

EXAMINING (MY)SELF: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC
EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY
NEGOTIATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an autoethnographic exploration of my dialectic cultural identity negotiation. Utilizing autoethnographic inquiry through the use of autoethnographic episodic narratives and Martin and Nakayama's (2004) notion of cultural dialectics, I explore the contradictions that occur between the identities of critical scholar, Christian, and heterosexual white male. This study serves to build upon autoethnographic and cultural identity scholarship, specifically scholarship that interrogates the social, cultural, and political systems of power such that of white heteronormative privilege. I carry out this examination by evocatively sharing my experiences with the hope that readers will be able to know themselves in a deeper manner, as interrogating yourself in this manner is the first step toward true social change (McIntosh, 1988).

CHAPTER I
THE ROAD TO NOW: PROVIDING CONTEXT
FOR IDENTITY EXAMINATION

It has been a long road to get to where I am. As I write this, I begin to wonder if there's *ever* really a short road. The short road implies an easy way, or a shortcut. To me, saying that there is a short road to some place in your life is to devalue the experiences that you have had along the way. Besides, the fact that the road was long does not mean that it was bad...

...It was important. Below, I detail the events leading up to the point where I begin to carry out this research project. How I got here is important, as it provides the context for examining the negotiation of my identity. Throughout the rest of this chapter you will experience my college graduation, an epiphany that led me to enter graduate school, and the epiphany that began my thesis research.

Before you begin, I feel the need to explain my choice regarding the different fonts you will come across in this text. You will notice the fonts detailing my experiences are different than the font you are reading now. I have done this as a means of denoting a different feel, a different attitude, and a different approach in my writing. These nontraditional fonts exist to differentiate between autoethnographic narratives and the engagement of those narratives with academic literature. I picked Century Schoolbook (size 12) because the look of it on the page communicates the feel that I am trying to share, as well as serving to break the expectation of the traditional voice usually

experienced in reading research. It works in the same vein as the asterisks that will appear shortly...

So, with that, I am happy to let you proceed with me on my journey.

*“Let these three asterisks denote a shift to a different temporal/spatial/attitudinal realm”
(Rambo-Ronai, 1992, p.102)*

Canyon, Texas – May 2002

“I wonder why we wear this stuff...” I muse as I head over to the “S” group. I have been directed by a woman wearing too much perfume to join a group of fellow college graduates whose last names begin with the same letter as mine. Pondering the history of why we wear long gowns and square hats to commemorate graduation, I head toward the back of the “S” line, as I am an “STO.” After inquiring the strangers around me about their last names, I take my position in line: next to last.

The people around me have been there longer than I have – so the ones who are not on cell phones are in the middle of what I like to call “nothing else to do” conversation. They do not know each other, but they find something to talk about to pass the time. I have experienced it in lines to enter sporting events, sitting on airplanes, and now at my college graduation. The graduates-to-be that surround me are in the middle of discussing what

will happen to them now that their undergraduate work is complete. I mostly hear “I am moving back home to figure out what to do.” They all laugh and chuckle about how “pathetic” that is. I think very arrogantly to (my)self that they are right. One student mentions that she’s going on to graduate school; another cites the Air Force. I am feeling deeply emotional about this day, so I choose to not jump into the conversation – I choose to observe it.

As their conversation continues, I become a bit shocked at how the group of “not really sure what I am going to do” grows. As they talk, I begin to feel a little out of place, as it becomes obvious to me that I am the only one who has a “job” waiting for them when they graduate. As I listen to them, I think back to all the sleepless nights I spent laying awake, worrying about getting a job after graduation. I remember how ecstatic I was when I got the call from a company I interviewed with, offering me a job – a “real” job with a salary and benefits. I felt so responsible and together – like I could make it in the “real world” – that I was **going to make it** in the real world.

As we file out of the back of the arena, “Pomp and Circumstance” slowly transforms from a muffled mess into an intelligible song, until finally we make our entrance onto the floor. The music intertwines with the sound of thousands of people speaking to one another – one cannot help but feel the unique bustle in the atmosphere. As I am an “S” there are many who have entered before me, and families are in the midst of jumping up and down and

waving, taking pictures, and yelling to get their student's attention. I see literally hundreds of students on their cell phones speaking with their family, attempting to locate them. "Do you see me?" "I am at the chairs....now." "Ok, what is mom wearing?" "OHHH there you are!" (students wave energetically and smile). I chuckle and tear up a little as I look to the east side of the arena, where my dad and I had agreed the family would sit. My brother is extremely tall, so it doesn't take me long to locate them. I wave. They do not see me. I wave again. Still no response – should have borrowed mom's cell. Waving with both arms now. Damn these robes – I am drowning in a sea of black silk. *Finally*, just before I go under for good, my brother spots me and points me out to the rest of the family. I wave and smile. Noticing my dad choking back tears is almost too much for me. Seeing my brother excited to see me **is** too much for me. Mom's crying – of course. There's Mema and Grandad – and Chelsea with her family. They do not know what it means to me for them to come to my graduation. They'll be attending their daughter's graduation exactly a year from now – we'll be married by then. Finally I take my seat, and the festivities begin.

Ten minutes in, I am excruciatingly bored. The wave of emotion I felt as I entered has passed; looking around, I am able to deduce that the presence of the university president is *supposed* to be a big deal. It is not. A hamburger right now, **THAT** would be a big deal. I look longingly at the

student eight seats down who had the forethought to purchase a Gameboy. In an attempt to alleviate my boredom, I shift in my seat, and begin to think about making this step in my life. I begin a new job in ten days, and the thought of this makes me smile. I finally feel like I am accomplishing something. I feel **good** for the first time in a long, long time.

This feeling carries me through the ceremony. I *finally* walk across the stage, shake the president's large hand, grab the leather-bound notification that my diploma will arrive via mail within two weeks, and return to my seat. As the ceremony ends, I meet up with my family by the front doors. My dad's hug is long and strong. His is the one I remember the most for some reason. I greet the rest of the family, and before I can finish, I am being rushed off to the restaurant.

Amarillo, Texas – January 2003

From my stall, I hear the restroom door creak open. I swallow my tears and sit as still as possible, listening to the strange man enter. He noisily strides in, clears his throat loudly, and then proceeds to urinate in the urinal two feet from me. I am mad at (my)self for not picking my feet up so that he wouldn't know I am here. All that separates us is a thin wall of plastic, and I cannot help but feel like he's invading my personal space. I feel this way

because I am enclosed in a stall in the office bathroom having what I think is the equivalent of a nervous breakdown. My crying is almost too much to hold in, my eyes overflowing with tears by the time the man leaves the room without washing his hands. As the door slowly closes behind him, I let out the breath I have been holding for the past minute. My soft cries and frequent sniffles echo slightly off the green tile walls, and as I realize that I cannot go on in this job for the rest of the year, much less the rest of my life, it hits me. With the euphoria of my graduation long gone, I can finally see clearly how miserable I am. My fear of what awaits me at my desk each morning keeps me awake at nights; no matter how much I work, I cannot handle the workload of an understaffed office. My boss has targeted me, as I was the only person who was strong enough to stand up and say that the workload was too much for one person at our meeting two months ago. My fellow employees have apologized for “hanging me out to dry,” but they “can’t lose this job.” I feel betrayed, but understand. Most of them have children, mortgages, and expenses that I cannot fathom. Here in this stall, I begin to wonder how I ever got to this point. I begin to remember, rather suddenly, things I had blocked out of my mind. Memories of plans to go on to graduate school and become a professor rush back. I am flabbergasted – as I am unable to explain where these plans went. I suddenly do not even understand how or why I got to where I am.

For the entirety of my undergraduate work, I worked as a professor's assistant for a professor named Russell. As a result, I saw the inner workings of what it meant to be a professor: teaching, researching, writing, department politics, tenure, and family. I fell in love with the thought of doing that for a living. It seemed to call to me.

At the end of my junior year, Russell, who by now had become a very good friend – explained to me that it was time to begin considering graduate school. For whatever reason, the insecurities that I had been working on for the last three years welled up – I suddenly felt completely inadequate at the thought of becoming a graduate student and a professor. From that day on, I began to tell (my)self what I needed to hear to talk (my)self out of pursuing that path. By the time application deadlines were approaching, I had convinced (my)self that I was “burnt out on school and really just wanted to get a job and work for awhile.” I practiced that line over and over in my head – and when it came time, delivered it with precision. I could see the disappointment on Russell's face when I shot it at him, but I was too far gone. The haze of lies I had surrounded (my)self with was too strong. I began looking for jobs in the area, as I had begun a pretty serious relationship with Chelsea, and knew it was heading someplace. I wish this had been the reason that I didn't go to graduate school straight out, but, sadly, it is not. I was so caught up in my own little world of “protect me” that I didn't think of it that

way (thank goodness it all worked out for the best despite me). I got my job as a claims adjuster, and before I knew it, found (my)self alone in the bathroom, having this epiphany.

The next day I call in sick, faking a stomach virus that has been going around the office. “You do not want the details” I tell my boss, and he seems to buy it. Free and clear from work for the day, I call Russell and he agrees to meet me for coffee.

I arrive early to the coffee shop. After ordering my grande mocha, I sit at a table facing the entrance, so that he will see me as soon as he walks in. I am extremely nervous as I go over what I want to say once he arrives. I practice my “I was wrong” speech a few times before he walks in the door. His caring, loving presence washes away all of my practiced words and our friendship picks up right where it left off. He jumps right into encouraging my thoughts about going to graduate school, and notes that my wife has extreme potential there as well. We talk about how great she is for awhile, and then we discuss specifics regarding the application process we are about to go through – very quickly, as we’ve decided to do this a bit late. As our conversation ends, we hug and Russell gives a few more encouraging words for Chelsea and (my)self. Home that afternoon, I come clean to Chelsea about how miserable I am at my job. Of course, she knows, I am the only person it hasn’t been obvious to all this time. She supports my thoughts about quitting

my job, and agrees that graduate school is a good idea for both of us, even though it *is* sudden. The thought of making these big changes scares both of us, but is made easier by the fact that we have each other to lean on through the whole process.

Lubbock, Texas – November 2003

I am grading papers when I hear Jake's knock on my office door. I know it is Jake because he always uses a very unique rhythm when knocking on my door. I turn around and let in a more-exuberant-than-usual Jake, who energetically breezes in and sits down. After our usual salutations and friendly banter (we are old friends), he begins to explain an opportunity for the two of us to help out with the undergraduate intercultural communication class coming up in the spring. The professor (Dr. Amy Heuman) needs two graduate students to help out with class activities, lectures, and grading. Amy and Jake have previously discussed their research interests, so now that this opportunity has surfaced, she offered Jake one of the spots, as she knew that Jake would be perfect as one of the student assistants. Amy asked Jake if there were any other graduate students interested in that area of study, and Jake informs me that he has recommended me. As someone interested in cultural studies, I see the chance

to be involved with this class as an opportunity to grow in my knowledge and pedagogy regarding intercultural communication. I have extremely fond memories of the intercultural class I took as an undergraduate – it changed me forever. I quickly accept the offer to help out.

Amy, Jake, and I immediately hit it off as a team, and before we know it, are in the throws of teaching an overenrolled (80 students) class. Around mid-semester, we begin to explore the material on identity and intercultural communication. I think nothing of it as I grab my things for class, almost forgetting my notebook on my desk.

In the classroom, Jake and I take our positions behind a table at the front of the room. We sit here and jump in from time to time as Amy lectures. The rest of the time we take fieldnotes of the classroom experience and pass notes back and forth to each other about different topics: grad school gossip, movies, research, whatever is on our minds at the time. But today I get back to my office and realize the pages of my notebook are empty...

Lubbock, Texas – March 2004

As the classroom discussion continues, the butterflies in my stomach make one last attempt at turning it upside down. A deep sigh followed by a hard swallow is a request for my system to “*please calm down.*” I am doing everything I can to appear calm and in control, sitting here in front of the classroom while Amy leads a discussion on the first time the students realized their cultural identity. As she discusses some of the student’s answers, I realize deep inside of (my)self that ***I do not know my own cultural identity.*** This makes me sick, as I am a graduate student who has studied intercultural communication/cultural studies for the past year, and even more so – I am someone who is helping teach an intercultural communication class. The irony of my own hypocrisy kicks me in the stomach – another sigh and hard swallow follow. As guilt slowly begins to overrun me – I realize that I have got to do something about this – that an exploration of my identity is warranted. But how – how do I go about this, and, how will I conduct (my)self after this realization? Can I *out* (my)self to my peers that I am working with in this class? Or do I go on, just like normal? How do I act like I have it all together culturally when deep inside I realize that I do not?

