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Department of Communication

4-1-2017

Speaking as (Significant) Othered

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Speaking as (Significant) Othered

Amy Arellano and Christina L. Ivey

Amy and Christina sat together in their living room. Amy held her phone, scrolling through notes she had typed a few minutes before their meeting. Christina's laptop lay open in front of her.

"How do we start this?" Amy asks. "Do we need an abstract?"

Christina smirks, "I don't know if we need it right now. Even if we do, I never start by writing the abstract."

"Then how do we start?" Amy asks again, anxiously.

"I think we can begin with what we bring to the table for this conversation about queer autoethnography: We are a queer couple in academia who often write duo/autoethnographies. It's our chance to conceptualize how we view queer duo/autoethnography."

"Do you think our relationship is what makes our duo/autoethnography queer? Or is it us creating a co-constructed narrative that's hard to identify where you end and I begin?"

"I can see that. Before we fully dive into how we conceive queer duo/autoethnography, how do you see queer autoethnography functioning?"

"At the intersection of autoethnography and queer theory, 'just stories' are transformed and transformative as insurrectionary acts that offer revolt through juxtaposition.¹ Queering autoethnography interrogates the idea that narratives not only become stories upon the body, but also storied upon various theoretical

frameworks that suggest possible lenses for decoding the author/s' experiences. Readers are simultaneously offered insight into the residuals of the positionality of the scholar. It becomes an issue of 'what is being read?' in conjunction with 'what is supposed to be read?'"

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"Does this make sense?" Amy looks up from her phone, a concerned look on her face.²

"Yeah, that definition works well. Who said that?"

"Oh, that's mine, I just wrote it."

"Oh, baby," Christina says reassuringly. "That is beautiful. We need to make sure to add a meta moment here so that the reader knows that is you."

Amy begins to tear up, the vulnerability of sharing her scholarly writing mounting. "I was just working with what had been suggested in other readings," she says as she shifts uncomfortably. Christina knows her compliment motivates Amy's sudden uneasiness, something Amy has never handled well. Joking, Amy adds, "The fact that you understood my writing is further proof that autoethnography is the way I was meant to write and contribute as a scholar."

))) Framework

Queer autoethnography stylistically pushes the bright line between critical/cultural scholarship and poetics, often assuming the shape and identity of both/and—stories are present but disguised within the present(ed) work.³ Our work plays with the queer temporality of time as we offer our thoughts on these pages—present within your current reading and discussion.

In particular, we engage in queer duo/autoethnography, not as a mere "research tool," but rather as "a way of living in a contingent and uncertain curriculum of self-accountability and reflexivity."⁴ For us, queer duo/autoethnography functions as a means of capturing and reflecting on how we story each other and our relationship. Through our methodological play and accounting for our storied selves, we challenge the elasticity of duo/autoethnography in queering work that somewhat systematically "acts as *if*, rather than *is*" whereas the work "advocates for troubl[ing]" systemic assumptions regarding both methodology and identity.⁵ In other words, queer duo/autoethnography empowers the idea of revisionism: By working together, we must agree on *which* stories to tell and *how* to tell them.

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"I think Alcott also works well here," Amy suggests.

"Yes, I remember you mentioning that. I'll pull up Alcott's *Speaking for Others* and look over it quickly as a refresher."⁶

"I think instead of speaking *for* others, I think we're speaking *as* othered. . . ."

"Wait," Christina interrupts. She struggled at times to keep up with Amy's racing thoughts. "Right now, you're starting with point 'D,' when we need to start with point 'A.' You could probably not only tell me how Alcott fits here, but also give me the page numbers of the citations we should use. I have to look over it first."

"Okay, could you read it aloud?" Amy asks.

Growing irritated, Christina imagines replying "no." Instead, she settles on, "I can, but don't get frustrated if I have to slow down in parts. I don't catch everything when I hear it aloud, especially if I'm the one reading it." She tries to collect herself. "You know, maybe we should be writing this part down. I think it'll clarify that we are trying to be as transparent as possible in our duo/autoethnographic process and our attempt at bridging our learning styles."

