New Mexico - Main Campus, [asantg@unm.edu](mailto:asantg@unm.edu)

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# **(De)Stabilizing the Normative: Using Critical Autoethnography as Intersectional Praxis to (Re) Conceptualize Identity Performances of Black Queer Immigrants**

Godfried Asante

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*This review explores how critical autoethnography as a qualitative research tool can be used to capture some of the social and material realities embedded in the processes of embodiment and performance and its implication for queer of color critique. Using African immigrant queer identity performances as an example, I elaborate how autoethnography can be used to highlight multiple, complex and sometimes contradictory identity negotiation strategies used by African queer migrants to navigate simultaneous systems of privilege and oppression. I show that identities of African queer migrants are ongoing processes riddled with constant negotiation and re-negotiation with systems with power which autoethnography can be used to illuminate.*

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Queer theory is used as an umbrella term to problematize assumptions about the homo/heterosexual binaries that stabilize and naturalize heterosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990; Yep, Lovaas & Elia, 2003). Although queer theory has tremendous influence in mainstream queer research, less prominence has been placed on the intersectional modes of sexuality, race, sex/gender and body across multiple socio-political, economics and historical positionings (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005). Current criticisms of queer theory continue to bring forth its inability to capture fully the material realities of non-white American middle class GLBTQ people, heterosexual identified trans people, and queer migrants (Chávez, 2013; Eguchi, Calafell, & Thompson, 2014; Johnson, 2001; LeMaster & Mapes, 2014).

As an intervention, Johnson (2001) introduced “quare studies,” which focuses on the discursive and material effects of sexuality with particular attention to race, class, gender, sexuality, and the body (Yep, 2013). Additionally, Lee (2003) launched “kauer theory,” which seeks to unpack how race, sexuality, gender, and nationality operate simultaneously at both local and transnational levels, within particular geopolitical and historical contexts to create inequality. Further interventions in queer theory have produced areas of theoretical inquiry such as crip theory (McRuer, 2006), in addition to transing and trans\*ing (LeMaster & Mapes 2014). An intersection of queer studies and diasporic studies that needs further theorizing is how Black queer migrants, especially those from Africa who “come out” in the United States, re-orient their bodies as Black and queer. For instance, how Black queer immigrants come to terms with the geo-politics, historical contexts, and spaces that frame their Black queer being and becoming in the United States. In this review, I elucidate how autoethnography as a qualitative research tool can be used

to capture some of the material realities embedded in the processes of embodiment and performance for African queer migrants and its implication for queer of color critique. Drawing from queer studies, I define queer as the discursive and material effects of sexuality on migration with particular attention to embodied racial and gendered identity performances (Johnson, 2001).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Intersectionality as an analytical tool can shed light on how gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation and other axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels contributing to systemic injustice and inequality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Johnson, 2001; Yep, 2010). Steeped in feminist studies, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) referred to the various intersections of social inequality as the matrix of domination; this is also known as the vectors of oppression and privilege. Expanding Collins' matrix of domination, Howard (2014) introduced the queer identity matrix as a form of analysis to uncover the structural, cultural, ideological, and historical underpinnings that shape and re-shape individuals' worldview, gender presentation, and sexual identity. Furthermore, Yep (2013) has argued for "thick intersectionality." He explains, "Thick intersectionality explores the complex particulars of individuals' lives and identities associated with their race, class, sexuality, and national locations by understanding their history and personhood in concrete time and space" (p.173). In light of these developments on intersectionality as a form of rigorous theoretical analysis for women and queers of color, this review situates Black queer migrant identities as intersectional and fluid. Accordingly, autoethnography can unveil the lived experiences of African queer migrants and how they navigate and negotiate their multiple interlocking embodied identities as Black, queer, and migrant, within the geo-political places and spaces they occupy.

## **Methodology**

Madison (2005) asserts that the body is a site of knowing and experiencing, where performance of the "everydayness" can be located. Lived experience, interpreted through the structural systems of power and hierarchy, is able to capture multiple interlocking processes and performances that frame the experiences of Black queer migrants in the United States. According to Boylorn and Orbe (2013), critical autoethnography is about connecting the interpersonal experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and ability to larger systems of power, social privileges, and oppression. Examples are the immigration system, police, heteronormativity, and negative stereotypes of Blacks in the United States. The process of "connecting" and "linking" the personal to the structural unveils oppressive systems and forces, which frame the lived experiences of queer people of color. Ellis and Bochner (2006) believe that "autoethnography does something in our life world with its unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative ways" (p. 433). In this vein, I argue that autoethnography is an effective tool of inquiry to understand the lived experiences of queer migrants from Africa. In the following, I present specific

personal narratives to illuminate my embodied lived experiences as an African queer migrant in the United States.