As class ends, I gather my things and join Amy and Jake for our usual walk back to the building. We typically process the day on our journey – and for the first time, I am very nervous and troubled by our talk. Not because

there's anything problematic about it, but because I do not know if I can participate. I am ashamed that I do not know my own cultural identity, and I have set (my)self up as someone who does. I am a walking contradiction – a liar. On the walk back to our building, we make the usual “can you believe they said that” comments and point out that some of the students seem to be making some connections to the course material. I stay as quiet as possible, offering a laugh or an affirming “yeah, I know what you mean” whenever I feel it is appropriate. Back in my office, I ponder the experiences of the past hour and a half. Right now, I am not sure how to resolve this feeling I have – so I decide to remain quiet for the rest of the semester, speaking about it only in ink, on paper.

Now Here We Are: Tension Resolution = Motivation and Purpose

On the other side of this realization now, I find (my)self torn regarding exactly how I feel about my learning experience that day. On one hand, it made me feel guilty, beaten up, and completely false as scholar. I felt like a fake. I would continue to feel this way as I became more and more self-reflexive about the contradicting identities I have. On the upside, it pushed me toward autoethnographic writing, identity literature, and my thesis research. It forced me look deeper at (my)self, allowing me to begin to see the clashing identities I negotiate, and gave me the strength to begin to ask questions about them. I do not know whether to be thankful for my revelation, or to curse it – as it has

created a tension within me that I am not sure I will ever alleviate. There happens to be a saying pinned to my wall that says “with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief,” and this is exactly how I feel as I research this area. It seems the more knowledge I acquire, the more I realize about (my)self that is contradictory. Heuman (2004) writes along this line, as she details the uneasiness and guilt she feels in covert, detached observation of a Cinco de Mayo celebration (p. 1-2). Her feelings of guilt led her to an ethical crossroads and pushed her to write her dissertation on this very tension that exists for many researchers, arguing for an ethic of “speaking with” in ethnography. She discovers autoethnography as the outlet that allows her to explore and examine these feelings and uses it to make a case for *speaking with* the “researched” in ethnographic explorations. Like Heuman, my feelings of confusion and guilt have led me to explore my contradicting cultural identities through autoethnography for my thesis. Much like her research, this thesis is a way of understanding (not necessarily ending) the tension created within me by this experience.

This thesis seeks to examine the negotiation of my cultural identities and explore the clash that occurs between them, looking at how communication helps me navigate their constant conflict. I am offering (my)self here as *researcher* and *subject*, in order to produce an autoethnographic study exploring cultural identity negotiation. The purpose of this study is threefold: 1) to *self-reflexively* better understand my own identity negotiation and the contradictions I encounter therein, 2) to create an evocative, conversational text that can serve as an examination of the identity negotiation process

through the application of cultural identity and intercultural/cultural studies scholarship, as well as, 3) to offer a text that focuses on the negotiation of dialectic cultural identities.

This study provides a valuable contribution to the body of cultural studies scholarship, as few cultural studies scholars have provided a self-reflexive examination of cultural identity negotiation (see Heuman,2004 for an example). This study seeks to explore elements of my identity and its negotiation that will explain “how I am” as seen through the lens of identity theory, as well as offer an application of this area of research. The two overarching questions which drive this thesis are:

- *What do the events detailed in my autoethnographic narratives reveal about my cultural identity negotiation?*
- *How do these narratives provide a means for understanding cultural identity negotiation in deep, meaningful ways?*

This study seeks to examine different aspects of my cultural identity, as well as explore how I negotiate the contradicting identities on a daily basis. This thesis is an examination of contradicting identities, and the negotiation of them.

I begin the study with an examination of the pertinent literature attempting to place a definition on what autoethnography is as well as how it can be understood. Here, I will explore how autoethnography has come of age as of late, and note its importance and relevance as a research method. In the next chapter, I detail the specific methodology for this study, outlining the steps I plan to take in the completion of this project. The fourth chapter includes the autoethnographic narratives and the examination of them through the

lens of cultural identity literature. Then, in the final chapter we will explore the conclusions and possibilities for the future of this research.

CHAPTER II
TAKING THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC TURN

Lubbock, Texas – March 2005

I really wish I had a strong, scholarly sounding way to transition into an examination of the pertinent literature in the area of autoethnography. I have wrestled with this chapter of my thesis for months now – writing and rewriting *many* times – and still having it NOT work. The frustrating thing about this experience wasn't the constant rewriting per se; it was that I couldn't pinpoint the specific reason *why* it was giving me trouble. I have written other literature reviews before, why is this one different?

At this point, I realize that if my life were a movie, I would (full of brilliant frustration) dramatically fling the things off of my desk and pace to one side of my tiny office – and as the papers, books, and writing utensils hit the floor, I would suddenly freeze with inspiration. Slowly I would lift my head and turn to my desk, a slight twinkle in my eye. The camera would pan to an empty legal pad and the one pencil still left on my desk. It has obviously hit me now. Feverishly I begin to write.

Damn, MY LIFE IS NOT A MOVIE.

Oddly enough, the answer comes from the literature I am trying so desperately to talk about, and not a brilliant outburst...

Ellis (2004) tells me that I needed to *experience* autoethnography before reading *about* it. This statement finally allowed me to see that my trouble lies in the fact that I have the same dilemma in writing a review of literature as I do in conducting research – I cannot remove my experience as a researcher from the writing – and this includes my experiences with the literature I am exploring. Pelias (2004) speaks of the pure excitement he feels when he comes across an undiscovered work in his area of interest, how he “take[s] it from the shelf as carefully as one might reach for a newborn in a crib” and how he “loves the smell, the freshness, [and] the promise” (p.130). As scholars, I think we have all experienced the excitement and jubilation of finding “that” work that leads us in a new direction, or confirms our ideas on a given topic. Having these feelings about material for the first time in my scholarly career, it was difficult for me to remove my feelings about the literature from my discussion of it, and the struggle was paralyzing my writing.

So, instead of *fighting* my need to include my experiences with all this literature, I have decided to *embrace* it. Pelias (2004) describes engaging in research as “offering a first-person narrative” and says that “even our most traditional work is someone’s story” (p.7). With this in mind, I offer you a ticket to join me on the journey around the autoethnographic turn; a turn I took in my research and writing that turned my inquisitive

eye back on (my)self; a turn where the path is discovered by discovering those who have been there before you. I now humbly and honestly offer you my story.

Discovering the Autoethnographic Past

I was at once enthusiastic and downtrodden. I found (my)self overwhelmingly excited to find that there were other scholars thinking like I do – that there’s a body of work out there supporting my misgivings about traditional naturalistic inquiry in ethnography. My feelings of excitement were dichotomized by my feelings of solemnity because finding this revealed that my ideas aren’t original – in fact, they are not even *new*. The original “crisis of representation” occurred during the 1970’s and 1980’s when a whole wave of ethnographers began to question the reality of their objectivity. This crisis stemmed from the postmodern assertion that there is not one “Reality” as much as there are multiple “realities,” and that the question of who has the right to observe and then represent a culture or phenomenon within one of these realities is a very valid one (Goodall, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Crawford, 1996). This move brought the modernist, traditional empiricist mindset (and all the epistemological assumptions about research that go along with it) into question.

Exploring this crisis further, the main issue with representation lies in the relationship between “the language used to create the representation and the reality that gets represented” (Goodall 2000, p.12). This new view of representation problematized language, pointing out how poorly it is adapted to truly re-present a phenomenon.

Scholars taking the ethnographic turn with the crisis of representation in mind realized that reality is far more complex than any representation of it could possibly be. As a result, *all* representations are not full representations of reality, and are therefore problematic in the traditional view of scientific inquiry. This led ethnographers to experiment with new ways of writing and conducting research: they began to examine the processes they used in conducting inquiry. In examining these processes, scholars ended up “coming full circle,” eventually turning their eye back to themselves (Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000; Tedlock, 1991). It is at this point where autoethnography begins to appear and gain prominence – it served as one possible response to the crisis of representation, allowing scholars to examine the researcher’s self in the production of research.

Occurring simultaneously as this shift in thought was the publication of two influential works in the history of ethnography/autoethnography. Despite the fact that ethnography in its traditional form had been around since the 1920’s, appearances of it in communication journals had been few and far between, even as late as the 1980’s (Lindlof, 1998). Most ethnographers had to publish their research in book form, and then publish their personal stories about their research experience in a separate “ethnographic memoir” or “confessional” (Ellis, 2004). They did this because they feared that the personal information might undermine their research, or even worse, that their research might not get published if it were included. This began to change, however, with the publication of Gerry Philipsen’s (1975) *Speaking Like a Man in Teamsterville* and Tom Benson’s (1981) *Another Shooting in Cowtown* (both appearing in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*). Utilizing participant observation and interviews, Phillipsen examined the

rules for talk of white adult men in the “Teamsterville” area of south Chicago. This more traditional minded ethnographic study was one of the first to infiltrate the ranks of communication journals. Appearing a few years later, Benson’s work autoethnographically detailed (through the use of narrative) his experiences helping a friend film political ads for a candidate in a small town, and the lessons he took away from that experience. These two essays together opened the doors for more ethnography to begin appearing in communication journals, and set the stage for autoethnography to stake a larger claim in the arena of scholarly literature.

Moving into the 1990’s, this evocative, non-objective writing experienced a major growth spurt. Spearheading this growing body of autoethnographic writing were Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, who published multiple pieces (both individually and together) with this form of writing as their focus. Beginning in 1991 with Ellis’ articles on “sociological introspection” and “emotional sociology” which argued for the use of one’s own emotional experience as a legitimate object of sociological research to be described, examined, and theorized – autoethnographic writing began to gain a foothold in the scholarly realm. The following year, Ellis and Bochner published a co-constructed narrative about the constraints of choice in abortion (Ellis and Bochner, 1992). In this piece, the authors write about a deeply personal experience in order to show how the telling of a personal story “becomes a social process for making lived experience understandable and meaningful” (Ellis and Bochner 1992, p. 80). Then, in 1995, Ellis published what is possibly her best known work: *Final Negotiations*. Here, she evocatively and movingly describes her grieving process as she deals with losing her first

husband to a battle with cancer. Throughout the rest of the decade, Bochner and Ellis continued to publish works together and separately, producing the groundwork for more writing of this nature.

Capitalizing on the groundbreaking ethnographic work of Philipsen, and the autoethnographic works of Benson, Ellis, and Bochner, many scholars began utilizing the ethnographic and autoethnographic avenues paved by these pioneers to publish their own experimental texts. Carol Rambo-Ronai wrote in compelling detail about her experiences as an erotic dancer, as well as her experiences with her mentally handicapped mother (1992; 1996). Laurel Richardson fanned the flame with her essay on writing as inquiry, pointing out that writing is not just an activity – it is a way of knowing (1994); Lisa Tillman-Healy evocatively explored her battle with bulimia (1996); Ruth Behar commented on the importance of being a “vulnerable observer” and noted that scholarship that doesn’t break your heart is not worth carrying out (1996); Stacy Holman-Jones ethnographically detailed the experiences and observations she had during her fieldwork done at a small club in California that focuses on giving underprivileged voices a chance for their music to be heard (1998); Nick Trujillo movingly explored the life of his grandmother, pointing out the importance of family stories in the formation of identity (1998). It was as a result of all this new writing emerging in the academic realm that pushed Crawford (1996) to assert that the nature of ethnography was taking a strong self-reflexive turn. As evidenced by the work above, this turn built a literature base for autoethnography to make a move into the new millennium.

Experiencing the Autoethnographic Present

With the mass of work produced in the 1990's, scholars doing autoethnography in the new millennium no longer need to focus solely on breaking ground for their experimental writing. This allows them to produce works that are more *defining* in nature than ground breaking; that is, authors now have a chance to look back and explain what happened throughout the 70's, 80's, and 90's and use their hindsight to encourage new writers interested in this type of scholarship. The first example of this type of guiding work to appear is Goodall's *Writing the New Ethnography* (2000), which serves as a source for understanding what it means to write these "new ethnographies" by detailing the processes and tensions that entail taking the auto/ethnographic turn. Personally, I do not know how scholars wrote before the publication of this text. Its voice is definitive, and its guidance inescapable – I have yet to see an auto/ethnographic text published since 2000 that *doesn't* cite this work. It explores every nuance of taking the ethnographic turn, and strongly yet lovingly explains the difficulties inherent with this type of research and writing. It was this work that solidified my interest in autoethnography, and began my period of "hero-worship" towards Goodall.