Excited, Amy sits up, "I think this is a great opportunity to queer the academic writing process through a demonstration of an alternative learning perspective."

They spent an hour struggling to remember what they'd just said, carefully trying to balance academic writing expectations with what they *really* sound like. Finally finished with their task, Amy asks, "Now where do we need to go?"

"Do we want to start with a brief section on the background, the diagnosis? Then, move to my paper, and the. . . ." Christina stops to search for the right word. "I don't want to say restriction, but your *hesitations*. . . ."

"It was just my request for you not to send it to the department after it was published," Amy says. She becomes frustrated, too: she thought she was being clear, "I mean, you still could have."

"Let's clarify what you mean."

))) Diagnosis⁷

In August 2013, it was recommended before beginning the second year of doctoral work that Amy be tested for learning disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) due to the struggles she was having with her writing. Professors described her writing as "sophomoric," and claimed she "sounded much more intelligent when she talked." After two weeks of various assessments, we were called into the testing center for results, where we learned Amy had ADHD, dyslexia, and three otherwise "nonspecified learning disorders."

As scholars and queer partners, we found ourselves in a rather complicated position because the academy is often seen as a place to safeguard and highlight the “rational” mind. The ADHD literature mutes representations of the adult experience; it is almost nonexistent when addressing partner communication between an ADHD partner and non-ADHD partner. We felt compelled to react and begin an experience-grounded conversation about the diagnosis, its relationality, and our relationship.

“I took the diagnosis hard,” Christina remarks after reading aloud the section about Amy’s diagnosis. “I think it’s because it made salient areas where I was treating you like a child as opposed to a partner. I didn’t like shopping with you, because you like to touch all the things. I felt like one of those moms who dreads going to the store because of how unpredictable their child can be. But, the worst feelings of guilt came after we would fight. Every time I recalled saying things like, ‘You’re not listening to me!’ or ‘Can you just try to stay focused for one second?’ I would wonder if I was getting angry at you or your ADHD.”

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“You know, you also try to send me to ‘time out’ when you’re mad,” Amy inserts.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, when you say, ‘Just give me a moment—you need to take some space and calm down.’ It’s like a mother sending their child into a time out. That’s why I just stare at you sometimes when you’re mad.”

Christina stares at Amy. “How dare you?” she asks, playfully. Though at this moment they are both playing with each other, they know this will be something they need to discuss further at another time.

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“To mentally process the changes in our relationship,” Christina continues, “I began to write narratives of our interactions. After asking your permission, I sent these narratives to be published in a journal. We were still in the same department completing our graduate work. Like many departments, ours liked to showcase publications by printing the first page of the paper and displaying it in a hallway case.”

“Yeah, I think I said something like, ‘I’m excited about your revise and resubmit, but do me a favor: once it does get published, will you not send it in for the cabinet? It’s hard enough doing grad school with ADHD. I don’t want a piece of paper that lets everyone know in the department.’ I don’t remember what you said after that—do you?”

“I want to say I immediately said, ‘okay, of course.’ Knowing me though, I probably asked ‘Why?’ first.”

“You writing the paper was something you needed to do. So, I was okay with that. I wasn’t okay with having people in the department possibly judge me because of a learning disorder. Essentially, the reason I gave you *permission* . . .” Amy stops and looks at Christina, who tensed at the word “permission.” She corrects, “Errr, I don’t want it to sound like we have a controlling relationship. The reason why I didn’t have a problem with you writing is because I know how important having a partner’s perspective of ADHD is within the public discourse. When you’re encouraged to show off your publications, that’s a different competitive world—and not a safe space. I have difficulty finding safety within the academic institution . . . [pause] . . . Huh.”

