

Mothers, Faggots, and Witnessing (Un)Contestable Experience

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In this essay, I make two suggestions about personal experience represented in writing. First, I suggest that this experience can be contested when the conditions and the representation of experience are critiqued rather than the experience itself. Second, I suggest that personal experience represented in writing, for example, an autoethnography, can also be “uncontestable” (Scott, 1991, p. 777). An autoethnography is not a disembodied text. A body, a subject, a *vulnerable* body and subject, is intertwined with and constituted by this text. As such, it becomes difficult to disentangle an autoethnographic representation from its corresponding, constituted-via-this-representation body and subject, thus making a critique of the text a critique of the life.

Keywords: *autoethnography; experience; writing; misogyny; sexuality*

“I fucked your mom, faggot!” someone screams at me from a passing car. It’s 10 p.m., and I’m walking on a residential street in Tampa, Florida.

I check my location: Morrison Avenue.

I take note of my surroundings: Any place to run?

I grab my cell phone to call the cops, but then wonder if I should or if it would be too late. What happens if the car stops and people jump out and approach me? In those few seconds could I dial 911, hit send, and then tell a dispatcher why I’m calling and identify my precise location?

I re-view my “OGTs,” that is, my “Obviously Gay Traits,” stereotypical ideas about how gay men act. I’m casually dressed and have a fairly masculine gait. I haven’t shaven in a few days nor am I walking with another man or in a designated gay space. I make sure to work against gay stereotypes so that I might appear straight. I fear harm.

But then there is my sexuality: I identify as a “faggot” and, ironically, happen to be walking to a gay bar. I don’t think the man could have known either of these

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things, but I decide I could lie for my safety. “I’m walking to the store,” I’d say, followed by “Faggots are disgusting. I’m no faggot.”

Butler (1996) argues that performative discourse—discourse that produces what it names in the act of naming—is the “vehicle through which ontological effects are established” (p. 112). In other words, material becomes material, that is, acquires ontological status, by way of performative discourse (Butler, 1993, p. 32). This constitutive, “materializing” discourse, however, is often concealed thus making material *as* material seem natural and authorless (Butler, 1999; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Garfinkel, 1967; Husserl, 1970).

Scott (1991) applies a performative, materializing logic to the concept of “experience.” She encourages us to attend to how experience-izing happens—that is, to the ways experience *becomes* experience—rather than treat experience as an isolated happening or depoliticized event. Experience is constituted *as* experience by way of naming *and* reflecting—two intentional and necessary performative acts (Carr, 1986; Crites, 1986; Husserl, 1973). By discerning conditions of experience—materializing processes through which an experience comes to seem natural and authorless—arguments previously grounded on experience now need qualified; experience can no longer maintain *a priori* natural and authorless status.

In this essay, I make two suggestions about personal experience represented in writing. First, I suggest that this experience can be contested when the conditions for and representation of experience, that is, the text, are critiqued rather than the experience itself. I show how such a critique may look by conceiving of the “I fucked your mom, faggot!” experience in four different ways. Second, I suggest that personal experience represented in writing, for example, an autoethnography, can also be “uncontestable” (Scott, 1991, p. 777). An autoethnography is not a disembodied text. A body, a subject, a *vulnerable* body and subject, is intertwined with and constituted by this text. As such, it becomes difficult to disentangle an autoethnographic representation from its corresponding, constituted-via-this-representation body and subject, thus making a critique of the text a critique of the life.¹

“I fucked your mom, faggot!” Someone screams at me from a passing car. It’s 10 p.m., and I’m walking on a residential street in Tampa, Florida.

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I grab my cell phone to call the cops but hesitate and wonder what makes my desire to call possible. I am a hearing, seeing being and can thus hear words and their accompanying tone and see a screamer in a car. A familiarity with English allows me to comprehend the screamed words and recognize that “fucked” and “faggot” are derogatory words in many English-speaking contexts. A familiarity with U.S. identity politics allows me to know that women and faggots are often targets of physical violence, moms are often targets of adolescent male jokes, and women are often targets of male dominance. A familiarity with U.S.

residential-street occurrences and with the U.S. legal system allows me to realize that this situation is dangerously atypical and that I should (a) report the dangerous situation by (b) documenting visible characteristics to (c) the police (and not to hair stylists, teachers, or taxi drivers).