Goodall is not the only focus of my hero worship, though. As if her work in the 1990's wasn't enough, Carolyn Ellis published in 2004 what I feel will be the definitive work in autoethnography. *The Ethnographic I* (2004) centers around Ellis' autoethnographic account of a class on autoethnography. She utilizes her years of experience and research to explain, describe, define, and explore autoethnography all in one place. This work addresses every question and criticism tied to autoethnography

while simultaneously providing an exemplary piece of experimental writing. This work will be a “must cite” for every piece of autoethnography produced in the future.

Other important works include Pelias (2004), Ricci (2003), and Richardson (2004). While these works are individually different, they all explore the use of poetry in the realm of autoethnography. Mixing compelling, evocative prose with poetry and drama, Pelias (2004) artfully examines the daily life of an academic. In this, he points out the joys, conflicts, contradictions, and ethical dilemmas involved with having a career in the academy. Ricci (2003) poetically explores a part of his identity by offering an autoethnographic poem; and Richardson (2004) comments on the poetic self in writing, noting how poetry is just as valid a writing tool in the academy as prose. These present works reveal that the future for autoethnographic writing looks bright.

Looking into the Autoethnographic Future

Looking to the future of autoethnography, there is currently a qualitative shift occurring in the discipline of communication as evidenced by the appearance of new journals and professional associations that focus on qualitative inquiry, and more specifically, experimental ethnographies (Banks & Banks, 2000). Specific examples of these include *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, and *Text and Performance Quarterly*. As a result of this, autoethnography continues to receive slowly growing attention by major communication journals. This attention however, doesn't necessarily translate into immediate positive acceptance. Ragan (2000) notes that our mainstream academic journals reflect a bias towards social-science related research

and writing – and that journals have inapplicable critical standards regarding what is good research. She ends with a call for communication professionals to develop a critical criterion that serves more than just social scientific manuscripts. Answering this call, Richardson (2000) offers five critical criteria by which works along this line can be properly critiqued: a) substantive contributions, b) aesthetic approach, c) reflexivity, d) impactfulness, and e) expressiveness of reality. Applying these standards, autoethnographies can be properly evaluated by professional journals. With the appearance of these critical criteria for evaluating autoethnography and the numerous new avenues for writing and publishing evocative texts that continue to open up, the future of autoethnography seems bright.

Explaining Autoethnography

“I keep thinking I understand autoethnography,” Valerie continues. “Then I go deeper, and find I do not understand shit.” (Ellis 2004, p.138)

With an exploration of the background of autoethnography complete, it is now important to take a look at what autoethnography *is*. This is easier said than done however, because the nature of autoethnography is very complex. Answering the question “what is autoethnography?” is akin to answering the question “what is art?” There are many of factors to consider when tackling a question of this magnitude, as it is difficult to narrow something so large down to a simple defining statement. That said, my examination of the literature has revealed that autoethnography can be carefully broken

down into seven simple (yet loaded) statements that when examined individually and together offer an accurate representation of autoethnography. These statements are:

- Autoethnography is *Self-Reflexive/Personal*
- Autoethnography is *Subjective*
- Autoethnography is *Evocative*
- *Autoethnography is Conversational*
- *Autoethnography is Vulnerable*
- Autoethnography is *Emotional*
- Autoethnography is *Difficult*

Below I will explore each of these statements in an attempt to paint a picture that appropriately reflects the nature of autoethnography. Like a painting (as Ellis, 2004 likens it to), I am seeking more than simple representation – I am striving to capture the *essence* and *being* involved with the focus of my work. Therefore, I will begin my explanation of autoethnography by examining the surface, and then with each statement, delving deeper into the core of autoethnography.

Autoethnography is Self-Reflexive/Personal

I will begin on the surface by first looking at the denotative definition of the word *autoethnography*. Dissecting the term, *auto* means “self,” *ethno* means “people or culture,” and *graphy* means “writing or describing” (Ellis 2004). As a result, it is the “turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self” (Denzin 1997) and writing about what is seen and experienced there. This examination can occur in one of two ways: self

as site, or self *in site* (Ellis 2004). Either way, this reveals the most foundational idea essential to understanding autoethnography: it is self-reflexive. The idea of including and examining the researcher's lived experiences is at the heart of what autoethnography seeks to accomplish. It is focused on "the full accounting for and utilization of the researcher's personal body and felt experience as research instrument" (Banks & Banks 2000, p.234; Denzin 1997; Goodall 2000; Ricci 2003; Richardson 1994). That the self is present, active and acknowledged as part of the analysis and research is the distinguishing factor of autoethnography.

As a result of being self-reflexive, autoethnography cannot help but be personal. Researchers utilizing this style of writing must produce "a highly personalized, revealing text in which an author tells stories about his or her own lived experience" (Richardson 1994, p.521). The personal, revealing factors are essential to the nature of self-reflexivity. For a researcher to be properly self-reflexive, they cannot be afraid of the process or products of deep emotional introspection.

Autoethnography's self-reflexive nature has brought it much critique from traditional minded scholars. They argue that autoethnography is self-centered and narcissistic and therefore of no real value to the academic community. Subjectively minded researchers respond to this critique by saying that it is self-centered to deny that you are somehow distanced from what it is that you are studying and not impacted by the same forces as others; it is self-centered to think that your actions and relationships do not need reflexive thought (Ellis, 2004). Experience with autoethnography reveals that it is in fact the opposite of self-absorbed – while the inquisitive gaze *is* placed on the self of

the researcher, the text is produced with the reader in mind, as autoethnography focuses on being dialogic and conversational with the reader (Goodall, 2000) and not solely focused on the reporting of a researcher's data.

Autoethnography is Subjective

Resulting from the self-reflexive and personal nature of autoethnography is the subjective manner in which it “speaks.” “Autoethnography removes the assumed researcher privilege in the research situation, and makes the presence of the researcher in the text unavoidable” (Crawford 1996, p.158). This on-purpose subjectivity brings to light the way that traditional social science texts have pushed academics toward becoming passive, unengaged readers and writers. Autoethnography seeks to knock down the false modernist ideals of researcher objectivity, neutrality, and omniscience – in hopes of getting the reader to question the usual canonical stories produced by traditional empiricist social science (Bochner & Ellis, 1996). Simply put – autoethnographers accept their subjectivity, embrace it, and explore it.

This too brings critique to autoethnography, as critics of the method argue that its subjectivity nullifies its validity. Scholars comfortable in the subjective waters of autoethnography are in turn using the views that began with the crisis of representation to redefine validity. Lincoln and Guba (2000) argue for criteria that judges the *processes and outcomes* of research rather than the *methods* by which outcomes are produced; Ellis (2004) views validity as searching for verisimilitude in that it “evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible” (p.124); Richardson

(1994) uses the idea of a crystal to respond to this critique, asserting that a crystal has many different sides and shapes, but still has structure – what you see depends on what side you are looking at – but all sides represent a crystal. All of these serve as new ways to look at the idea of validity in research, and work toward an understanding of the multiple realities that autoethnographic research seeks to understand.

Autoethnography is Evocative

Moving into the next piece of the autoethnographic picture, it is important to note that autoethnography in its very nature cannot get around being self-reflexive and subjective. If the writer is not self-reflexive or subjective, then they are not doing autoethnography. The next point of discussion is different, however. Autoethnography is not *inherently* evocative (as it is inherently self-reflexive and subjective) – the most powerful and compelling autoethnographic writings possess this trait. As one of the focuses of autoethnography is to bring verisimilitude (lifelikeness) in the experience of the reader, it is important that autoethnographic texts stir up feelings and emotions from their readers – that they make a difference in the reader’s life perspective, and that they hit close to home (Richardson, 1994). Bochner and Ellis (1996) echo this, noting that “on the whole autoethnographers do not want you to sit back as spectators; they want readers to feel, care, and desire” (p.24). It is important for autoethnography to pull the reader in and take them along for the experience that is being detailed in the writing. The reader should experience the writers feelings, sensations, fears – whatever is happening in the

story. The reader should be immersed into the moment with the author – so that when the reader is done reading, they have a shared experience with the author.

Autoethnography is Conversational

Researchers/writers can accomplish the goal of crafting an evocative text by writing not only from the head, as most academic writing is done, but to write from the heart as well. This allows the researcher to be relational in her or his writing, to “hold an interesting conversation with readers” (Goodall, 2000, p.13). Ellis (2004) elaborates on this point, noting that writing in a conversational manner allows the scholar to be an involved and compassionate writer, thus providing more verisimilitude or crystallization to the autoethnographic study. Writing in this manner requires putting aside the traditional omniscient voice associated with traditional social science writing, and telling the story in terms of feelings and emotions. Crafting a text like this allows the reader to feel like they have an active part in the events being explored and examined within the world on the page; it allows them to participate directly in the happenings of the experience. Conversational writing and producing an evocative text are inextricably linked, as combining the two opens the door for shared experiences between reader and writer.

Autoethnography is Vulnerable

As a direct result of the emotionality involved in doing autoethnography, the writer and reader find themselves confronted with vulnerability. This is difficult on

multiple levels, because on most fronts being vulnerable is not something that people desire. In our society vulnerability translates into weakness, and we do not want to be weak. But in doing autoethnography, opening yourself up in this manner is important. As scholars, we have to overcome our training that vulnerability is not a part of scholarship (Ellis, 2004). As a writer, allowing yourself to be vulnerable in the writing process lets you be a more involved and compassionate writer. It is not weakness, but a willingness to feel, experience, and learn. Behar (1996) articulates how vital it is for researchers to let themselves become vulnerable in their academic writing. She notes the importance of this vulnerability, and explains that “when you write vulnerably, others will respond vulnerably” (p.16). And getting others to respond is a large part of what autoethnography seeks to do.

Autoethnography is Emotional

The discussion of vulnerability segues perfectly into an examination of the need for autoethnography to be emotional. To create an evocative text, the researcher must make themselves vulnerable – lay themselves and their experiences out for the reader to see and feel, take part in and share. This vulnerability necessarily leads to an emotional experience that must be highlighted and communicated within the evocative autoethnographic text. Ellis (2004) notes:

Being emotional helps you become a better autoethnographer, since so often the subject matter as well as the process is emotional. Though being too emotional may overload your senses and prevent you from looking at situations from multiple frames (p.110).

Finding the middle ground as described above results in being comfortable with emotionality in yourself as well as in others, as this is necessary in doing autoethnography. Because the researcher is examining parts of the self that may not have been looked at or dealt with before, this process can be difficult. “Some emotional turmoil usually accompanies the vulnerability required to scrutinize yourself and reveal to others what you find” (Ellis, 2004, p. xx).

Communicating this emotionality in the writing is another matter all together. How is this done? Tied in with producing an evocative text, this is done by the writer *showing* more than *telling* (Ellis 2004). This means that the writer, after being properly self-reflexive, must tell their story in such a way as to make the reader feel the emotions they experienced. Instead of telling the reader that they were upset by something, the writer must bring the experience to life in vivid, lively detail, showing, not just telling (Ellis, 2004) how they felt when they were upset. This communicates the emotionality of the experience, and fulfills the criteria of autoethnographies to highlight emotional experiences.

Autoethnography is Difficult

“So you just write about your life?” Valerie says casually. “That doesn’t sound too difficult” (Ellis 2004, p. xvii).

All of the pieces of the picture we have discussed thus far culminate in this section, as it is all of these things (together and separately) that make autoethnography amazingly difficult. I will admit, when I first heard of autoethnographic writing, I too thought it couldn’t be very difficult. I was absolutely wrong.

Looking back to the fact that autoethnography is self-reflexive reveals that this makes the process difficult because not all people who try to do this type of work are sufficiently introspective about their experiences, or observant enough of the world around them. Additionally, “The self questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult...Often you confront things about yourself that are less than flattering” (Ellis 2004, p. xviii). Doing autoethnography requires living the autoethnographic life, and living this life means existing under an all inquisitive eye – your own.