Christina watches Amy, nonverbally asking her to continue. She knows this epiphany is too important to miss.

“That’s something I hadn’t realized before. Safe spaces in academia are typically thought of as a place where queers can go without judgment. I don’t think there’s a space yet in academia for students who learn alternatively.”

“Is that what caused you to think of Alcoff as a place for our discussion to go?”

“No, it was your publication. You were worried you were speaking for others. And I didn’t want you to put it in the department publication case, because that was an outing of my ADHD to anyone who read it. With you writing that article, is it you speaking for others? At what point is that story *our* story? Even Alcoff acknowledges that simply changing all the ‘I’s’ to ‘we’s’ isn’t merely coalition.”⁸

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“Do you need help finding that ‘I/we’ citation?” Amy asks.

“Nope, just found it. Page 11,” Christina begins typing as Amy leans toward her.

“You’re an 11,” Amy says flirtatiously, nudging Christina with her elbow.

“Thanks,” Christina responds quickly, blushing. She momentarily feels frustrated, knowing the time they have to spend on this piece is limited. She considers adding, “Please stay focused,” but thinks it is wise to allow for a playful break from writing.

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Amy, sensing Christina’s hesitation, continues, “I think that gets back to my original question: Are we speaking as *othered* any time we write because we’re speaking as a marginalized group? We are talking about marginalized bodies here—ADHD in the academy is a marginalized body. Two queers in the academy are marginalized bodies. I think the bigger issue is Alcoff doesn’t offer a space where marginalized bodies can be empowered. So, we’re always othered. Am I speaking as othered when I write academically because that’s not how

my mind thinks or wants to write? I have to overutilize editors and reviewers to polish my voice in order to be participate. At what point is it not my voice anymore?"

"Is collaborating with me the same thing?" Christina questions.

"Is duo/autoethnography the same because it melds our voices? It only exists as the two of us together," Amy rejoins.

"I think we've been lucky so far, and we've tried to maintain 'us' as authentically as we can," Christina offers.

"But with your paper, when is it your story to tell as the *partner* giving the perspective? I've been put in a position where I had more power in this situation than you did. Like, me saying, 'Don't submit the article for our publication case,' right? And you've had more power at times: the Peter Pan analogy is appropriate," Amy responds.

"I understand. But did you tell me not to put it in the case, or did you ask?"

"Regardless of what discursive choice I did, I still feel shame for it being in the case."

"That's not what I'm asking. Did you have power in the asking?"

"Obviously. How many times did you ask me if it was okay for you to write this?"

"Several."

"And even though you asked me several times if it was okay, the only time I had an issue with it was when it came time to share it with the department."

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"Are you worried they won't get the Peter Pan reference?"

"Maybe. Want to add it to the paper?"

"Yeah, I think we should."

))) Peter Pan Analogy⁹

Amy: The problem is ADHD makes it hard to 'grow up.' And although I would love for that to make me Peter Pan, I have fallen in love with Wendy, and I know how that story turns out. It's frustrating how we get in fights I wish we could avoid because I haven't matured past, "Pay attention." Is it me or the diagnosis? If I say it's just the ADHD, is that me acting like a child and giving an excuse?

Christina: To her so-called "Peter Pan" narrative, I feel like no Wendy. Instead, I am Wendy's father—the overbearing, at times hot-headed disciplinarian who enforces normative maturing and strict rules. Instead of being supportive, I am

patronizing her, treating her like a small child when she is a brilliant woman who deserves more respect.

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Amy quickly wipes her eyes. Christina allows the tears to stream down her face, welcoming the physical embodiment of her emotions. Reading those selections aloud causes both of them to remember the intense feelings that engulfed them as they wrote the Peter Pan section. They stare at each other, taking mental notes of how the other is handling their emotions.

“Do you think this sounds okay? Do you think they’ll like it?”

“Yea. We usually do well on our duo/autoethnographies at the Doing Autoethnography conference.”¹⁰

“Right, but that’s a performance. This is a written paper.”