## **Autoethnographic Recollections**

Countries such as Nigeria, Mali, Gambia, and Uganda have enacted anti-gay laws, which criminalize same sex relationships and desires. Even advocating for queer politics could lead to social stigmatization, police harassment, and sometimes imprisonment (Boyd, 2013). Some countries in Africa such as Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, and Niger still retain colonial laws instituted by the British and French, which criminalize “unnatural” sexual acts. Although African history is replete with examples of both erotic and nonerotic same-sex relationships (e.g., Epprecht, 2008; Murray & Roscoe 1997), the discourse around “homosexuality” continues to be politicized as not “African” by some African leaders. For example, during a primetime interview with BBC’s “Hard Talk,” Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni was quoted as saying that “homosexuals in small numbers have always existed in our part of Black Africa.” However, Museveni reversed his assertion under internal and external pressures from U. S. American evangelicals and Christian conservatives, declaring that homosexuality is “Western imposed through colonialism” (Epprecht, 2013)

Given the socio-political climate for queer people in some African countries, migration to the United States or European countries is an opportunity to be free from physical harm or social stigmatization (Asante & Roberts, 2014). In addition, migration creates spaces for the enactment of specific identities (Manalansan, 2006). However, the social hierarchy and structure associated with race, class, gender, and sexuality in the United States disrupts the seemingly smooth transition to the U. S. as the land of “freedom” and opportunities (Asante & Roberts, 2014). Below, I provide four narratives to elaborate how autoethnography can be used to illuminate some of the nuances associated with embodiment and performance.

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On my way to work, a police officer stopped me. In that moment, my heart sank into my stomach. What would he do? Should I retaliate if he says anything racist? I began to think of my immigration status. Is my paperwork in place? At least I have a photocopy of my passport in the car. In that moment, I “felt” my body. I never had to think of my Black body in Ghana, but my blackness filled the car. He leaned over with his left hand on his gun and asked angrily, did you just put on your seat belt? I said, “No. I already had it on.” He said, “The reason why I stopped you is that you did not have your seatbelt on.” With my voice shaking, I told him “I have it on.” He asked me to get out of the car so he can search my car. I wanted to ask why, but I hesitated. Surprisingly, he placed me in his car handcuffed, and began to search my car. While in the back of his car, I was angry, scared, and confused. How can I be treated like a criminal in the land of “freedom?” After searching my car and not finding any contraband, like drugs, he released me and wrote me a warning for “obstruction in use of seatbelt.”

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At a conference in New Orleans, I went to a store with my friend Justin, who is White, to get snacks before our next presentation. After choosing a bag of Doritos, I walked over to the clerk with Justin in front of me. Justin paid for his items without being asked for his ID. After the clerk told me how much it all cost, I handed him my credit card. He looked at it briefly and asked for an ID. I told him, "My picture is on the credit card." He laughed and said, "I know, but we ask everyone for his or her ID."

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At a gay bar in Minneapolis, an older White man who seemed interested in me since I looked new to the bar approached me. He bought me a drink and asked where I was from. I told him I was graduate student from Ghana. "Wow, a smart Black man" he said. He continued, "I live in New York and hardly encounter smart Black people." I told him that was a very insensitive comment. Looking surprised, he said "You are African and not African American, so why should you be upset"? Later that night, he apologized and asked me if I wanted to spend the night at his place.

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As I began to make sense of the historical meanings and materiality of my embodied Black identity in the United States, I also began to understand how my Black male identity intersected with my Queer identity. Moving from Ghana, I thought I could finally be "out of the closet" and date whomever I wanted, yet the materiality of my racial identity intersecting with my sexuality had placed me in a category where I was perceived as a criminal, a threat, and sexually desirable, but not as a long term partner. On the one hand, I had to negotiate my embodied racial identity as Black in the United States. On the other hand, I was struggling with my intersectional identity as queer both in the United States and in my home country. Therefore, I began to use multiple identity negotiation strategies to maneuver my racial and sexual identities to resist the positionalities of my "Otherness" as a monolithic category (Shome, 2010).

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On a night out with my female friend, a couple next to us asked what we were having. I said, "Bread pudding." My friend continued, "We drove all the way for this." The woman next to us said, "So sweet of him!" with a smile in her voice. I am predictably identified and positioned as a heterosexual African American male in many social spaces, such as bars, classrooms, and specific events. Conversely, I sometimes act "effeminate" to bring attention to my sexual identity as not heterosexual. My deliberate effeminate performances work on and against the monolithic representation of my Black masculinity as always heterosexual and hypersexual. Nonetheless, in social spaces with Africans or when I go back to Ghana, I would engage in hyper-masculine performances to deflect my queerness.

### **Autoethnography as Destabilizing the Normative**

In sum, it is necessary for queer scholars to re-think Black queer migrant identity performances, which can sometimes reflect conformity with some hegemonic practices yet capable of altering and challenging normative race and gender scripts. For instance, due to the socio-political climate around homosexuality in Ghana, I had

adapted specific masculine identity performances in order to survive or resist social stigma. In the United States, these performances were sometimes categorized both within the queer community and my heterosexual friends as “down low,” “not coming out,” and “bisexual.” My Black, Ghanaian masculine identity performances were rather represented as “straight acting.” While to me, it was a form of disidentification from multiple systems of oppressions whereby I had to use the code of the majority as a form of empowerment and resistance (Muñoz, 1999).

Autoethnography as methodology for qualitative enquiry is a relevant tool, which can excavate the nuances and complexities within embodiment and performance. As noted by Elia (2003), “scholarly work on Queer relationships has been under theorized and conspicuously absent from the academic landscape” (p. 3). Moreover, due to the socio-political climate around queerness in continental Africa, research about African queer world-making is uncommon in even queer of color scholarship. Thus, autoethnography serves as a way to fill a gap of knowledge largely under-represented in academic conversations (Eguchi, 2014). From this personal and intellectual space, autoethnography destabilizes the normative conceptualization of knowledge building in qualitative studies; it disrupts master, universal narratives. Doing autoethnography recognizes that different kinds of people share different worldviews and assumptions about the world (Alexander, 2002; Eguchi, 2015, 2011; Ellis and Bochner, 2006).

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