Secondly, subjectivity makes this type of research and writing very difficult. The expert voice that you have learned to write in throughout your entire scholarly career is no longer the voice that you utilize. You have to learn another language (Ellis 2004). All of the worries that you used to have about reliability and generalization are replaced with the sometimes more burdensome task of dealing with realizations that you really have no answer for. Your research ethic prohibits you from providing answers – you just explore experience. When you are used to answers, however problematic they were, they are hard to get away from. Dealing with subjectivity and attempting to not offer answers makes you realize how powerful the patriarchal modernist mindset was in your education as a child, teenager, young adult, and adult.

Lastly, writing an evocative text is not only hard, but intimidating. Ellis (2004) notes that most social scientists do not write well enough to do autoethnography. This is because autoethnography claims the conventions of *literary* writing. It not only has to be theoretically sound, but it must be interesting and well written. Goodall (2000) says that these pieces need to have “soul,” and this can be difficult to do, as to have soul, the

writer/researcher needs to allow themselves to be vulnerable – and we usually do not like feeling vulnerable. This ties to the emotionality of autoethnography, which makes the process extremely difficult, as all of this self-reflection, subjectivity and difficult writing forces you to deal with and communicate your emotional pain in an emotional, evocative way. Autoethnography is a difficult *personal* process. Autoethnography is a difficult *research* process. Autoethnography is a difficult *writing* process.

I do not want to leave the discussion of autoethnography as difficult without commenting on the fact that participating in the creation of autoethnography is in fact worth all of the difficulty you experience. All of the self-introspection can be very therapeutic, and while painful at the time, you get used to the self-examination and expression, and it then becomes a welcomed experience (Ellis, 2004). Doing autoethnography will allow the researcher/writer to live a more compassionate, honest existence, as there are details about your life out there for people to criticize. It is the communication of honesty and experience that makes this method so appealing to readers – as most people are readers of autoethnography before they are writers of it. Ellis (2004) notes that readers want a reason to believe what they are reading – and autoethnography offers that opportunity.

Setting a Course for Collision

In this study I use the notion of *dialectic tensions* (or contradictions) in examining (my)self as a site for autoethnographic inquiry. Rambo-Ronai (1992) offers the closest comparable autoethnographic exploration of identity, but doesn't focus specifically on

identity negotiation as the center of her analysis – for her, the *experiences* she has as an erotic dancer are at the center of her analysis – this clashing of roles is just a side effect of the erotic dancer experience. Within my examination, identity and the negotiation thereof *is* the experience at the center of the exploration and analysis. Rambo-Ronai (1992) conducted a *self in site* autoethnography – I am carrying out a *self as site* autoethnography.

Tracing the idea of co-existing yet contradictory forces back to its conception, one can point to Bahktin's (1981) notion of the term *dialectic*, which he used to describe the dialogic tensions that we encounter within ourselves. He views dialectical tension as being at the very center of all human experience, and that these tensions have no ultimate resolution. He also explains that this is not detrimental to our interactions; rather, these tensions provide an opportunity for dialogue. Relational Communication scholars (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996) were the first to apply this term to the opposing needs that are present in human interpersonal communication. More central to my study, however, is Martin and Nakayama's (2004) notion of *cultural dialectics*. In keeping with Bahktin's suggestion, Martin and Nakayama describe this as a paradoxical relationship between two opposite qualities or entities as they outline specific tensions and how they are linked to intercultural relations. The assumption is that a cultural phenomenon generates its opposite (i.e. privilege generates non-privilege), thus explaining what is occurring with the identities I examine. For these cultural communication scholars, the very tensions involved in cultural identity negotiation are grounded in a system of power and a careful negotiation of the political systems that gives rise to these opposing forces.

Specific examples of these cultural dialectics include the cultural-individual and static-dynamic dialectic. The cultural-individual dialectic is examined in this study by looking at the opposing identities of white-male critical scholar and critical scholar Christian. The collision that occurs at the intersection of my cultural and individual selves is at the center of this autoethnographic exploration. The static-dynamic dialectic is seen in how the identities detailed here are not static – but are in a constant state of change.

Acknowledging these aspects of cultural identities obligates me to examine the dialectic tensions at play within my own identity (just as Goodall (2000) notes that ethnographers are obligated to write about their lives, as that is what makes them trustworthy to their audience). These dialectic tensions emerge from cultural and academic systems of power where they are located and acted out. Goodall (2000) also notes that ethnographers are obligated to write about their lives; that this is what will make them trustworthy to their audience (p. 23). The call for the interrogation of my cultural identity is necessary if I am to prompt others to examine their own cultural assumptions and identities.

Answering this call, I have chosen to explore my identities through the lens of cultural dialectics, as dialectics best describes the negotiation at work with my multiple *social* and *cultural locations* (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Heuman, 2004, respectively) because with it, *contradiction* is a central concept when discussing the term. I am doing more than exploring and talking about different parts of (my)self, I focus on the fact that these different parts of (my)self *contradict* or collide with each other in meaningful and

powerful ways. This thesis is about exploring how I negotiate these dialectical tensions on a daily basis.

CHAPTER III
EPISODIC NARRATIVE AS INQUIRY

*“I wanted to write my story to help others understand their experiences sociologically”
(Ellis, 2004, p. 19).*

There are many times that I have regretted my decision to write autoethnography. I have found (my)self completely at a loss for words a few too many times for anyone’s liking. I have found (my)self extremely angry at the dead white men that say I am supposed to write in a certain voice and certain organizational structure. As I wrestle with my writing and lose – again – I stop and wonder where to turn.

Ragan (2000) notes that autoethnography is not a method in the usual, sanctified sense that we speak of research methods in the discipline. As a result, explaining autoethnographic inquiry for this study poses a difficult challenge. It is hard because autoethnography is a way of *living*; therefore, this inquiry is a theoretical and philosophical account of my *lifestyle* and *perspective* not only as a researcher, but as a person. I am extremely tempted to say the following: “This study explores the negotiation of my dialectic identities through the use of evocative autoethnographic narratives that detail my story. These narratives blur the lines between theory and story, in hopes that the

experiences detailed will enable researcher and reader to connect on a personal and emotional level.” The problem with this statement is that it fails to detail why autoethnography is the proper means of exploring the phenomenon of my identity negotiation, exactly how I wrote these autoethnographic narratives, and how these will be analyzed regarding the negotiation of my cultural identity. Therefore, I will address these three questions below to explicate the steps I went through in carrying out this study.

Why Autoethnography?

Neumann (1996) notes the following about autoethnography:

...this joining of *auto* and *ethno*, of self and culture, can critique the conditions of the culture in which the self is located. In this sense, autoethnography is more than a telling of one’s experience; it is a critical looking outward at power relations in a cultural space that constrains the meanings available for understanding the writer’s (i.e. one’s own) life and text (p. 235).

Here Neumann explains that autoethnography allows the author to critique the conditions of the culture in which the self is located. Along that same line, the examination of the writer’s cultural space becomes a means for understanding the writer’s own life and text. Ricci (2003) using Ellis and Bochner (1992) calls this the “bridge made available by autoethnography that links the personal with the cultural” (p.595). The autoethnographic method allows me to look back on the culture of my self, and examine the aspects of my identity negotiation. This method allows me to “tell stories that show bodily, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experience” (Ellis, 2004). This method allows me to draw a useful line from the research I write to the lives of those who read it. All these things

taken into consideration, autoethnography reveals itself to be the *perfect* mode of exploration and expression for this study.

Construction of Narratives

In exploring my dialectic cultural identities, this study consists of a series of creative autoethnographic narratives of the self (Richardson, 1994) focused on the negotiation of my contradicting identities. Personal narratives often occur as short stories, which is the form they appear in for this study (Ellis, 2004). Below, I will explain what I mean by “narrative” and offer a detailed explanation for how the final chapters of this thesis are to unfold.

When I utilize the term “narrative,” I am referring to the way the autoethnographic examination will be told as a story. Ellis (2004) expounds on this, explaining that “narrative refers to the stories people tell – the way they organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes” (p. 195). I would like to draw attention to the “episodes” part of her explanation. In this study, I have written narrative episodes that detail my identity negotiation. These narrative episodes are evocative short stories told in the first person, in a dialogic, conversational style. I have chosen this specific way of telling/exploring my story as a result of prior autoethnographic research I have experienced. My construction of narratives, modeled specifically after Rambo-Ronai (1992) and Ellis and Bochner (1992), blurs theory and story (this will be discussed in the next section), and details a different aspect/piece/time of my life.

These narrative episodes explore a few of the contradicting identities I negotiate on a daily basis. In the next chapter we will explore the negotiation of my spiritual identity and academic identity as a critical scholar, as well as my identity as a white male critical scholar aware of his whiteness. Overall, this examination is about the contradictions I encounter as I try to add my scholarly identity into the fold of who I am.

To complete my discussion of the construction of the narratives, I feel it is important to explain how I approached the writing of the narratives, as the approach I utilized is different. I wrote these narratives evocatively, not just as a scholar, but as a *novelist-scholar*. As a result, I have tried to make sure that my writing in the final chapters of this project not only meet scholarly standards, but literary standards as well. While I have utilized these methods to a certain extent throughout the first chapters of the thesis, the actual autoethnographic narratives you are about to experience will look and feel a bit different, as I blur theory and story together into one cohesive text. They have characters, a plot, and events described in vivid detail in hopes of drawing you into the experience so we can achieve understanding together.

Analysis of Narratives

Ellis (2004) notes that there are three different ways that analysis takes place in narrative. These are: “*narrative analysis, thematic analysis of narrative, and structural analysis of narrative*” (p. 195). For this project, I have utilized the first two, combining them into one mode of analysis, and blurring them seamlessly into the flow of the story being told (see sandwich discussion below).

Narrative analysis begins with the assumption that a good story is itself theoretical, as when people tell their stories, they utilize “analytic techniques to interpret their world” (Ellis, 2004, p. 196). With this type of analysis, the narrative stands alone *as the analysis* (See Tillman-Healy, 1996 for a good example of this). The goal of narrative analysis is to evoke a situation that the author has been through or studied in their life (Ellis, 2004).

Thematic analysis differs from narrative analysis in that thematic analysis treats stories as data and uses analysis to find common themes that link from story to story. Similar to grounded theory, the emphasis is more on the analysis and the themes that it uncovers than on the stories themselves. I have combined *narrative* and *thematic* analysis, utilizing more narrative analysis (than thematic) in the writing of the autoethnographic narratives for this study.

Ellis (2004) describes the way I have combined these two approaches as a *sandwich* – “a story with academic literature and theory on both sides” (p. 198). With this approach, I have “focus[ed] on telling [my] story, then frame[ed] it with an analysis of the literature or about accepted theoretical notions, or on generating new ideas” (Ellis, 2004, p. 198). This approach allows for the blurring of theory and story that I mentioned above, while still including a focus on the importance of theoretical analysis of the narratives.

To summarize, I have written what I call *episodic narratives of the self* that explore the negotiation of my dialectic cultural identities. Within these narratives, I have seamlessly interwoven analysis of what theory and literature say about the experiences I

am detailing in each of the narratives presented (See Rambo-Ronai, 1992; Ellis and Bochner, 1992 for specific examples). Utilizing this autoethnographic exploration of dialectic cultural identities provides an evocative, interesting contribution to autoethnographic and cultural studies literature.

Academic Adolescence and Touch

“My voice is cracking as I write this.” (Rambo-Ronai 1992, p. 104)

A few years ago, I found (my)self driving around the small town I lived in at one in the morning thinking about my life. Now, I do this a lot (thinking about my life, that is – driving around a small town at one a.m. gets you pulled over), but this time it was a little different. For some reason, I realized on that midnight drive that I wanted to be a writer. Not necessarily the book selling kind – just someone who writes. I felt good about that realization and decided that I would in fact become someone who writes.

Funny thing is I really didn’t know how to tell when I had officially become a writer. I couldn’t say that I would know I am a writer when I publish a book or story, because to do that you’d obviously have to be a writer before that point. Besides, I knew a handful of people who were writers who will probably never publish anything in their lifetime. After a year and a half of graduate school it finally hit me that I *am* a writer and have been one since

I began journaling back in college. I had been a writer for years and never realized it.

Please note that I didn't mention whether or not I was a *good* writer.

Realizing it was the first step – now I am learning to *live with it*.