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“Within the academy, is speaking as othered a way to account for invisible identities or *identity erasure*?”

“What specifically do you mean by ‘identity erasure’?” Christina asks. Part of the fun of working with Amy was the way she worked with words and concepts. Although Christina could not always follow her terminology, she knew Amy would always provide definitions. It offered Christina a glimpse into how Amy thought through research.

“Like, privileged perspectives that normatively represent the ivory tower.”

Christina carefully constructs her next question: “Then, is autoethnography the only place where you feel you can express your scholarly identity as other without feeling ashamed about your ADHD?”

“Yes,” Amy answers quickly. She sits still for a moment before adding, “In my entire academic career, autoethnography is the only place where I have found that I have a voice.”

Another pregnant pause. Neither of them knew exactly what to do with that statement. Wanting to push forward, Christina redirects the discussion. “I keep coming back to *our* story versus our *individual* stories. How do we negotiate this tension in writing about our relationship?”

“In duo/autoethnography, we have the ability to check against our individual perspectives with each other’s views. It creates a unique, collaborative voice representing both of us.”

“Right. But then, can we ever write about us individually?”

“That is the queer flux. It is simultaneously mine, yours, and ours. It’s the question that has plagued autoethnography since its inception, and isn’t really what this particular paper is trying to interrogate. I think, methodologically,

that duo/autoethnography is queer because it creates a separate entity. It's like a baby. It lives and breathes very differently than a coauthored paper within other methodological frameworks."

"So, instead of being just 'your' story or 'my' story, it is *our* story. It acts as a way for both of us to push how we think individually. And, if I were doing this with anyone else, not only would the process be different, but the piece itself shifts—external representatives of the bodies that have created it."

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"So, that's all I have there. I don't know if we should have a 'discussion,' or . . ."

"No, this whole thing has been a discussion. And I don't want to stop others from continuing it just because we have an official 'here's the end, folks' section. It's more of a pause. Let someone else query it more."

NOTES

1. Stacy Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams, "Autoethnography and Queer Theory: Making Possibilities," in *Qualitative Inquiry and Human Rights*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Michael Giardina (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010), 137–38.
2. Part of our process includes these reassurances as we write. Like many academics, we both suffer from imposter syndrome. In many ways, our feelings are exacerbated: Amy's because of the diagnosis and the inability to fit within a normative academic space and Christina's because of comparisons to Amy's gift for thinking outside of the traditional "academic box." We challenge each other while collaborating, but try to do so in a positive, encouraging, mostly playful way.
3. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, "Autoethnography's Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2005): 311–12.
4. Pauline Sameshima, "Book Review: *Duoethnography*," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 11, no. 1 (2013).
5. For additional reading on the negotiation of queer style and theory within autoethnography see Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones, "Autoethnography is Queer," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 373–90.
6. Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991): 5–32.
7. This section sounds more clinical intentionally. Doing so not only highlights medicalization of this disorder, but also preserves the sterility of academic writing. It was lifted from an abstract we submitted to the 2015 Doing Autoethnography Conference.

8. "Yet to simply replace the 'I' with a 'we' does not solve this problem because the 'we' is also a product of mediating forces and, in a certain sense, is also a fictional construct." Alcoff, "The Problem," 11.
9. We performed a duo/autoethnography at the 2015 Doing Autoethnography Conference entitled "And ADHD Makes 3." The following section is an excerpt from that performance.
10. Doing Autoethnography is an annual conference organized by Derek Bolen. This conference allows autoethnography scholars from around the world to present their work, network with other performers/researchers, and expand autoethnography. For more information, visit doingautoethnography.org.

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Amy Arellano (corresponding author) and **Christina L. Ivey** work in the Department of Communication at Boise State University. They wish to thank Tony Adams and Derek Bolen for this great opportunity and insightful feedback. Both authors were equal contributors to this article.