The authority of autoethnography, Gannon (2006) writes, begins at the “scene of lived experience” (p. 475); the “ontological foundation for truth in autoethnography” rests on a “self who was ‘there,’” a witnessing self, a self who personally experienced “thereness” (p. 491; Buzard, 2003; Pollock, 2007). But like the heart, the authority of personal experience—the “auto” of autoethnography—has “opponents” (Pelias, 2004, p. 9). The arguments: Personal experience is not privileged “data” just because it is “personal” (Atkinson, 1997; Scott, 1991); personal experience needs an “outsider” to validate an “insider’s” validation (Anderson, 2006; Gans, 1999); personal experience invites too many hugs (Goode, 2006).

“Witnessing,” Boler (1999) writes, “is a process in which we do not have the luxury of seeing a static truth or fixed certainty” (p. 186). Witnessing happens by experiencing representations of experience, representations that, using a performative lens, constitute experience and constitute lives (Bruner, 1986; Denzin, 1989, 1998; Greenspan, 1998; Ricoeur, 1986; Schrag, 1997). It is this representational and constitutive function that motivates Denzin’s (2004) faith in autoethnography, a method about “real people with real lives,” a method that allows audiences to witness “the horror of it all” (p. 140; e.g., Bochner, 2002; Ellis, 1993, 2002), a method that mediates marginal personal experiences to resist the “domination and authority of canonical stories” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 120; see also, Adams, 2006; Boylorn, 2006; Couser, 1997; Jago, 2002; Pineau, 2000; Rambo, 2007; Ronai, 1995, 1996). In constituting experience, autoethnographies “shatter” and “re-story” past experiences to make better, hopeful experiences possible (Parry, 1991). In representing experience, autoethnographies make accounts that *in witnessing* may “change the world” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764).

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I grab my cell phone to call the cops and try to fathom ways to describe the screamer: a man, a teenager riding with other male-appearing teens, four, maybe five, high schoolers driving a brownish-green sport utility vehicle, young adults who like hearing themselves talk, rambunctious individuals who I hope would never inflict physical harm.

“I fucked your mom, faggot!” is a phrase that, while derogatory, may build solidarity among White, male, middle-class adolescents (Frank, 1993; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Pascoe, 2007). I remember my high school experiences, specifically calling feminine boys “faggots,” an act that simultaneous devalued one’s manhood and feminine ideals. But in calling fem-boys faggots, I garnered respect from male

peers. I showed that I was not a feminine-thus-faggy male but a masculine man. I showed that I could linguistically discipline the feminine, the discursively positioned inferior sex that I, as a masculine man, should desire and dominate.

“I fucked your mom, faggot!” is a phrase that, while derogatory, also aligns with the misogynistic “Your Mama” jokes I bantered in the halls, a phrase usually deployed by a me, a youthful White male, and directed at my White male friends, a phrase that used a “mom” and thus assumed older female identity, a phrase related to the “Mother Fucker” swear, and a phrase that aligned with the canonical story of a young man sympathetically sleeping with a perceived aged, sexless, desperate woman like *The Graduate*’s Mrs. Robinson or Stifler’s mom in the *American Pie* movie series, a series that explicitly made the “M.I.L.F.” —“Mom I’d Like to Fuck”—act possible and desirable. In claiming to fuck another boy’s mom, I also garnered respect from male peers. By suggesting I could fuck a woman, I coated myself with a layer of heterosexuality rather than homosexual faggy-ness. I showed that I could do a good deed by satisfying a perceived aged, sexless, desperate being. I showed that I could penetrate the feminine, the discursively positioned inferior sex that I, as a masculine man, should desire and dominate.

I make these observations in an attempt to historicize the “I fucked your mom, faggot!” experience, to conceive of conditions that may make the experience possible. Why might a male teen scream misogynistic and homophobic remarks at someone walking on a sidewalk? What are “moms” and “faggots?” Why did I hesitate when a person uttered these words, in this order, from a moving car, at this time of day? How do I respond to the perceived address, this/my calling?

Experience, specifically personal experience represented in writing, must be granted some authority as a text solidifies a representation of an experience in time and space (Ong, 1982). In other words, when I represent my experience in writing, I solidify a representation of my experience, never allowing the representation to change and thus requiring me to produce a second, complementary account (e.g., Ellis, 1986, 1995, 2007; Jones, 1997, 2002; Wolcott, 2002; Wyatt, 2005, *in press*). In using the written medium, I, as autoethnographer, represent and constitute personal experience in definitive, seemingly certain ways.