Goodall (2000) tells me that ““Nobody is born a writer. It is an identity we invent for ourselves and then try very hard to live with, and within” (Goodall 2000, p. 24). Honestly, I am a bit reluctant to accept that part of me – not because I do not want to be a writer anymore, but because I do not *feel* like one. I do not feel like one because I do not have a very good “voice.” In fact, I do not think I have a voice at all. I guess you could say I am right in the middle of “academic puberty” – oh, sorry, someone more mature who has finished academic puberty would probably say “*academic adolescence*.” This awkward maturation process has led me to a new place in my writing, a new metaphor for how you and I are to interact. The usual metaphor is “voice.” I have even used this metaphor throughout my writing up until this point, but now I have to let you know that my voice is having problems so I want to assert something different.

I have heard much as a graduate student about finding a voice in my writing – finding *my* voice, *that* voice that distinguishes me from everyone else. But as I read the works I have produced in the past, I do not really hear a voice that sounds like me. To be completely honest, I find a voice that

sounds like every piece of literature I have read in the past few weeks leading up to the writing of whatever paper I am preparing at the last minute. Even looking back at creative writing I have done in my journal doesn't read like me – it reads like whatever piece of fiction I have been reading at the time. The playback from the small tape recorder I use to talk out my ideas reveals a voice that sounds like my father. Suddenly, I realize that the idea of me having a voice is problematic. Goodall (2000) tells me that I have to have character, and I think I have that, but voice is how he says I communicate that character. No matter how hard I try, I cannot find *my own* writing voice. It doesn't exist. Really all I am is a conglomeration of everything I have come across. What to do, what to do...

I know!!! Maybe it is at this point in my work where I assert my hot, new idea, the one that will point to my brilliance and pave the way for a terrific future in the academy:

I like the idea of touch.

I want to find my touch so that I can touch *you*. I want to touch you where you hurt, where you tickle – I want to massage your emotions and caress your feelings into a climax of shared experiences.

Get your mind out of the gutter.

This is intimate, not sexual.

Touch is more of a shared experience in my opinion. With voice, one person is talking and the other is listening. Sure there is interaction and sharing, but the two seem to interact in a detached manner. With touch, *both participants feel*. They feel together. Whoever initiates the touch really doesn't matter, both feel, together; skin to skin. My finger could caress your arm, and in doing so, your arm would simultaneously feel my finger. Ellis (2004) and Behar (1996) tell me that autoethnography has to break your heart and then put it back together – how can I put your heart back together without touching it?

It is reciprocal.

It is more intimate.

Doesn't writing have so much more to do with touch anyway? Grab a pen close by and sign your name on a piece of paper. The bottom of the hand and pinky finger resting on the top of the smooth white surface – the pressure of the thumb and first two fingers on the pen, pressing – tattooing the ink onto the page. Or, the finger tips – laying softly across the keys – you cannot press them too hard or out of order or you get a;lsdkjfa'asdkjf – each soft touch sends an electronic pulse which results in a letter appearing on the screen. Each one of the letters you are reading at this second represents at least one touch. Even the blank spaces between the words represent a touch. Try to write without touch. You cannot can you? Neither can I. Touch is an

inextricable part of writing – I want to make it an inextricable part of reading.

So, if you do not mind, I would like to touch you. This way we can feel each other as this journey progresses. How does that strike you?

CHAPTER IV
CONTRADICTING (MY)SELF

“I tend to write about experiences that knock me for a loop and challenge the construction of meaning I have put together for (my)self...”
(Ellis 2004, p. 33)

I see life in *slow-motion* sometimes;

The events around me *too dramatic* for real time.

They look normal to everyone else – but my eyes have been fitted with a slow-motion lens.

It feels like I have experienced all or most of the significant moments in my life in slow-motion. Perhaps I saw too many movies as a youngster, or there is something severely wrong with my eyes. Either way, I really do have moments like this. Good or bad, the big milestone “my life has been changed” moments happen in slow-motion. I am not altogether sure why it is that this happens – I think it has something to do with being born with an ethnographer inside of me. This odd gift allows me to almost transcend time and remember major life moments in disturbing clarity. A sudden hyper-awareness comes and I am able to soak *everything* in. The moments that occur in slow motion are

the ones that challenge my construction of meaning. These moments are the ones I write about. Some of these are the moments you and I are about to experience together.

As I articulate the following episodes, I have denoted the slow motion moments with a larger font – some of the words will stand out more than the words around it. Please read these lines carefully. With large text, it is easy for us to read more quickly, to skim over those words easily – please read the large text at the same speed that you would read the rest of the text. This is intended to give you the surreal feeling I get when I am living that moment in my life.

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first two sections will focus on how various identities contradict with my academic identity as a critical scholar, while the last one will explore how these contradictions are productive as they create moments of possibility in the way that I teach, do research, write, and live. Looking at these sections more specifically, section one will examine how my spiritual identity as a Christian contradicts my emerging academic identity; section two will detail tensions that result from the fact that I am a white heterosexual male and a critical scholar. Overall, this is an exploration of how this academic identity comes into opposition with the rest of the pieces of who I am. The constant tug created by the tensions between my identities reminds me of how I should view the world around me as I live my life.

As a result of my use of episodic narrative, two points are important to explain. First, I will not be exploring or examining *entire* identities. In this chapter I am explaining that the multiple *cultural locations* (Heuman, 2004) that I occupy create tensions between my identities. Secondly, as a result of not being able to examine entire

identities, all I can offer is a *series of episodes* (moments) where my identities run into each other and the negotiation of them requires maintenance. Each narrative is an account of a different identity episode.

I am not sure I have ever been as honest or open with (my)self as I am in the narratives we are about to explore. You will experience feelings that I felt *as I felt them*. Some of them are repressed feelings that I held in for a long time that fought their way to the surface and demanded to be felt. Others are purely from that particular moment. I am writing as someone immersed in the moment, so the feelings and emotions articulated here are purposefully *raw*. If while experiencing one of my darker moments you read something that makes you uncomfortable or angry, I would like to ask two things of you: one – ask yourself *why* whatever it was made you uncomfortable or angry. Perhaps there is something very important there that you should acknowledge and or examine. Perhaps I have made you feel what I was feeling. Second – keep on reading with the knowledge that you are experiencing *one* episode that is articulating *a piece* of a situation. Try to avoid generalizing the person presented in the narratives into my whole self. Ellis (2004) notes that “readers often assume you continue to be the story you wrote” (p. 34). I am not the same person I was when I began this project, and I will not be the same as I am now when it is finally finished. You too will experience a change within yourself. Change is the experience that will bring us together on this journey.

So, I offer you a look at me – as it is now.

Section One: Autoethnographic Episodes of a Christian Critical Scholar

“...sense making and identity often are **entangled** with religious and spiritual beliefs” (Ellis, 2004, p. 98-99).

A Spiritual Conversion

I sit staring deep into the campfire while a man speaks off to my right. I am sitting on a large cold stone in a circle with about 20 other teenagers with a butt that is *now* fully numb and toes that feel like they are about to freeze right off, completely lost in thought about what happened to me earlier today. I am supposed to be paying attention to the bible study that is going on right now, but I am totally checked out – an ax murderer could jump out of the trees that surround us and I wouldn’t notice. Right now, it is just me and the fire as I remember my experience from this morning.

After breakfast I hurry to my sleeping bag where I have already laid out my bible and spiral for easy access. My feet make a rhythmic sound as I stride across the tarp floor we’ve put down in our tent. It is almost time for “quiet time” and I have got a place that I want to make sure I get to first.

“Quiet time” is a 30 minute period after breakfast when everybody goes off by themselves to “meet with god.” We are not allowed to travel too far from the campsite, so prime spots are hard to come by. Most of the older kids who’ve been here before have the best spots, ones that they’ve claimed on a perennial basis. Since this is my first time, I still haven’t really found a place that I am happy with.

Yesterday afternoon, however, I found a spot that I really want. It is about 30 yards from the campsite at the edge of a fairly large creek. There’s a large rock there that hangs over the water – it’ll make a great place to sit, and today I am going to make sure that it is mine.

I get back to the covered area just in time to hear the adults tell us all to get our stuff and head out for quiet time. I rush toward my spot, delighted that nobody else is even headed in this general direction. Being in this kind of hurry reminds me of the feeling I used to get when playing hide-n-go-seek. As soon as the person would start to count, I would hurry to my hiding place and get set as quickly as possible. Then, once there, practice barely breathing so that when they said “ready or not here I come” I could be as silent as possible. I arrive to my spot before most of the other youth even have their things. I feel an odd sense of victory and pride in obtaining this spot. I am just lucky it is not one of the older kid’s places.

Once I perch (my)self on the top of the rock, I find that I am pretty satisfied with (my)self – I have haven't found a place this quickly all week long. This is both good and bad because now I guess I need to “meet with god” and honestly have no idea how to do that. So far all I have done the past few days during this time is look for a spot. I look at the natural beauty around me and take as much of it in as I can. The sun is warm on my skin and the cold mountain water with the pine trees produces a sweet smell. Seeing all this beauty and life that I do not understand leads me to ask the question that possibly every human that ever lived has asked: ***God, are you real?*** Then I pause for a long moment – a very long moment in which I hear the silence of the outdoors. It is beautiful. Then, as if one by one, the noises of nature begin to trickle in. I sit completely still, and *feel*. Then, on the rock there by the creek, ***something inside of me tells me that God is real.*** It was like realizing that you are in love with someone. Suddenly, it just becomes glaringly obvious and you wonder how you didn't see it before. This moment extends into an experience and as it ends I have chosen to believe that God exists. It was simple as that. I have been pondering what making this choice means all day, and that is what I am trying to figure out as I stare at the fire.

When I walk into the office of the church, I immediately see that Terry is waiting for me. We shake hands and he leads me into a back part of the office where the youth pastor search committee is waiting. It is a pretty large room, and each person is seated neatly around a very large table. This committee is made up of parents who have students in the youth group. I recognize some of these people as parents of kids I knew in high school. They then proceed to ask me questions and present me with scenarios that test my knowledge and abilities. The interview goes very well and I feel good when they offer me the position with about 5 minutes of deliberation. We shake hands and I am welcomed onto the church staff. My part-time job as youth pastor begins. Now I am the man speaking at the camp fire. ***I think this is who I am supposed to be, and fight to convince (my)self that it is right.***

I am wrong.

In the seven years between my conversion (at 13) to Christianity and becoming a youth pastor (at 20), I grew very deeply in the area of my faith. Most would call me devout. My spiritual identity became one of the largest, most influential identities that I had. In fact, if someone were to ask me “who/what are you?” I would answer with Christian first. Because of the large

role my faith played in who I was, I felt that I might be “called” to this type of service in the church. I found through my speech communication major at college and my job as a professor’s assistant that I really loved working with people. I simply added my deep faith with my love for people and “the ministry” seemed the logical place for me. However, my time as the interim youth pastor at that church provided me with the experience that made me realize that there was *something else* for me to do, *someone else* for me to be. My heart was broken. This doesn’t mean that I forsook the spiritual part of who I am. Spiritual identity is an important dimension of my life, and that is something I am not ready to change. It is just that the person the church was turning me into was one I was not prepared to be. There is an expectation that you have to believe every piece of doctrine as fact and take on the theology of whatever religion you are a part of. I haven’t found a doctrine or theology that I am *completely* sure of or happy with yet, and having a leader who’s answers are sometimes “I do not know” or “I am not sure yet” can be detrimental to the organization – especially when those answers come in response to key issues in the church doctrine and teachings, issues which have “correct” answers. I was answering questions that way on a daily basis.

I came to realize that I loved the teaching and interacting with students, but that I wasn’t made for the halls of a church, at least not yet. My place is in the university classroom.

A Scholarly Conversion

The only day left on the sign-up sheet when it gets to me is the last one. I do not like presenting in class so late in the semester – that is when things are always the craziest. But, I see that the other person signed up on that day is a friend of mine, and working with him on this presentation won't be bad. I look and see that the theory we'll be presenting is called "postcolonialism."¹ I am not familiar with what this is as a result of my undergraduate communication theory class not covering it. There are *other* communication theories on the list that I recognize: narrative paradigm, symbolic interactionism, etc... I sign my name in blue ink and pass the sheet back up to the professor.

The next week, just as the professor calls for a short break in our class, he catches me on the way to the soda machine.

"Brandon, I was finalizing the presentation order and noticed that you signed up for postcolonialism. I also noticed that it was probably as a result of you getting the list last and having no other place to sign up. I just want to tell you that this theory is not a communication theory in the traditional

¹ Postcolonialism is the study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonize in the modern period. It is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry committed to theorizing the problematics of colonization and decolonization, and deals with the impartation of western thought, government, and morality upon the non-western world (Hedge & Shome, 2002; Shome & Hedge, 2002). Postcolonialism is a broader critical product of cultural studies, and attempts to redo the epistemic structure of the culture that is being colonized by a dominant culture.

sense; it is not a theory in the way you are probably used to or have experienced before. I had intended for a pair of second year graduate students to present those later theories. Are you sure that you feel comfortable diving in so deep at the end of your first semester? I can move somebody around if you feel uncomfortable. “

“Thanks, sir, but I really feel fine about it. My partner and I have already discussed it a bit and realize it will be a challenge, one that we look forward to. If it is difficult to understand, I will just read about it until I understand it.”

“That’s fine. I am glad the two of you have already talked. See you back in class.”

I am a bit upset about this conversation at first. I feel like my professor is telling me that I am not smart enough to handle this theory so early in my graduate school career. I immediately put on my “I’ll show him” attitude.

When we start doing research I quickly find that he was right about it being tough. We learn right off the bat that it is extremely hard to research because our library doesn’t have many resources on postcolonialism. This says something, as I am in graduate school at a large division one university. I also find that this theory *is* different from every theory I have ever come across; but even more so than that, I find that it is *exciting*. I find (my)self agreeing with what it posits, even though *I*, the white male American am the

focus of its critique. Its arguments are fascinating and I am enjoying compiling the information for the presentation.

Then, in the few weeks preceding our presentation, I begin to enjoy class on another level. There have been student presentations of communication theories for the past month, and we are all about ready for them to be over. There are only 4 more to go – and it is now that they really get my attention. Within a week or two in class I get exposed to hegemony, spiral of silence, marxism, all of these building up to our presentation on postcolonialism.

I am also starting to get fired up in class. I see the power structures that these theories talk about very clearly. I am one of the few in the class who sees this knowledge as valuable – everyone else thinks it is a cynical view on the world and that it is a waste of energy. “There’s nothing we can ever do to change the situation, so let’s just live our lives in peace” is the cry I hear. But I see room for change – I see possibilities that emerge as a result of the examination of these power structures. Sure change is difficult, but all we do if we do nothing is ensure that everything stays the same; and this for me, is no longer an option.

I start to carry these theories around with me now, and I am beginning to see the everyday world through this lens. I am shocked more than anything when I open my bible and when I walk into my church. My faith is

possibly the most *overtly* postcolonial entity that I can see; suddenly missionary work resembles the invasion of a dominant culture onto another, more subverted one. This area of my life where I used to never think twice about the rhetoric or power dynamic is now under the microscope like never before.

But yet I still go...

When Conversions Converge I: The Critical Scholar Goes to Church

I sit down and grab my bible and spiral as the preacher moves from the side of the stage to the center of it. As quietly as possible, I tear out a piece of paper and fold it so it is thick enough to be used as a fan. The temperature is fine; I just worked up a sweat in the worship we've just finished.

I usually begin to get excited as he starts to talk – he's excellent at what he does. He's described around here as "anointed to preach the word." I would have to agree. He usually teaches for *at least* an hour from the stage and hardly loses anybody's attention – or doesn't lose attention like other preachers do, anyway. It rarely feels as long as it actually is when he's speaking. Today, he doesn't lose my attention – he never has it.

As the scriptures for this message flash up on the huge screen behind him, I start to think about how I love coming to church here, but that lately

things haven't been the same for me. Since my scholarly conversion, no matter how hard I try, ***I can no longer enter church and only be a Christian.*** I bring the critical scholar along. I try so hard to leave my scholarly identity at home, but when I turn on the radio I begin to analyze the commercials and comments the DJs make. I try to leave the scholar in the car but find (my)self listening carefully to the rhetoric of the preacher. This always unearths many problematic assumptions and statements mixed in with the great truths and principles he's speaking on.

I take a deep breath trying to pull (my)self out of my own thoughts, and decide to take a look around the room. This auditorium holds 2,000 people for four services each weekend. It is completely full right now, and the other three will be too. I try to focus on how big this place is so that I do not notice almost all in attendance are white or *white-appearing* (Warren, 2003). I notice it anyway. I look at the list of pastors, and some of them are women, but *none* of them are executive pastors. They do let women on stage to speak and lead in worship, which is more than most allow, but you get the sense that they are being watched. This church has a ministry that focuses on ministering to people "suffering from homosexuality." I hear "encouraging testimonials" of people who have "overcome that issue" in their life. I do not see a ministry focused on people who "struggle with heterosexuality."

All of these problematic things my critical scholar eye sees (heterosexism, sexism, whiteness), *and I still feel comfortable and want to be here*. How is this possible? Right now I do not know. All I do know is that I cannot give up being a Christian or being a critical scholar. What does this mean for me? How can I reconcile these opposing identities? Is reconciliation an option? These are two *intricate* parts of who I am – two lenses that I view the world around me with; and I believe strongly in both of them. I cannot be sometimes one, and sometimes the other. I AM ALWAYS BOTH. This is what I mean when I say that I am a walking contradiction.

When Conversions Converge II: The Heterosexist Critical Scholar

I begin my journal entry with “I have always been heterosexist.” This part of me makes me sad, and is difficult to admit. The worst part of it all is that I KNOW IT IS PROBLEMATIC for me to be heterosexist. If I could take a pill to automatically remove this part of me, I would take it. I feel guilty whenever I correct a student’s rhetoric when they say something heterosexist, because I know I still have a piece of (my)self that is that way. I

have not completely resolved this issue within (my)self. This too is what I mean when I say that I am a walking contradiction.

When I went to college as an undergraduate, I wasn't only heterosexual, I was homophobic. I was as naïve as anybody could ever be about the issue of homosexuality. This was a result of me only learning about homosexuality in the confines of the church – where it was condemned outright and then left alone. As my years at college went along, ***I began to make friends with people who had different sexual orientations than me.*** As a result, I was surrounded by many young men and women who had to deal with coming out while in college. Watching people who I knew were good, normal people (good and normal both being things I was told homosexuals could not be) go through such an excruciatingly painful experience all because of their natural attraction to someone of the same sex really opened my eyes. For many of them, simply being who they were got them removed from their family. Parents who I had seen helping my friends move into their dorm room at the beginning of the semester, were not there at the end to help take them home.

I even began to realize that ***I knew people who had the same religious faith as I did and were homosexual;*** this was something I assumed didn't happen and thought wasn't possible.

Most of them were better Christians than I was. This completely blew my mind, and getting to know them dramatically changed my outward response to this issue – but inside, the struggle continued. I was no longer homophobic, but was still unsure if I was ready to be completely “ok” with it. I had always been uneasy with the overt anti-homosexual rhetoric displayed in the churches I had attended and was pushed back by the either/or position held by the faith that meant so much to me; but there was still something refreshing about a place that wasn’t afraid to be “politically incorrect.” It felt right for some reason for the preacher to stand firm for what he believed – if that was really what he was doing. It still feels right.

It is indescribably difficult to reconcile the teachings I have believed in for so long with the things I have seen and experienced around me. My experiences tell me one thing, and my faith another about what it means to be homosexual. Then one day I realized that maybe I do not have to choose one side or the other – that ***maybe I need these opposing identities – maybe the tensions between my scholarly and spiritual identity are necessary.*** Perhaps I cannot completely rid (my)self of my heterosexism because it helps me to remember the progress that I have made, while at the same time allowing me a place to level with my students who are the same way. The touch of heterosexism that

I still have keeps me honest and nonjudgmental while reminding me that there is still more progress to be made – that I cannot give up. I cannot give up on (my)self or my students or people or society. If I can change and move toward a better place, then so can everyone else. Taking this view of my opposing identities begins to change me...

Section Two: Autoethnographic Narratives
of a White Male Critical Scholar

Flashback with me

To A

Slow Motion Moment

I realize deep inside of (my)self that ***I do not know my own
cultural identity.***

I am *ashamed* that I do not know my own cultural identity, and I
have set (my)self up as someone who does. *I am a walking
contradiction.*

...pause...breathe...Stop for a moment and ponder...

I am *still* a walking contradiction – but not for the same reason as before.

Realize this is now my *way of life*.

Read my body as a text – it looks mainstream but it is not. Know that what you see is at odds with what a critical academic would suggest, and *I am a critical academic*. Everything my body represents contradicts my philosophies. I am a walking contradiction.

How do I live?

With my eyes open.

Beep – beep – beep

Beep – beep – beep

Beep – beep – beep

Beep – beep –

I finally wake up enough to grab the alarm clock and hit the snooze button in the middle of the fourth set of beeps. As I lay there, my heart beating in my ears, the cat comes over and lays on my face. As I angrily retire him to the floor, I wonder if Ron Pelias' (2004; 2000) cat still does that to him.

I manage a small grin as I imagine sharing an early-morning moment with a scholar I admire.

The light clicks on after my fingers clamor for the switch for a few moments. The light hits my eyes hard, and I squint, allowing a little bit in at a time. Slowly, and in between heavy blinks I open them more and more until finally I can let all the light into my sleepy stupor. As I dig the crustiness of sleep out of the corner of my eyes I am greeted by my reflection in the bathroom mirror. Much to my disappointment, I have woken up in the body I went to bed in. It is basically the same one I had yesterday but it is a day older with more stubble, and it is tired. I proceed into the daily detailed examination of my surface reflection. A close look confirms that I can still see all the pores on my nose. The other minor blemishes look to either be going away or causing more. A small move back reveals the bags under my eyes as a result of a late night spent reading and writing. A full move back reveals that I look like hell. I sigh and step outside the view of the mirror so I can undress for my shower. Seeing (my)self naked in the mirror is a truth I dare not encounter this early in the morning.

The hot water feels good on my aching muscles and I slowly begin to really wake up. After washing my hair, I am awake enough to notice my skin. Lately I have been noticing how white I really am. *Very white*. For some reason, being wet and naked is the opposite of sexy to me, and it is in this

position that I begin to contemplate what it means for me to live in this skin; this body. Since my experience that day in the classroom, I cannot take a shower without looking at (my)self in a completely different way. I am suddenly fascinated with the color and intricacies of my skin. The freckles, hairs, cuts and scabs come together to form more than just a covering for my insides. There are assumptions and “privileges”² attached to my skin just like my skin is attached to my body. Unearned “privilege” and power are stretched over me in an invisible coat called “whiteness” (McIntosh, 1988). This whiteness is not just referring to the color of my skin. It is the fact that the color of my skin is considered normative in the country where I live, and this brings me the “privileges” that come from belonging to the dominant group (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). As a member of the dominant group, I have access to the *cultural spaces* (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) and conditions that McIntosh (1988) refers to in her research (such as: I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time; and, I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race). Whiteness translates into normative race privilege and power that people of other races do not have access too.

Reaching for the soap, I begin to relive an experience from the golf course last week.

² I agree with McIntosh (1988) that privilege is a bad word for what my skin brings me. It implies a good thing, something I would want, when in reality I do not.

Standing on the 15th tee, I talk with the three other men I have been playing golf with for the past three hours. I am friends with _____,³ who invited me to go on this outing. He knows _____, an older gentleman whom I have play with before, and _____ knows _____. We are all getting along smashingly and are having a very good time playing golf together. I am feeling confident for a change, as I have been playing very well. In fact, I would have to quit to lose I am so far ahead by this point. The three of us have been messing around all day, not taking ourselves too seriously, when _____ reaches into his pocket and pulls out a black tee. It is been a joke a minute all day with each of us firing off when something comes to our head.

_____, seeing the black tee in his hand, says “look boys, a ***flesh colored tee***” and he and the other two crack up. The joke *isn't* funny, and really doesn't make any sense, but _____ and _____ laugh because it is just what you do. It never registers to them that it was a racist statement, commenting on the fact that there is a ***right*** color for flesh and a ***wrong*** color. I am not sure what to do, as I am completely offended and want to shout out “It IS a flesh colored tee.” But I do not. I just keep quiet and hurry up to the hitting

³ It is important to note that the names of the men are right there on the page for you to see. You cannot see them because I purposefully changed the color of the text to white so that their names would disappear into the background. I am not doing this to protect them. This is meant as a metaphor for whiteness. It is right there, all around us, but invisible. It remains as such until we expose its unseen presence.

area, acting like I didn't hear them. "Why ruin the good time?" was my thought. As my ball lands to the right of the green, I realize how sick I make (my)self. The normative white male overtook the critical scholar this time.