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I grab my cell phone to call the cops and think about how I might use the situation to my advantage. In the name of research, fieldwork, I could try to capture these individuals, prolong my experience, and gain additional experiences to report. When the men in the car get arrested, or at least questioned, I could acquire a good story by living through an event where I am fearful and thankful, fearful that I may get physically harmed if and after the police leave, thankful that I can function as an insider to a unique event.

But I decide against reporting the crime. I feel guilty for trying to make an experience into a good story, using other individuals for my advantage and to their dismay, getting others into trouble, motivating harm to “get even” in a system that encourages bad individuals to get paid back. I envision what the possible experiences might justify: an enforcement of curfew, a need for programs that combat youth-based misogyny, the passage of hate crime legislation. I may even learn how other passengers responded to the man’s “I fucked your mom, faggot!” utterance, responses that might have included “You’re so cool dude” or “You really scared that dude, dude,” or “You’re gross dude,” or, hopefully, “Quit being mean, dude.” But if this latter, caring utterance never surfaced, I may ask what conditions make a lack of care possible.

Pollock (2007) asks, “Does the first person exempt writing from critique?” (p. 241)

To which I reply, “No, use of the first person in writing does not exempt this writing from critique.” As illustrated, it is in representation where the contingencies, the “what ifs of experience reside” (Pollock, 2007, p. 247). It is in representation, itself, where a “politics of possibility” exists (p. 242), where conditions of experience may conflict, where a writer can be positioned tangential to rather than intertwined with. To use an often-heard Christian analogy, in representations “sinners” and “sins” textually separate. It is in representation where I admit the difficulty of hearing, witnessing, the “I fucked your mother, faggot!” scream but where I can critique and revel in the “what ifs” of represented experience, where I can witness the molding of experience to my practical, pressing, always-particular needs, where I can view experience otherwise, and where I can contest its conditions.

But I also reply, “Yes, use of the first person in writing can exempt this writing from critique.” Through a performative lens, written experience constitutes experience (see Richardson, 2000). A self, the personal, the auto of autoethnography, is called into being, constituted via the representing practice, making a life inseparable from the life’s texts. A performative view of represented experience makes it impossible to separate sins and sinners; one is what one does, one is what one experiences, one is what one writes. I thus suggest that the use of the first person in a writing, for example, an autoethnography, can exempt this personal experience from critique (a) if I adhere to philosophies like “live and let live,” “mind my own business,” and/or “keep your laws [or criticisms] off my body,” and (b) if I believe that I cannot separate a writer from the constitutive representation. Any critique of a life text is simultaneously a critique of a life, and as long as an-other is not harming another, I do not consider it ethical to question her/his actions, offer unsolicited advice, and/or suggest that a life could, should, be lived otherwise. This is why Mitch Allen suggests life writing is “a bit riskier” than authoring “5-point Likert scales”—the is, the personal is less implicated in the latter type of research (personal communication, May 4, 2006; see Wolcott, 2002). This is also why I suggest personal experience represented in writing can be “uncontestable” (Scott, 1991, p. 777).²

I consider it ethical to contest my interpretation of the “I fucked your mother, faggot!” experience, to contest my representation of it, to contest my attempt to outline conditions necessary for the happening. But as a critical scholar, I consider it unethical to contest the experience itself, to say it never happened, to say that I should not be walking late at night or that I should not be a faggot, to say that the screaming of misogynistic, homophobic remarks is a natural and necessary act for White male teens. To say so feels too fucking risky.

Notes

1. I agree with Scott's (1991) argument that experience, and representations of experience, can and should be contested. I want to emphasize, however, that a personal experience represented in writing, for example, an autoethnography, calls for—if not requires—a complicated and humane contestation.

2. I recognize my experience-as-uncontestable position rubs against Scott's treatment of experience and that my position may have consequences. For example, saying that you have no right to critique my experience would make it difficult to have meaningful conversations about the experience. But I want to emphasize that maxims such as “live and let live,” “mind your own business,” and/or “keep your laws [or criticisms] off my body” are meaningful and necessary in some contexts. My position also raises questions about publishing, specifically about making an experience public. Is a written, published experience exempt from critique? If so, can I ever evaluate a life text if a text and a life are inseparable? Is it okay to justify a published experience only on its ability to help others?

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