Back to my white and now soapy skin, I shake my head at my own retreat into my comfort zone that day at the golf course. Sadly, it wouldn't have been that long ago when I would have laughed and thought nothing of it. But now, with my eyes open to what Warren (2003) calls "the machinery" of whiteness, I cannot let the fact that I kept quiet go. I rack (my)self with guilt over this situation, realizing that not saying something is just as racist as laughing along. Hytten and Warren (2003) note that students can engage in whiteness rhetoric even while pointing it out in other parts of their lives. I did the same thing in this situation. How can I be a critical scholar that studies this aspect of life and simply ignore it when I come across it? That day at the golf course, my white male identity intersected with the critical academic identity and I didn't know how to deal with it. A voice inside of me tried to tell me that just noticing the presence of whiteness is enough for me. But I know it is not. Living that way would be succumbing to the pressure to avoid its presence, to allow (my)self to disappear into the status quo and comfort of the background again, and I cannot do that. To keep completely silent is to reify it. McIntosh (1988) notes on this point that "the pressure to

avoid it is great...” and that “white identity and status give me considerable power to choose whether to broach this subject and its trouble” (p. 5,7).

Choosing not to broach the subject with the men on the golf course was me exercising my own white privilege.

But I cannot get caught up in my guilt, either. As I rinse the soap off my back and underarms, I realize that I have been stuck in the rut of “the torpefied” (Warren and Hytten, 2004). This is a face that some people dealing with whiteness put on in response to it. This persona “realize[s] they oppress, and find themselves without agency to think through that oppression in order to change” (Warren and Hytten, 2004, p. 325). This guilt they feel leads them to often look for easy answers – like just trying to tell yourself that noticing it is good enough.

Warren and Hytten (2004) tell me that I need to strive for what they call the “Critical Democrat.” This persona “balance[s] their examinations of their own role in racism while simultaneously examining the roles of others” as well as “balancing their own understanding of whiteness and racism while continuing to read and participate in conversations about the intricacies of racial constructions of power” (p. 331). As my shower ends, I laugh at (my)self that I have begun to think in source citations, and in the shower no less. But doesn’t graduate school do that do you?

I shut off the water and reach for a towel. A curse emanates from my mouth when I realize there's not one near the shower. I politely call to my wife, hoping she's not downstairs already. If she's downstairs, I will get to perform the "I am naked, wet, and cold and need a towel" dance from the shower to the towel shelf and then back to the shower. I hate that dangerous dance and am especially not in the mood to do it this morning. I am relieved when she answers me with a teasing "did you forget your towel *again*?" I answer with a timid yes, and she brings me a towel – making me beg for it through the shower curtain. After the proper amount of groveling, she flops it over the rail at the back of the shower and asks me what I would do without her. I grab the towel and respond that I would die a slow, wet death. She laughs and heads into her closet. I begin to feverishly dry my hair and think about what I want to wear today.

With my shower complete and clothes now covering my body, the mirror is safe for my navigation again. At this point I would say it is okay to take another look at me now that I am awake a little bit. As I begin to brush my teeth, I look intently at the details of my physical appearance. I am either 6'2 or 6'3 depending on how confident I am feeling on a particular day. Apparently, I am taller than I think. I always get asked how tall I am on the first day of class, and do not really know why. I am not freakishly tall, but I

guess I am a big man. I weigh probably 220 pounds or so, and could use to get rid of 10 or 15 of them. I have dark brown hair and green eyes, and can usually be seen with a little bit of stubble on my face. I like blue jeans and t-shirts but really only wear those on the weekend as a result of teaching 5 days a week. My hair looks cool messed up, or at least I think it does.

What does all of this really say about *me* though? If I read *this* body as a text, it represents everything that the critical academic in me sees as problematic. I am the “typical” white male when you look at me. I reek of middle class privilege. When you look at the clothes that I wear, the style of my hair, and the color of my skin, it becomes obvious that I AM HETERONORMATIVITY. I AM WHITENESS PERSONIFIED. I can walk into a room and not worry about any assumptions being made on my intelligence, qualifications, work ethic or sexuality based on my appearance or skin color. These aspects of my appearance and adversely, my identity, allow me access to the cultural spaces that allow me to live in the shell of my whiteness. But what can I do – I cannot *get away* from my body. This is the skin I am in, like it or not. I guess that I could just ignore it – revert back to the comfort zone provided to me by the color and privilege of my skin – but that would be wrong. I have made the choice as a critical scholar to live with my eyes open, and to keep them open to the problematics of my identity.

Maybe I could change the type of scholarship I do – but then I would be living with a scholarly identity that really is not me.

So it is here, at this crossroads I come to everyday looking in the mirror, where the critical scholar and white male meet. And it is here, staring the two opposing forces in the eyes that I remember my purpose, my mission as an academic. One of the reasons I have chosen to teach is so that I can make my students more aware of their own unearned privilege. I am no hero and the possibility for change in no way rests only on my shoulders. McIntosh (1988) notes that one person “can palliate, but cannot end these problems,” and that the first step in redesigning social systems is uncovering and acknowledging “their colossal unseen dimensions” (p.9). The best way that I know to acknowledge their unseen dimensions, is to open the doors for communication and begin to bring light to them. I want to shine the flashlight’s beam on the machine of whiteness, revealing it to those who haven’t seen it before (Warren, 2003).

Section Three: Possibilities

The answer to question five swings at me from the page and it is all I can do to dodge its onslaught. I immediately blame (my)self; feeling that this is resulting from an obvious gap in my teaching ability. We covered the

“Culture and the Workplace” section of the book – there is even material from that chapter on the same test as this question over the job interview. Are the students even aware of their assumptions?

Maybe you can see the problem:

5). After being introduced to the head engineer at Buildings R’ Us, Bobby sits down and the interviewer asks him “The Question.” What question did the interviewer ask Bobby?

For your own reference, the answer is “Could you tell me a little about yourself?” I like to discuss with my students how this question is guaranteed to come up in an interview, and how they need to be able to handle it without ruining their chances for getting the job. I ask this question and have them write it in to make sure that they know this question is an important one. As I graded the answers, I went back multiple times to see if I mentioned anything about the biological sex of the head engineer. I see no mention of that anywhere in the question. There is nothing to hint at this in previous questions. The questions prior to this one were simple definition oriented multiple choice questions and over a different section of the material we covered. But the student’s answers read like this:

He asked Bobby to tell *him* about himself.

He asked Bobby “could you tell us a little about yourself?”

“Could you tell us a little about yourself” is the question that *he* asked Bobby.

He asked Bobby why *he* should hire him.

He asked Bobby why he was qualified to work for *him*.

Such small words pointing to a huge assumption: *he*, *him*. Is this my fault? Is the question poorly written? Or does this truly point to the patriarchal slant in our society where only men can be in positions of power in the imaginations of the people or accepted in the sciences. All but 8 of the tests I graded assumed the sex of the engineer was male. Those 8 tests didn't assume any sex on the interviewer. They just answered the question.

Once I get all the tests graded, I look back at the names of the students at the top of the first page. I shake my head in disbelief, trying not to judge. Many students who claim a feminist ideology are writing these answers. Others who agreed that there is a power structure at work in our society unconsciously include "he and him" in their answer. Was it the fact that it was a test and they were in a hurry to spit out information, or does this really say something? I enter the grades into my spreadsheet, and decide that we will talk about this in class tomorrow.

The students are eager to see their test grade as I hand them their tests. They quickly flip to the back page and assess the damage. Some students sigh with relief, others get worried looks on their faces while a few

others comment “yeah, that’s about right.” I know that I will have to talk with the “worried looks” after class today.

I ask them to not put the test away – and already some of them have to retrieve the document from the depths of their bag. It is amazing how they can have something for a minute and the paper already looks like it has been to hell and back. When everyone gets their test out, I ask them to look at their answer to question #5. A few make comments on how they cannot believe they missed such an easy question as I ask one of the students to read the question out loud. She does, and afterwards, I ask them to look at *their answer* and circle any words that indicate gender. They do, and then I ask them to read the question and do the same. One of the more outspoken young women on the right side of the class room lets out a loud “Oh my god,” and immediately leans over to her friend and I hear her ask if she did the same thing. It quickly spreads around the room what I am trying to point out.

Most of the students that used “he” or “him” in their answer to describe the interviewer cannot believe they did it. Then a few of the students that didn’t include a gender descriptor admit that they *just assumed* the interviewer was male. The most outspoken person in class when we discussed the culture and the workplace chapter was a young woman who argued passionately that men and women are treated equally in the workplace, and that women who claimed things weren’t fair, or that there was a glass ceiling

were weak. She now sits silent at her desk, shaking her head as she stares at the circles in her answer. I know that she made the gender assumption in her answer, but I ask if there was anyone who was especially shocked that they used those words. She raises her hand, and I ask her if she would like to comment. She simply notes that she really did think men and women were treated equal – but looking at the material manifestation of her own as well as her classmates assumptions tells her that might not be true.

It is at this point that one of the male students from the back of the room raises his hand. He raises it in *that way*, really quickly with his head tilted to one side and his eyes mid-roll that tells me this comment is likely to be an ugly one.

I take a quiet, deep breath, and call on him He begins to speak.

“Ok, so this is *gay* – sure our society privileges men over women – but what can we do? I mean if all we do is sit here and talk about the problem we are just wasting time. What good does talk do?”

This comment pushes my buttons, and I want to fire a list of citations to him about how this is whiteness in the form of an appeal to progress (Hyttten and Warren, 2003) and the persona of the cynic (Warren and Hyttten, 2004) and that he’s utilizing one of the “privileges” that is afforded him due to his gender, sexuality, and skin color (McIntosh, 1988). But I cool (my)self down and find the calm to begin with “Well, let’s address that in two parts.

First, what do you mean by gay?” I try to begin a discussion that will open the door for the students in the class to problematize his rhetoric, so I am not “attacking” him. One young man in the front row turns around and tells him that is not really a proper use of the word, that it makes the statement that being gay is inherently bad and therefore could insult any homosexual person in the room. As this student makes this statement, my mind moves to my own struggle between what the critical scholar and what the Christian would say on this subject. I am thankful for the moments of introspection I have spent trying to negotiate this struggle. Now, in the classroom, I have the ability to walk the line between the two opposing ideologies that I live my life around.

The student who made the comment doesn’t seem to care. Then a female student also from the front of the room makes a great statement: “I understand your call for progress and how “just talking” about it *could* seem to be a waste, but, what good does stopping discussion do? To stop talking about it is to ignore it, and those with power and privilege have gotten by with that too long in our society.”

That comment single handedly sparks a discussion that will take up the entire class period. The students get up and leave the classroom talking about it. We do not cover what was on the syllabus for the day, and now I have to figure out what to do for the next time that we meet. Do I simply

leave out the material from that day, or do I try to make it up somehow? How do I account for what happened in class today? It was a wonderful class period, full of tough questions and hashed-out answers. I could really see the student's minds turning. Whether or not they think this is a problem in our society, everyone had to think on another level today. I am exhausted as I return to my office, having to be that on your toes from start to finish is tiring. I sit back in my chair and rethink some of the things I said and the direction I led them in today. I hope I did the right thing, I hope I didn't let my white male heteronormativity take control.

Soon I decide that thinking about it too much will ruin the moment, so I go get a drink of water.

Teaching is a very emotional practice for me. It is this way for one main reason, and I feel odd telling you. But, I have held no punches so far, so I might as well lay it out: I fall in love with my students every semester. It is not love at first sight, not puppy love – it is the kind of love that gets forged out of time and shared experiences. I do not mean to, but I join my students on a journey every semester. Some of them do not make it all the way, some of them barely make it, most times I barely make it. Some students reject me altogether. But two months in, I find (my)self enraptured with the personalities that occupy those desks.

Some of those personalities remain only a name and a level of work that they turn in to me. Others do not even get that far. But most are willing to talk and share and laugh and cry right along with me. I am always very heartbroken on the last day of class, when we say our goodbyes. I leave the classroom and go to my office and sit and remember and hope for the best in each of their lives, knowing that some of them may not make much of themselves in the future.

I realize that this ability to love my students in this manner is as a direct result of my negotiating my contradicting identities. When I am faced with a collision of white male critical scholar and critical scholar Christian, there really is no final resolution. I just get better at handling it each time. I see these same contradictions in my students, and having examined my own I am able to reach out and simply love them where they are at. Love is really the only thing that comforts me in my contradictions – maybe that is what they need too. My thought is that if I am wrong, that is fine. I can never miss by loving someone.

Let me explain what I mean by love in regard to my students. I am talking about a camaraderie, a bond, a sharing of experiences, a trip there and back, *together*. I purposefully choose the term “love” because it is not all peaches and cream. Sometimes I have to deliver a grade that they do not want, or ask someone to watch how they are talking in my classroom.

Sometimes I even have to ask someone to leave. It is a connection beyond the material discussed in the class that leads the students to an even greater level of application of that material outside of the classroom. I also choose love because love is full of possibilities. When there is love in my classroom, I do not give up on my students that do not seem to care or that reject me at the start. Love reminds me to keep pressing, that there is always the chance something good can come out of a situation. This also reminds my students to not give up on me, when I am having a hard time explaining something to them or when we are having a hard time coming to a consensus on a discussion. I have found that love leads to learning.

I would have never thought that dealing with contradicting identities would teach me how to love on a whole other level, but it has. It feels very cheesy and cliché to end this chapter with “love is the answer.” But what else can you do when that *is* the answer?

A good friend of mine informed me over dinner recently that nobody will ever read the research I have done for my thesis, and that it really doesn't matter. I was informed that I will look back at it once I am in my doctoral program and wonder how I could write so poorly. I do not doubt that, but my thesis not important? I think it is...

The contradictions I have experienced with these dialectic identities have brought me to a whole new place of awareness in my identity negotiation. I have learned to embrace the dialectic identities, not try to erase one. The exploration of these difficult issues in my life has produced positive moments for me. Sure, there may not be a bunch of other people who read this, but that is not why I do research. That is not why I write.

Writing and doing research the way that I do it is very important to me, and dealing with these contradicting identities reminds me of why I do it. I do it first and foremost for (my)self. The simple writing and carrying out of research is inspirational for me. It is difficult, but I cannot do anything else. And as far as nobody reading it – I ask this question: whose research do you read the most? YOUR OWN. Sure you have to read other scholar's work to get yours together, but you do not read their pieces time and time again like you do in preparing your own. The hours spent toiling over a single page of text – if nobody ever reads the research you write, at least you can say that you read it, and you were changed by what you did. This is why I write and do research the way I do it.

I am thankful for the reminder that my contradicting identities give in regard to how and why I write and conduct my research. It has made me a better, more effective person and communicator. I have been changed by my work, and that is the least I can ask.

CHAPTER V

*ALL THAT YOU CAN'T LEAVE BEHIND*⁴

*“I wonder what is going to happen to you, you wonder what has happened to me.”
(Bono, 2000).*

No matter how much I want to, I cannot leave behind who I am; not my skin, not my faith, not my scholarship. I think about how U2's album *All That You Can't Leave Behind* (2000) relates to this. I love how that band has a way of allowing for personal interpretation in their music, lyrics, and in this case, album titles. It means what it means to you depending on where you are at in your life when you experience it. Thinking of that album makes me remember a line from my favorite song off of that record. *Kite* (2000) is the name of the song and it is the one that is in my head as I stand here in line to get on *The Maid of the Mist*. “I wonder what is going to happen to me once I get on that boat” I think to (my)self. I continue to sing the lines of the song under my breath while I look at the price breakdown for what it is going to cost me to go on this ride. For some reason I feel like I am saving money as a result of the \$7.00 American side of the sign, as opposed to the \$11.00 Canadian side. There are signs like this all over the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, and each one of them makes me feel like I am receiving a bargain.

⁴ U2, (2000). The title of the album actually comes from a line in a song on the album. In *Walk On* Bono sings about how love is the only thing that you can't leave behind when you leave this life. Or it could be a line about love is just the most important thing in life. Again, the song can be about whatever you need it to be.

Deep down I realize that I am not, but it is nice to live in the denial that the signs grant me entrance too.

The wait is short, and I begin to do a bit of math as I realize that one boat can hold close to 200 people or so. Every one of these boats I have watched today trudge up close to the falls and then turn around and come back is *full* of tourists. Cha-Ching. I reach into the large box and grab a garbage bag like poncho and attempt to maneuver into it as I walk toward the boat.

With everybody crammed on, the boat begins to head closer and closer to the falls. I am by (my)self on this ride, so I listen to the group of German tourists talk to each other just ten feet away from me. I lean on the rail and marvel at the enormity of the falls as they get bigger and bigger.

Before too long, a cold wet mist wrapped in a strong head wind that comes off the falls hits me, knocking me off balance a bit and causing me to grab onto a pole so I can steady (my)self. The mist is pretty strong, so I pull up the hood on my poncho so I do not end up with a wet head of hair. The wind only gets stronger, and the mist turns into more of a shower as the boat gets even closer to the base of the falls. The constant thunderous rumble of the water hitting the jagged rocks begins to get deafening. It is LOUD and unrelenting. There is a pure natural energy coming off the falls that you cannot deny or ignore. Now I am gripping the rail, water hitting me hard in

the face, but I do not move because the sheer power of the falls is breathtaking. We are still easily 100 yards from the falls themselves, but it feels like we are right upon them, reaping their powerful but beautiful wrath. As the boat turns its side to the falls, the tourists that were on the other side of the boat crowd to the side I am standing on so that they can get a prolonged view. They all shuffle very carefully across the deck, a few people losing their balance as the boat shifts with the rough waters that result from the rapids from the falls. ***The boat seems to pause here – almost like it is treading water.*** Everyone settles in and ***no one speaks.*** Here, huddled on one side of the boat, we all share in the awe of the moment together.

Once the boat completes its turn around, the mist and wind begin to die down as we put distance between us and the falls. Talk begins to happen again, most of it about how amazing that was. I just stand in silence, trying to take everything in.

When the boat stops, I remove my poncho and head down the ramp in a huge mass of people. We follow the rails back onto land, and then find ourselves in the gift shop. I shake my head as I realize that the gift shop is the *only* exit from this ride. “Genius,” I think to (my)self. That really is a life changing experience, and they’ve found a way to make money off of it.

Despite this unabashed display of capitalism at its finest, I find there's something comforting about the gift shop. It is where you stop and remember your journey, if only for a moment. It is a place that allows you to find a way to commemorate what you went through, if you felt the journey was worth whatever outlandish price you'll have to pay for something to remember it with. I think this one was worth it.

I smile and begin to shop for souvenirs.

I would like to treat this final chapter as my gift shop. Just like the boat trip, this is the only exit. Do not distress, this is a place for us to look back and remember what has taken place, how I have grown, and why the journey that is drawing to a momentary close is important.

Don't leave...please...

The souvenirs are paid for with the experiences we have gone through to get here. I would say we both endured the mist and the wind throughout this project. Take what you want; it is all free as a result of taking the journey with me. All I ask is that you come shop with me – let me share in reflecting on this journey with you.

In the midst of doing something huge, it is easy to forget why it even got started in the first place. By this point in the journey, it is very easy to be exhausted with the adventure, and to just want to head straight for the exit over there. But, examining the ins

and out of where you have been and why you went there makes the trip more worthwhile.

This journey began with the desire to take you along with me in an examination of the contradicting identities that I found (my)self negotiating. I set out on this exploration in search of answers to some difficult questions. But, as it usually is in life – one of the things I have learned is that the answer is not *the thing* – it is the experience that comes as a result of looking for it that is *the thing*. There are no answers in this gift shop, only realizations, revelations, epiphanies, and remembered experiences.

As I begin to mill around the shop, a picture of (my)self taken just before I entered graduate school grabs my attention. I take a close look at who that picture shows I used to be, and looking at (my)self now, I can see how much of an effect the academic identity has had on me. I can see that I have only just begun to learn how to include my scholarly identity into the fold of who I am and how I live my life. The “critical scholar” part of me contradicts with many other parts of who I am, but I still love that part of me. I resist nostalgia looking at this picture, and place it back on the shelf.

Moving away from the picture, I contemplate how this journey made me stare at (my)self in a way that I never have before. Many times I found (my)self gripping onto the rail, holding on for dear life as I stared something huge square in the face. Strolling over to the t-shirts, I see one that says “heterosexist Christian critical scholar” on the front and “white-male critical scholar” on the back. I pull it off the rack and look for the tag to see what size it is. I find no tag, and realize that I can wear it both ways – there’s no front or back to this shirt. It all depends on how I wear it. This one’s a must have.

I drape the shirt over my shoulder and head to the book section of the store. There are many interesting titles to choose from, two of which get my attention. I take them off the shelf and examine their contents. This first one is on dialectics and absolutes. It is a book that explores how I do not have to see things as absolutes regarding my cultural identities. This is because with the presence of dialectics, there can be no enforcement of absolutes in that the very fact that I have one identity means that there will be another part of me that contradicts that particular identity (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). It notes that to be successful in the negotiation of these identities, I have to employ both/and thinking and avoid either/or thinking. Cool.

The second book I pull off the shelf is one exploring how the negotiation of dialectic identities is at the essence of what it means to be human. This idea is based on Bakhtin's (1981) notion that dialectic tensions are the "deep structure" of human existence and are in fact not destructive, but productive. These contradictions are necessary for us to learn how to manage all of the tiny parts of who we are. Dealing with these produce moments of learning and moments of communication for us in our lives that teach us how to manage who we are and who we are becoming. Deep.

Confident that the reading in these two books is enough to occupy me for quite some time, I move on. On the wall just past the book shelf is what looks like some kind of growth chart. I walk over to it and see that I can stand up next to this, and measure (my)self. It is a Hardiman's (1994) growth chart that measures my majority identity development. Curious, I stand next to the measuring device and put my hand on the wall and carefully turn around. There are five stages on this scale, and it appears that I am

right between stage four (redefinition) and stage five (integration). The description for the fourth stage tells me that it represents people who begin to refocus their energy toward redefining whiteness in non-racist terms (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). Gosh, this thing is right on, I do that everyday when I look in the mirror. I look to see about stage five. This is where an individual is “able to integrate their whiteness into all other facets of their identity” (Martin & Nakayama 2004, p. 176). Again, right on. I am still redefining my world as a result of realizing my own whiteness. I step back, take one last look at the colorful chart, and continue to shop.

Arriving at the movie section, I speak to the attendant behind the counter. This is the spot where you can purchase a video of yourself on the ride that you just took. It is bulky, but the journey has been a great one, so I decide that I should go for it. After a few moments, they bring out the box set of movies that my journey has produced. It is called “If My Life Were a Movie” and is a series of films that takes a critical angle at the adventure I have been on. This set of movies explores the effects of power, “privilege,” skin color, class, sexuality, and religion on identities, and how these can result in dialectical tensions within an individual. It shows how it is necessary to interrogate the forces that are at work in identity formation, with the notion in mind that bringing the problematic pieces of ourselves to the surface is very important. These movies assert that in doing an examination of the political forces at work in our identities, we produce possibilities for growth and change first within ourselves, and then for the others around us. This is based on McIntosh’s (1988) assertion that we need to uncover the unseen

dimensions of the power structures present in our society before we can begin to really experience any social change. It looks like a great series, and I am glad that I can get it.

I take one last look around the gift shop to make sure I have covered the whole area. I come to the conclusion that I have, and turn to head for the exit. As I do, I begin to think about this journey and realize how important this journey was – and that there needs to be more like this in the future – I will certainly take a few more. There need to be more journeys into the rough waters of whiteness, spirituality, heteronormativity, dialectics, and identity. The more people who take these journeys, the easier taking them will become for others in the future. There is room to explore specific identity dialectics, what it means to have these contradicting identities, and how they can be negotiated in effective ways. There is a special travel package here for those who utilize autoethnography, as it is important to explore the contradictions present *in ourselves* in order to come to a proper negotiation strategy, as well as to explore the possibilities that result from an inquiry of this kind. Being an autoethnographer is a communicative experience. This process of communicating through writing is vital to managing and exploring these opposing forces.

My hand reaches the door and as I begin to push on it and exit into the warm sunlight I cannot help but ask (my)self “so now what?” Well, I take the shirt, books and movie home with me and live my life with the lessons this journey has taught me. Taking the artifacts of my journey home is vital; one because it helps me remember my trip; but two, it inspires others to go on their own journey. Seeing my movie will encourage someone else to go make their own, especially white people, as taking this journey allows

you to see your part in the “machinery” (Warren, 2003) and opens the door for social change. I find that most white people do not want to take a journey like this, because it can be uncomfortable at times, but it is necessary for change, and hopefully transformation to come about. Take it from somebody who has been there, it is the most important trip of a lifetime.

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